

XAVIER WEVERS



NIGHTMOOR  
*As DARKNESS FALLS*





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# NIGHTMOOR

As DARKNESS FALLS

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# Chapter 1

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I longed for a new beginning—a fresh start in a new home, a new school, and the promise of new friends. Making connections had always come naturally to me, but leaving the house I grew up in was bittersweet. The once-cherished memories had become too painful to face every day.

The car ride felt endless, winding through unfamiliar roads that seemed to go on forever. The landscape outside my window shifted between rolling hills, dense forests, and open fields, a stark contrast to the bustling neighborhood I was leaving behind. The hum of the engine and the rhythmic thump of the tires on the road did little to calm my restless thoughts. Each mile brought me further away from the life I knew and closer to the unknown that awaited me.

"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. "What's this place called again?"

"Nightmoor," she said, 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 from a horror movie, sending a shiver down my spine. I noticed a shadowy figure peering through a window. It resembled a woman in a robe, with long hair flowing down her back, her hands clasped together.

I turned my head slowly, keeping my eyes on her.

"Ready to go?" my mother asked. 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 lightly slapped my cheek to snap out of it. I grabbed my bag and got out of the car.

Entering the house, I couldn't help but feel it had been abandoned for some time. Dust covered everything, and cobwebs clung to every corner.

"Yuck, I hate spiders!" I complained.

"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 remotely modern. I ventured into different rooms, looking for my space.

"Which room is mine?" I called out.

"You can take any you want, but I thought you might like this one," she said, leading me down a long hallway before opening a 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'll start with my room."

While my mother cleaned 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.

Placing the broom in the corner, I turned to leave, but heard the door close behind me.

"It's probably just an old door," I reassured myself. As I approached, 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 it. I heard 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. What was going on in this house? I knew I had to uncover its secrets, but the thought sent shivers down my spine.

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

To my surprise, the clock showed it was only 2 pm. Confused, I rushed to the front door and swung it open.

"Hey there," a voice greeted me. At my speed, I couldn't stop and collided with one of the movers.

"Ouch, that hurts."

"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.

"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 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 movers' steps. 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. "M-mom, I'm freaking out here!" I yelled. The shadow approached 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, confused.

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 come from behind a table. As I reached out, 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 only an attic."

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# Chapter II

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My hands tremble as I look at my mother, my heart pounding.

"B-but I was just in the basement?!" I stammer, my voice shaking.

"Sorry, sweetie, there's no basement here," Elaine replies, her voice soothing. She pulls out the first-floor plan 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, even more confused.

Back in the living room, I try to push the mysterious thoughts of the basement aside and focus on setting the table for dinner. But the memory lingers, refusing to fade. 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, surprised to see it at 9% battery life. I could have sworn it was dead. Confused, I pull out the charger from my bedside table and plug it in.

"Nervous about something?" I mutter to myself, a small smile crossing my lips.

"Great, my phone's already at 11%. You never know when you might need it."

As I head to the dinner table, curiosity makes me scan the hallway for the basement door. To my astonishment, there's nothing but a blank wall, as if the door never existed. Determined to shake off the strange feeling, I sit at the table, excitement blossoming within me. "That smells delicious!" I



exclaim with a broad grin.

Elaine smiles back. "I hope it tastes as good as it smells."

I eagerly lift the lid of the pan, my eyes wide with delight. "Noodles! My favorite! Mom, you didn't have to make this!" I squeal.

Elaine beams. "I'm so proud of my little girl. She deserves to have her favorite meal in our new home."

Warmth fills my heart. "I'm not so little anymore, Mom..." I smile awkwardly.

"I know, sweetheart, but you'll always be my little girl. Almost eighteen! Time goes too fast. I feel old."

Her playful exaggeration makes me laugh.

"Mom, now you're overreacting," I tease gently.

Elaine's eyes fill with love and pride. "Go on, eat up," she says warmly.

I dive into the delicious butter noodles, savoring every bite. My mind is 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 eating the delicious butter noodles, I decide it's time for bed. Despite sleeping earlier, I still feel exhausted. I remove the remains of my makeup and feel the exhaustion settle on my shoulders. I head for my bedroom, longing for the comfort of my cozy bed. With a sigh, I place my glasses on the nightstand and crawl under the covers, longing for sleep. I set my alarm for 7:30, remembering my first day at the new school. Curiosity sparks as I wonder what friends I'll make.

The next morning, my alarm wakes me. I groggily turn it off, rub my eyes, and stretch. As I sit up, the previous night's events replay in my mind. The mysterious door, the shadowy figure, the strange occurrences—I can't shake the feeling that something unusual is happening.

I quickly get out of bed and head downstairs, hoping for answers. The house is eerily quiet as I reach the living room. The clock shows the correct time, but the symbols on the hands are different. Confused, I let it go for now and focus on finding my mother.

I carefully climb the creaky stairs to the second floor. Dust and cobwebs fill the air, confirming my suspicion that this part of the house has been neglected. Following the path my mother took, I cross the bridge to the second room in the east wing.

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

"Mom?" I call, startling her. "What are you doing here? What's all this?" I ask, pointing at the documents.

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

My curiosity piqued, I move closer to examine the papers. They contain faded names, dates, and details of the mortuary's operations. One photograph catches my eye—a group of people standing in front of a large building, presumably the old mortuary.

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

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

"Yes, just a rumor," she assures. "But interesting, isn't it? The idea of a hidden mortuary under our house."

Delving deeper into the documents, we find an old map of the village. It marks a spot in the woods beyond our backyard. Could this be the entrance to the underground mortuary?

Feeling a mix of trepidation and curiosity, we decide to investigate. Equipped with flashlights, we venture into the dense forest. The path narrows, and the trees tower over us, casting long shadows.

Finally, we reach the spot marked on the map. Our flashlights scan the ground and surrounding trees. Just as we're about to give up, we notice a strange pattern of blue leaves on the forest floor.

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

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

As we venture deeper into the underground mortuary, cryptic symbols and markings appear on the walls. The path winds endlessly, leading us to chamber after chamber, each shrouded in shadow.

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

Suddenly, we reach a chamber bathed in an unearthly blue glow. A mysterious energy emanates from the center, drawing

us closer. As we approach, a low rumbling fills the air, and the ground shakes.

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

Xavier Wevers

# Chapter III

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I wake up to my alarm clock ringing, signaling a new day. Groggily, I notice it's already 7:30 am. I turn off the alarm, feeling exhausted. Was it all just a dream? The vivid images of the stone pedestal and the ornate ring haunt my thoughts, leaving me with a lingering sense of anticipation. Determined to uncover the truth, I crawl out of bed, my feet touching the cold floor.

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

Frantically searching the room, my hands rummage through every nook and drawer, but the ornate ring remains elusive. Doubt gnaws at my mind. Was it all just my imagination?

"Breakfast!" my mother calls from downstairs.

"Coming, Mom!" I call back, quickly grabbing my clothes and getting dressed.

Undeterred, I take a deep breath and descend the stairs, the wooden steps creaking under my weight.

Entering the living room, the aroma of freshly baked blueberry pancakes fills the air.

"Blueberry pancakes for breakfast?" I exclaim, pleasantly surprised.

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

I take a moment to admire the delicious-looking pancake on my plate before taking a bite, savoring the sweet syrup.

"It's delicious!" I exclaim, feeling a surge of joy. I quickly finish my pancake and head to the bathroom to brush my long blonde hair. Ensuring the purple strands are neatly intertwined, 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 my phone's navigation, I observe my surroundings. The village is a harmonious blend of buildings and trees. My attention is drawn to the lush trees in the distance, wrapping the town in a natural embrace.

I finally arrive at the school, a building that exudes grandeur and history. The entrance is adorned with intricate carvings and ancient stone columns that hint at a rich past. I lock my bike and approach the entrance, my heart pounding. As I step inside, the buzz of students fills the air. Some look at me curiously, while others are deep in conversation. I make my way to the main office to pick up my schedule.

"Welcome to Nightmoor High!" the receptionist greets me warmly. "How can I help you today?"

"I'm new here," I reply, trying to sound confident. "I need my schedule."

"Of course! Here's your schedule," she says, handing me a piece of paper. "If you need help finding your classes, just ask."

"Thank you," I say, looking at the schedule. I take a deep breath and walk through the hallways lined with lockers and posters advertising school events, trying to find my first class.

I finally find the classroom and enter. The teacher, a woman with glasses and a friendly face, greeted me.

"Hello! You must be the new student. I'm Mrs. Thompson. Welcome!"

"Thank you," I reply, feeling a little more at ease. Mrs.

Thompson introduces me to the class and I take a seat at an empty desk by the window.

As the class progresses, I notice strange markings on some of the students' notebooks. They look like runes.

When class ends, I gather my things and head to my next class. The day passes in a blur of new faces and unfamiliar hallways.

At lunchtime, I find a quiet spot outside to eat. Sitting on a bench, I pull out my phone to check for messages.

There's a message from my old friend Jess: How's the new school? Miss you!

I smile and reply quickly: It's different, but okay. Miss you too!

The afternoon classes fly by and soon it's time to go home. I unlock my bike and start riding back.

When I get home, I find my mom in the kitchen preparing dinner. "How was your first day?" she asks, looking up from the stove.

"It was good," I answer, sitting down at the table. "I met some nice people."

"I'm glad to hear that," she says, smiling. "I knew you'd do well."

As I lie in bed that night, my thoughts return to the events of the day. The school, the mysterious runes, and the disturbing dream about the ring all swirl around in my mind. Just as I'm about to drift off, my phone buzzes softly on the nightstand.

It's another message from Jess: I'm so glad to hear it went well! How's Nightmoor treating you? Anything weird happen yet?

I smile and type back: Nightmoor is... interesting. Definitely different from the city! And yes, some strange things happened already. I'll tell you more tomorrow.

Jess replies almost immediately: Ooh, mysterious! I can't wait to hear all about it. Sleep well and tell me all about it tomorrow!

I chuckle softly. With a last glance at my phone, I put it aside and let sleep claim me.

The next morning comes quickly, and I wake up. After a quick breakfast of cereal, I get on my bike and pedal to school. The morning air is crisp and the streets of Nightmoor are quiet, with only a few early risers walking their dogs.

As I approach the school gates, I notice a group of students chatting near the entrance. Among them is a boy with dark hair and a mischievous grin, his eyes catching mine for a moment before he looks away.

I lock my bike and walk towards the entrance.

Inside the school, the hallways are buzzing with students getting ready for another day of classes. I was heading to my locker to put my bag and books away when I heard someone call out from behind me.

"Hey, you're the new kid, right?"

I turn to see the same boy from earlier approaching me with a friendly smile.

"Yeah, I am," I reply, feeling a little nervous.

"Cool, I'm Jake," he says, offering his hand.

"Nice to meet you, Jake. I'm Sophia," I say, shaking his hand.

"You're from the city, right? Must be quite a change coming out here," Jake remarks, his curiosity evident.

"Yeah, it's definitely different," I admit with a smile. "But I'm getting used to it."

We chat for a few minutes before the bell rings, signaling the start of class. Jake gestures toward the classroom we're both headed to.

"Looks like we're in the same class," he says.

"Really? That's cool," I reply, relieved to see a familiar face.

As we enter the classroom, Mrs. Thompson greets us warmly. Jake and I find seats next to each other and the day begins again with teaching and learning.

During a break between classes, Jake leans over and whispers, "So, what weird stuff have you noticed so far?"

I look around to make sure no one is listening before I reply in a low voice, "Have you seen these strange markings on some of the students' notebooks? They look like runes or something."

Jake's eyes widen slightly. "Yeah, I noticed that too. It's kind of creepy, isn't it?"

"Definitely," I agree, feeling a shiver run down my spine.

Before I can say more, the bell rings, signaling the end of break. Jake gives me a quick nod before returning to his books.

The rest of the day passes in a blur of classes and conversations. By the end of the day, I feel more comfortable with the routine and the people around me. As I gather my things to head home, Jake catches up with me.

"Hey, you want to grab a snack at the café in town?" he asks casually.

I hesitate for a moment, then smile and nod. "Sure, why not?"

We walk out of the school together, chatting about everything from schoolwork to the rumors of Nightmoor's mysterious history. The sun sets in a blaze of orange and pink, casting long shadows across the quiet streets.

As we reach the café, I realize that despite the strange occurrences and unanswered questions, Nightmoor may turn out to be a fascinating place after all.

The café in town is a quaint little place with cozy booths and soft jazz playing in the background. Jake and I settle into a corner booth, our conversation flowing easily as we order snacks and drinks.

"So what brought you to Nightmoor?" Jake asks, taking a sip of his hot chocolate.

I hesitate for a moment, debating how much to reveal. "My family recently moved here. My mom thought it would be a good change for us."

Jake nods understandingly. "Yes, Nightmoor is definitely different from the city. But it has its own charm."

As we talk, I can't help but notice Jake's easygoing nature and the genuine interest he shows in our conversation. It's a welcome change from the initial nerves.

"Have you noticed anything else weird about this town?" I finally ask.

Jake leans back thoughtfully. "Well, aside from the runes, there are rumors of hidden tunnels under the old library. Some say they lead to ancient crypts or even deeper into the forest."

"Really?" I lean forward, intrigued. "That sounds like something out of a mystery novel."

He grins. "Yeah, Nightmoor has its fair share of secrets. I guess every town has its secrets, right?"

I nod, feeling a sense of connection with Jake.

As we leave the cafe and head back to our bikes, I realize how quickly the day has passed. Despite the strange start in this new town, meeting Jake has made me feel more at ease.

"Thanks for hanging out with me today," I say sincerely.

"No problem," Jake replies with a smile. "Anytime you want to explore more of Nightmoor, just let me know."

"I definitely will."

We part with a wave, and I pedal back home under the starry sky. The streets are quiet now, the night enveloping Nightmoor in a peaceful silence.

Back in my room, I settle into my bed with a satisfied sigh. Despite the lingering mysteries and unanswered questions, today was a good day. Jess's messages pop into my head and I reach for my phone to update her.

I met a guy named Jake who showed me around. Nightmoor is full of surprises. Miss you!

A few moments later, my phone buzzes with a reply.

Whoa, whoa, whoa. Back up. A guy named Jake? Do tell!

I smile, rolling onto my stomach as I type back.

Yeah, he's pretty cool. Knows a lot about this place. Took me to a cozy little café.

**Jess:** A café? Sounds cute! Was it like an old, charming one or one of those modern hipster places?

**Me:** Definitely old and charming. The kind with mismatched furniture and homemade pastries.

**Jess:** Ooh, sounds perfect. And the important question: is Jake cute?

I laugh softly, Jess's curiosity always making me feel more at home.

He's definitely easy on the eyes.

**Jess:** Nice! So, did he make a move?

**Me:** Nope, nothing like that. He was just being friendly, showing me around. Besides, I just got here. Not ready to dive into anything yet.

**Jess:** Fair enough. But keep me updated. You deserve some fun! How's the new place?

**Me:** It's a bit spooky, to be honest. The house has this old, haunted vibe. And the people...well, they're interesting, to say the least.

**Jess:** Spooky how? Like ghosts and creaky floors?

**Me:** Exactly, but don't worry, I'm being cautious. But enough about my weird day. How are things back home?

**Jess:** Same old, same old. Missing you like crazy though. It's not the same without you here.

**Me:** I miss you too. But I promise to keep you updated on all the strange and wonderful things happening here.

**Jess:** You better! And take care of yourself. Don't go summoning any spirits without me.

I laugh, feeling a warmth spread through me at her concern.

**Me:** Deal. Talk to you tomorrow?

**Jess:** Absolutely. Goodnight!

**Me:** Goodnight, Jess.

# Chapter IV

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The next morning greeted me with a crisp breeze and a clear sky, promising another day of discovery in Nightmoor. As I pedaled my way to school, the village seemed to awaken around me, with birds chirping and distant sounds of morning activity echoing through the streets. Arriving at Nightmoor High, I locked my bike and headed inside.

Navigating the hallways, I made my way to my first class: Math with Mrs. Sharpe. The classroom was already buzzing with students taking their seats. I found an empty desk and took a seat, glancing around to take in the atmosphere.

Just as Mrs. Sharpe began the class and called for our attention, I noticed a group of students entering together, chatting and laughing. Leading the group was Jake, whom I had met briefly yesterday.

"Good morning, class," Mrs. Sharpe greeted us with a warm smile. "Before we begin, we have a new student joining our class. Sophia, would you please stand and introduce yourself?"

Feeling a little self-conscious under the gaze of unfamiliar faces, I stood and cleared my throat. "Hello everyone. I'm Sophia and I just recently moved here. I'm looking forward to meeting all of you."

Most of the class greeted me with friendly smiles and nods, but one girl immediately caught my attention. She sat in the front row, her dark eyes fixed on me with an intensity that sent shivers down my spine. Her expression was one of thinly veiled contempt, as if my mere presence offended her.



Curious and a little unsettled by her piercing gaze, I turned to Jake, who had settled into his seat nearby. "Hey, Jake," I whispered quietly, trying not to attract too much attention. "Who's that girl over there? The one staring at me?"

Jake followed my gaze and furrowed his brow. "That's Hannah Gibson," he replied in a quiet voice. "She's... well, let's just say she's not the friendliest person around here. You might want to stay away from her."

I nodded, taking in this information with a hint of concern. "Got it. Thanks for the warning."

Mrs. Sharpe continued with the lesson, diving into the complexities of algebraic equations and quadratic formulas. I did my best to focus on the material, occasionally glancing over at Jake and his friends as they whispered and exchanged notes.

As the lesson drew to a close, Mrs. Sharpe gave us a few practice problems due by the end of the week. I gathered my things and made my way out into the hallway, where I caught up with Jake and his friends as they made their way to their next class.

"Hey, Sophia!" Jake greeted me with a friendly smile. "How's your morning going so far?"

"Pretty good," I replied. "Just trying to find my way through all these classes. Speaking of which, where do we go next?"

"We have English with Mr. Roberts. You're welcome to join us at our table if you'd like. We can show you around."

"Sure, that would be great," I said, falling in step with them as we made our way down the hall. "By the way, are you all friends?"

"Yeah, we've known each other for a while," Anthony replied with a grin. "We're sort of the misfits of Nightmoor High."

"Speak for yourself," Alisha teased, nudging him playfully. "We're just a diverse group with eclectic interests."

As we approached the classroom, I couldn't help but glance back at Hannah, who was walking ahead of us. Her expression hadn't changed, and I couldn't help but feel that our paths were destined to cross again.

As we took our seats in Mr. Roberts' English class, I found myself surrounded by Jake and his friends. Mr. Roberts, a middle-aged man with an inviting smile, stood at the front of the room, organizing his notes.

"Good morning, everyone," Mr. Roberts began as the bell rang. "Let's get right into our discussion today."

As he began the lesson on literary analysis, exploring themes in classic literature, I couldn't help but feel a sense of excitement. Jake and his friends seemed genuinely interested in the subject, occasionally exchanging knowing looks or quiet comments about the readings.

Midway through the class, Mr. Roberts announced a group activity to analyze a short story. He instructed us to form groups of four, and before I could even think about who to partner with, Jake spoke up.

"Hey, Sophia, why don't you join us?" Jake suggested warmly, gesturing towards Liam, Anthony and Alisha. "We've got some good ideas brewing and I think you'd be a great addition."

I smiled gratefully and joined their group, feeling more at ease about being the new student. As we talked about the story and shared our ideas, I was impressed by their understanding and comradeship. Liam was great at explaining the plot details, Anthony added a thoughtful view on the characters, and Alisha noticed all the clever writing techniques.

During our discussion, Hannah's gaze lingered on our group from across the room, her expression unreadable. I tried to ignore her scrutiny and focus on contributing to our group's analysis. But her presence added an undercurrent of tension that I couldn't quite shake.

After a productive discussion, Mr. Roberts ended the activity and assigned us a short essay based on our group's findings. As the lesson ended, Jake turned to me with a smile.

"You did great, Sophia," he complimented me. "I knew you'd fit right in."

"Thanks, I appreciate you including me."

"No problem," Liam chimed in. "We stick together here."

Anthony nodded in agreement and added with a grin, "Besides, it's more fun with a new perspective."

Alisha nudged him playfully. "Speak for yourself, Anthony."

As we gathered our things and prepared to leave the classroom, I couldn't help but wonder about Hannah. What was her story, and why did she seem so cautious? Despite Jake's warning, a part of me felt compelled to understand her better, to unravel the mystery behind her distant demeanor.

"Hey, Sophia," Jake interrupted my thoughts as we stepped out into the hallway. "We usually grab lunch together. You want to join us?"

I hesitated for a moment, glancing back at Hannah who was already heading in the opposite direction. "Sure," I finally replied, grateful for the opportunity to get to know Jake and his friends better.

We made our way to the cafeteria, where lively chatter and the smell of food filled the air. We found a table and settled in, and I couldn't help but feel a sense of belonging among this group of misfits with eclectic interests.

As we ate and laughed, I couldn't help but feel that my

decision to move to Nightmoor might turn out to be the adventure I never expected.

The lunch bell rang, signaling the end of our break. With full stomachs and high spirits, we gathered our things and headed to our next class: Economics. Mr. Thompson, our teacher, greeted us as we entered the classroom.

"Good afternoon class, today we're going to dive into the principles of microeconomics."

I found a seat near Jake and Alisha, with Hannah sitting a few rows in front of me. The classroom buzzed with anticipation as Mr. Thompson launched into the lesson, explaining supply and demand curves and their effect on market equilibrium.

During a break in the lecture, I turned to Jake and whispered, "Hey, Jake, do you know anything more about Hannah? She seems... I don't know, like there's more to her story."

Jake furrowed his brow thoughtfully and glanced at Hannah, who was busily taking notes. "Not much, to be honest," he replied in a low voice. "She mostly keeps to herself. There are rumors, but I don't pay much attention to gossip."

I nodded, taking in his words. "Yeah, I get that. It's just... she seems so reserved. I wonder if she's dealing with something."

Alisha leaned forward, her curiosity piqued. "What rumors?"

Jake hesitated, obviously choosing his words carefully. "Just stuff about her past... something to do with her family. But honestly, it's all hearsay. It is rumored that she killed her own parents because nobody has seen or heard from them for 4 years now."

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, but if her parents were really dead, it would be because they died in an accident.

"But if she's alone, why does everyone say 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 will 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, urging 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 narrowed slightly, a hint of suspicion crossing her face. "What do you care, nosy new girl?" Hannah replied, her tone defensive.

I took a deep breath and chose my words carefully. "It's not just curiosity," I began quietly. "I heard a rumor about your parents... that... you"

Hannah's gaze softened for a moment. "I didn't murder my parents, if that's what you're wondering, I know it sounds strange, but you have to believe me, their bodies were never found."

I nod. "Does it ever occur to you that they might still be out there... somewhere?"

"Alive?" she mumbles. "If they were alive, wouldn't they have reached out?"

"I understand it must be hard not to know," I replied gently. "Have you ever tried to find out more about what really happened?"

Hannah shook her head slowly. "I've asked around, but every trail leads nowhere. It's like they vanished without a trace."

"What exactly happened?"

Her voice trembled as she recounted the painful memory. "It was late at night, and we were all asleep in our old cabin by the woods. The fire started in the living room...my parents woke up and ran to my room, calling my name. But I wasn't there."

She paused, struggling to keep her composure. "I was in the attic, quietly reading. When I saw the flames through the window, I panicked...and climbed out onto the roof. I was scared, Sophia. I didn't think to warn them. I just wanted to get away."

Tears welled up in her eyes, reflecting the grief of that terrible night. "I never told them that I was safe. By the time they realized I wasn't in my room, it was too late. The fire had spread too fast."

Feeling a surge of compassion, I reached out and gently took Hannah's hand in mine. "Hannah, it's not your fault," I assured her gently. "You were scared and you did what you thought was best in the moment."

She nodded slowly, the weight of years of guilt and grief on her face. "I know... but I carried that guilt for so long."

"And about your parents... why do you think no one found their bodies?" I asked gently, trying to understand more of her story.

Hannah looked at me, her expression troubled. "I made up a story that they were on a business trip and I was home alone that night. I... couldn't face the truth."

"That's a heavy burden to carry alone," I remarked quietly. "You don't have to keep that secret from me, Hannah. If there's more to your story, or if you ever need to talk about it, I'm here for you."

She looked at me gratefully, a flicker of trust beginning to form. "Thank you, Sophia," she said softly, her voice filled with a mixture of relief and uncertainty.

I gave her a warm hug, a gesture of comfort and solidarity.

Just then, Jake appeared 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! 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 substance 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.

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

Xavier Wevers

# Chapter V

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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 excitedly.

"Follow me." I said with a smile

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."

"She works for the police," I reveal. 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 outside 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. "Come and sit here," 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 and my hands are shaking uncontrollably while I open the window and reach for my phone on the bed.

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, another 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 from 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 shattered. 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. After each step she 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 refuses 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 towards 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. 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 and I catch a glimpse of a forced smile playing on her lips, as if she knows something we don't.

The classroom is buzzing with excitement. 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, I steal glances at Hannah, trying to decipher the secrets she holds. She catches my gaze, her eyes filled with fear.

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?" he asks.

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. "It's like something is weighing on her shoulders. 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, 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."

As the final school bell rings, signaling the end of the day, Hannah tightens her grip on my arm and leads me towards the exit. Confused, I ask her, "What's going on, Hannah?"

"I... I need to tell you something," she says, her voice barely above a whisper. Suddenly, 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.

"Sure, what have you got in mind?"

"Your bedroom."

My heart skips a beat, struggling to maintain my composure, I manage to reply, "Yeah, that works."

Fragments of last night's events resurface.

"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 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?"

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."

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 of 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 got here, I went down to the basement because I thought I heard something strange. It was this weird, inexplicable sound that just drew me in. But then, just as I started going down the stairs, my phone's battery died, and I was plunged into darkness. I freaked out, ran back upstairs to grab a flashlight.

When I tried to get back to the basement, I noticed that the door was gone. It had just vanished, leaving an empty wall."

Hannah's brow furrowed in confusion. "How does a door disappear?" she asked.

I nodded, sharing her disbelief. "I know, right? That's exactly what I thought. One minute it was there, and the next it was just... gone."

"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 plan, 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 wrist. "Have you told your mother any of this?" she asks, concern in her voice.

"I haven't. But maybe... maybe it's time to tell her."

"Would you like me to be there with you?"

Relief washes over me as Hannah offers her support. "I would appreciate that, thank you."

Her lips curve into a gentle smile.

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

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

"Tonight, let's stay together. Let's find answers and find out what's going on. You don't have to face this alone."

# Chapter VI

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The creaking of the front door signaled my mother's arrival. Her eyes 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, the basement door was gone. It had just vanished, leaving an empty wall. I



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

"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 and we felt a slight sense of disappointment. Perhaps we had hoped for more understanding.

But as if guided by fate, a subtle change unfolded. A gentle breeze entered the living room and suddenly my mother noticed movement in the hallway. Out of nowhere the basement door appeared. Disbelief gave way to the realization that our stories were more than just hallucinations.

A gasp escaped her lips as she rose and tentatively approached the door. Her hand reached out and hesitantly brushed its cool surface.

"You were right," she whispered, her voice filled with wonder. "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.

"Sh- Shall we go down and investigate?"

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Elaine asked, sounding calm but worried.

I hesitated, but the desire to know the truth overwhelmed my fear. "We need to find out what's going on, so let's go."

My mother handed us flashlights, and cautiously we stepped down the creaking stairs, the air growing colder with each step.

The basement was already dimly lit with a single

flickering bulb casting eerie shadows.

Our eyes caught sight of dust-covered furniture, several boxes, and a journal on a wooden desk.

Hannah picked up the journal.

I stepped closer, trying to catch a glimpse of the text.

"What is it, Hannah?"

She swallowed hard and began to read aloud.

"October 12th, 1963. There is something in this house, something ancient and malevolent. A creature observes you from a corner and its eyes are glowing with an eerie light. We have tried to ward it off with salt and prayer, but nothing seems to keep it at bay.

October 30th, 1963. The whispers are getting louder. They call my name in the dead of night, filling my mind with dark thoughts. I saw a creature standing at the foot of my bed, its face obscured by shadows. When I lit the candle, it vanished, but the air remained cold as death.

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.

November 22nd, 1963. The entity's power is growing. I hear it in the walls, a constant scratching, like claws raking against the wood. It leaves messages in the dust, warnings and threats. It knows we are planning something. I fear it is only a matter of time before it takes one of us."

She paused, her breath catching in her throat.

"December 2nd, 1963. Last night I saw it. A creature, 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. Its voice echoed in my mind. We must find a way to stop it before it consumes us all.

December 15th, 1963. The creature is relentless. It moves objects, hides things from us, and fills the house with a suffocating dread. I found a dead bird on my pillow this morning, its eyes gouged out, it's like a nightmare has come alive.

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 closed the diary, her eyes filled with dread. "That's where it ends."

"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. But as we prepared to resume our search, a chilling gust of wind blew through the basement, switching off the lightbulb. In complete darkness Hannah screamed.

"Did you feel that?" she asked, her voice quivering.

"Yes," Elaine replied, her voice steady but tense.

"Stay close, both of you."

Footsteps grew louder from the darkness, so we quickly switched on our flashlights. Panic set in as we fumbled our way to the stairs, seeking escape from the eerie basement.

We bolted the door behind us and collapsed against it, breathing heavily.

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

Suddenly we heard a low humming sound. It was coming from the old box Elaine had picked up. A soft glow emanated from inside.

"What the hell did you bring from downstairs?" I yelled.

"Do you think it's safe to open?" Hannah asked with fear.

"We have to," Elaine replied, feeling a strange sense of calm wash over her. "It may hold all 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 this old book, casting an eerie light on our faces.

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

As we were going through the old letters, 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?"

Elaine looked troubled. "Wait... T-this letter... It's from your father's grandmother. She must have been involved in whatever happened here."

With trembling hands, Elaine carefully opened the letter. The ink was faded but still legible.

Dearest Elaine,

If you are reading this, then you have come to understand that Nightmoor is not just an ordinary house. I pray you never have to face the horrors we did, but I fear that day may come. The creature we tried to banish is ancient and powerful, and it feeds on fear and despair. We were able to weaken it, but not destroy it. Our ritual bought us time, but I fear it is only a matter of time before it returns.

You must know that the ritual requires three key components: the sacred herbs, the ancient tome, and the talisman. The herbs are meant to purify the space and weaken the creature's hold. The tome contains the incantations necessary to bind it, and the talisman is the anchor that will trap it in a state of limbo.

There is one more thing, something we learned too late. The talisman must be consecrated with the blood of someone from our bloodline, willingly given. It is a grim requirement, but it is the only way to ensure the binding holds.

I know this is a heavy burden to bear, but you must be strong. Protect your family, and remember that you are not alone. The answers you seek are within the house, hidden in the places where the light cannot reach. Trust your instincts, and be brave.

With all my love,

- Eliza

"I never knew... I never realized how deep this ran." Elaine said.

"Mom, we have to do this. We have to finish what they started. But we will have to find the talisman first."

Elaine nodded, her expression determined. "If what Eliza said is true, then it needs to be consecrated."

As we gathered the items and prepared to move upstairs, the house seemed to hum with a dark energy.

We found a quiet room on the second floor, far from the oppressive darkness of the basement.

As we laid out the sacred herbs and the ancient tome, I couldn't help but feel a surge of hope, and with my dad's grandmother Eliza's guidance, we might just have a chance.

"We are still missing the talisman, where do you think it is?" Hannah asks.

Elaine took a deep breath. "It must be at a place where the light can't reach."

Just as we were getting settled, the doorbell rang.

Surprised, we jumped up in unison.

As Elaine opened the front door, an eerie figure appeared—a shiver ran down my spine.

"Erin?" Elaine exclaimed.

"Hey, sis. How's the new place?" she says with fear in her eyes.

Before Elaine could answer, Erin went to the door in the hallway. "This door..."

"What do you know about it?" Elaine asks.

"Please come with me to the basement." She motioned for us to follow, and Hannah quickly grabbed the flashlights.

Down in the basement Erin led us to a corner with a hidden doorknob.

"Down here... are the answers." The door creaked open, revealing a hidden passage that led down to an unknown realm below.

Erin stepped forward, her figure disappearing into the shadows.

"Erin? Aunt Erin?" I called, my voice shaking.

We exchanged glances. Flashlights in hand, we stepped into the unknown, the passageway closing behind us with a thunderous bang.

# Chapter VII

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Elaine's voice trembled as she called out to her sister, but the ominous silence swallowed her words.

We shined our flashlights forward, revealing the stairs opening into a huge, hollow cave. I reached for my mother's shaking hand, a feeble attempt to calm us both. Her eyes darted nervously from side to side.

"Where's Erin?" I whispered.

Elaine shook her head, uncertainty clouding her eyes. "I don't know, but we have to find her. This cave only leads in one direction, and that is forward."

The cave 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 cave 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, but as my fingers touched the book, a surge of energy coursed through them, causing me to recoil in shock.

"Be careful!" Hannah exclaimed.

My mother quickly held my hand, inspecting my fingers. "Please do not just touch everything that you see."



I nodded carefully, and we continued through the cave, leaving the book behind.

The air grew colder with each step, and a sign swayed ominously in front of us, its faded letters spelling out 'Gibson Mortuary.'

"Wait... It still exists! Wasn't it a mystery as to what had happened to it all those years ago? How did the authorities not know about it?" Hannah's voice trembled, the disbelief evident.

We stood in stunned silence, staring at the ancient mortuary. The heavy atmosphere around the place pressed down on us, sending a chill through my spine. My mother moved closer.

"This can't be real," Elaine murmured, her brow furrowed. "The Gibson Mortuary was declared destroyed decades ago. We all thought it was lost."

"But it's here," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "How could an entire world be built on top of it without anyone knowing?"

Hannah reached out to touch the sign, her fingers hovering just inches away from the weathered wood. Suddenly, a discordant melody pierced the air, jarring her from her reverie. She pulled back, shaking. "Where's that coming from?" she asked, her eyes wide with fear.

Elaine's gaze swept the area, her trained instincts kicking in. "This place must have been hidden for a reason. If the mortuary never got destroyed, then what happened here? How could it have been concealed all this time?"

"Maybe it wasn't destroyed but rather... buried?" I suggested. "What if something or someone wanted it to stay hidden?"

Elaine nodded slowly. "And we've just stumbled upon it. This cave, this underground world—it's like an entire layer of history buried beneath our feet."

As we stood there, the discordant melody grew louder, reverberating off the cavern walls. The unsettling tune seemed to echo from the very depths of the mortuary, as if calling to us.

"We need to be careful," Elaine said, her voice steady despite the fear in her eyes. "Whatever's down here, it's been hidden for a reason. We can't let our guard down."

Hannah clung to my arm, her fear palpable. "But why is it here? What secrets does it hold?"

"I don't know," I admitted, my mind racing with possibilities. "But we're going to find out."

We reached the entrance, and Elaine slowly opened the door. Our flashlights cut through the gloom, revealing a shadowy figure in the far corner. We cautiously approached, and the figure suddenly turned, startling us. Hannah let out a scream.

Erin's eyes glowed eerily as she stepped forward, her voice taking on an unsettling tone. "Are you lost?" she asked, her lips curling into an unnatural smile.

"Erin? What's wrong with you?" Hannah stammered, backing away.

Elaine stepped forward, her voice urgent. "Erin, tell me everything you know!"

Erin met her eyes, a mysterious smile playing on her lips. "Why don't you ask your husband?" she said, her voice dripping with an otherworldly malice.

Elaine's heart skipped a beat. "Blake? He died 17 years ago!"

"Just trust me," Erin said, her voice shifting back to normal as she pointed to a mysterious doorway. "Go through that door and you'll understand."

Elaine stared at her sister, "Erin, are you... okay?"

Erin blinked, the eerie glow fading from her eyes. She shook her head slightly. "I'm sorry, Elaine. I don't know what came over me. This place... it's doing something to me. But trust me, you need to go through that door."

Elaine hesitated, then nodded, her resolve hardening.  
"Let's go."

We made our way down the mossy, muggy hallway. Elaine reached for the doorknob with a trembling hand, her heart pounding. As she turned it, the door creaked open, revealing a dimly lit chamber.

We entered, our eyes adjusting to the low light. In the center of the room stood a figure with its back to us.

"Blake... is that really you?"

The figure turned slowly, revealing a face both familiar and hauntingly different.

"Blake, what happened to you? How did you end up here?" Elaine asked, her voice trembling.

The figure's gaze met hers. "I am not Blake. I am an echo, a ghostly entity conjured here."

Elaine's face fell. "What do you mean? Erin, what's going on?"

Erin stepped forward, holding a worn, ancient book. "This place... it has the power to manifest the past, to bring forth echoes of what once was."

She sighed deeply. "I've been researching Blake's disappearance for years, and I only recently discovered the truth myself. This mortuary... it's a nexus, a place where the veil between worlds is thin. I had hoped to find a way to free Blake."

A heavy silence settled over us as we processed Erin's revelation. The dim light flickered, casting eerie shadows on the walls.

"This is the Book of Shadows," Erin continued. "With it, I can control entities like this one and speak to those who are lost."

"Lost?" Elaine asked, concerned.

"Ghosts," Erin clarified. "Deceased, lost souls who roam this earth. I'm sorry for the confusion, but Blake is not alive. This entity is a conduit to speak with him."

Elaine's eyes filled with tears.

Erin shook her head, giving herself a light slap. "I'm sorry for confusing you, sis. Let's restart."

Elaine reached out, grabbing Erin's hand. "Hey, stop that."

Erin smiled softly. "With the use of this book, you can talk to the dead. You need to give the entity something that belonged to them, something meaningful. If they're lost, they can connect like as if they're being called on their phone. They will control the entity, and you will have exactly five minutes to talk before the connection weakens."

Elaine questioned Erin's actions, "Will I get the object back?"

"If we break the connection before the time limit, yes," Erin explained. "Otherwise, the given object will vanish like it never existed."

Elaine pulled out a small, worn locket from her pocket, her hands trembling. "This belonged to Blake. He gave it to me before he disappeared."

Erin took the locket gently, her eyes meeting Elaine's. "This will work. Trust me."

We watched as Erin began to chant softly, her words from the ancient book echoing through the chamber. The air in the room thickened, charged with an eerie energy. A cold, unnatural chill swept through the chamber as the connection formed. The ghostly figure flickered, then steadied, its form becoming more defined.

Elaine stepped closer, her voice shaking. "Blake... if you can hear me, please come through."

The figure's eyes glowed faintly, and a voice, distant yet familiar, filled the room. "Elaine... is that really you?"

"Yes, Blake, it's me," Elaine responded, her voice filled with emotion. "I've missed you so much. Why did you leave us?"

Blake's ghostly figure hesitated, his form wavering slightly. "I never wanted to leave you, Elaine. The night I disappeared, I was drawn into something dark... something I couldn't resist. I was trapped, caught between worlds. But I never stopped thinking about you."

Elaine's eyes glistened with tears. "We searched for you everywhere. We thought you were gone forever."

Blake's gaze softened as he looked at Elaine. "You... you look different. Older."

Elaine managed a faint smile through her tears. "It's been seventeen years, Blake. A lot has changed."

Blake nodded slowly, his expression grave. "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you."

Elaine took a step closer. "Blake, is there a way for us to be together again?"

Before Blake could respond, Erin's voice cut through the moment, breaking the fragile connection. "Time's running out, Elaine. We need to end this."

Elaine turned to Erin, frustration and longing evident in her eyes. "Just a little longer, please..."

Erin's face contorted with an unsettling smile. "Oh, but isn't this touching? Reuniting with your lost love."

Hannah leaned in closer to me, her voice barely a whisper. "Something doesn't feel right."

I nodded silently, my gaze flickering between Erin and the ghostly figure of Blake.

Suddenly, the room darkened, the temperature plummeting further. A sinister chuckle echoed around us.

"Foolish mortals," a dark figure emerged from the shadows, its eyes glowing with malevolent intent.

Elaine's heart pounded as she took a step back. "What do you want from us?"

"You have meddled with forces beyond your understanding," the figure hissed, its voice echoing ominously. "Now, you will pay the price."

Blake's form twisted unnaturally, merging with the dark figure. His voice deepened into a sinister growl. "It's time for my return."

Erin collapsed suddenly, her body convulsing. Elaine rushed to her side, concern etched on her face.

"I'm back in control," Blake's voice echoed in a chilling tone. "I've waited years for this moment. My return is inevitable."

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

"But you brought us here," Elaine protested.

"No! That... that wasn't me," Erin stammered. "He took control of my mind. We need to leave. Now!"

Blake chuckled, a low, threatening sound. "I sensed you when you entered Nightmoor. It was only a matter of time before I brought you back. How did it feel to be out of control of your own body again?"

"We've had enough!" Erin shouted, struggling to stand. "Kids, come on. We have to go, now!"

Fear gripped my heart as I ran to Erin, Hannah close behind.

"Sister, please come with me," Erin pleaded. "I'm sorry for what happened, but you have to trust me!"

"I've trusted you my whole life," Elaine snapped, her voice trembling with emotion. "But look where it got me. You left me when I needed you most!"

"I'm sorry," Erin pleaded, tears welling in her eyes. "You don't know the whole story."

"Whatever," Elaine said, her voice strained. "Let's get out of here—"

Elaine's words were cut off as the ground beneath us shook. Blake's laughter filled the room.

"Your family drama fuels me," the figure sneered. "But it's time for you to do something for me."

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

The figure grinned, and with a flick of its wrist, we were all thrown into the center of the chamber, the force of the impact knocking the wind out of me.

# Chapter VIII

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"Are you okay?" Erin asked, her voice filled with concern.

"M-my leg hurts," Hannah replied, wincing in pain.

I looked around and stood up. The dim light in the room went out, and I immediately grabbed my flashlight and turned it on. I scanned the area for the dark figure, but he was nowhere to be seen. Had he really just left?

I helped Hannah to her feet, supporting her weight as she leaned against me.

"Take it easy, Hannah. We're going to find a way out of here. You just light the way."

"W-where... Where do you think he went?" Hannah asked, her voice shaking.

"I don't know, but I don't want to stay here to find out. Let's get back to our world."

My mother and aunt helped me move Hannah through the mortuary. Finding our way back was the easy part. We just had to go through the door around the corner and walk in a straight line through the cave back to the stairs that led to safety.

As we approached the stairs, a sudden gust of air blew straight at us. I turned to see my mother and aunt being flung through the cave.

"M-Mom?" I cried, my voice filled with fear.

A din of clattering and terrified screams erupted from the darkness. In the midst of the chaos, a flashlight rolled toward us, casting eerie shadows on the walls. I picked it up, hands



shaking, and shined it forward, desperately searching for any sign of my mother or aunt. With no visual clues, I gathered my courage and ventured deeper into the caves.

"Sophia, please wait! Think about what you're doing; this is reckless!" Hannah called after me, her voice trembling with worry.

I turned to face her, my heart pounding. "Wouldn't you do anything to save your family?" I asked.

Hannah's eyes softened. She sighed, her shoulders slumping slightly. "You're right. I get it. Just... be careful. I'll be here, waiting for you."

I stepped closer, taking her hands in mine. "Hannah, I need you to be my anchor. If anything happens, I need you to be strong for both of us."

Hannah nodded, tears glistening in her eyes. "I will. Just promise you'll come back to me."

I forced a smile, trying to hide my own fear. "I promise."

I kissed her hand gently, feeling the warmth of her skin against my lips.

"Remember me."

With one last lingering look, I turned and disappeared into the darkness.

"M-Mom? Auntie? Can you make any noise?" I called, my voice echoing in the oppressive silence.

I kept walking and caught a glimpse of three looming shadows in the distance. The beam of the flashlight illuminated their forms, revealing their dark silhouettes against the dimly lit backdrop. My eyes strained to make out their features, but they remained obscured, shrouded in an air of mystery.

Taking a deep breath, I gathered my courage and cautiously approached the shadowy figures.

"W-who are you?"

The figures remained motionless, their presence casting an eerie silence over the room, broken only by the faint sound of my racing heartbeat. Suddenly, one of the figures took a step forward, emerging from the shadows. The dim light revealed a tall, slender figure with a stoic expression.

"You seek answers, child. Answers to questions long buried and forgotten," the voice echoed through the cave.

I gathered my resolve and asked the question that had plagued my mind for years. "What exactly happened to Dad?"

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

"Tell me," I demanded. "Tell me what to do."

The figure's smile widened and it extended a hand to me. "Follow the path of your ancestors," it instructed. "Embrace the darkness, face your fears, and take back what was taken from you."

Taking a deep breath, I took a step forward and accepted the figure's outstretched hand. The touch sent a surge of energy through me, a tingling sensation that resonated with ancient knowledge and untapped potential. For some reason, it felt familiar.

As I took another step forward, my mother's voice cut through the air, tinged with concern. "Sophia, wait!"

Her words snapped me out of the trance-like state induced by the enigmatic figures, grounding me back to reality.

I turned to face my mother.

"You can't trust them, Sophia. There's something wrong with them. Please, come back with us."

I cast a longing glance back at the figures, their presence still shrouded in mystery, beckoning me into the unknown. Reluctantly, I removed my hand from the figure's grasp and

took a step back, returning to my mother.

The figures watched me silently.

Elaine grabbed my hand and I saw Erin standing behind her. I noticed that her arms were covered in fresh cuts and bruises. Concern etched itself into my face, and I let go of my mother and reached out to touch her injured arm.

"Erin, what happened?" I asked.

She looked down at her injured arm and quickly moved to cover the wounds, trying to shield me from the truth. "It's nothing, Sophia," she mumbled, her voice strained. "Just a little accident. Don't worry about it."

I took Erin's hand gently, holding it tightly but tenderly. "Erin, we can't hide anymore. We have to face the darkness together," I said, my voice filled with resolute conviction.

Erin met my gaze, her eyes shining. She recognized the strength and maturity that had blossomed in me, and with a sigh, she gave in, allowing vulnerability to surface. "You're right, Sophia. We will face this darkness as a family, united."

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, we emerged from the depths of the unknown, our hearts still racing with adrenaline. The safety of the moonlight washed over us, a soothing balm for our frayed nerves. We settled into the living room and I grabbed an ice pack to put on Hannah's leg.

"Does it still hurt?" I asked.

"A little, but it'll heal," Hannah replied, smiling bravely.

I could see my mother's mind still racing with questions, her eyes distant.

"Sister, can we really trust you?" Elaine asked, her voice trembling.

Erin opened her mouth to answer, but before she could get a word out, she collapsed to the ground.

Panic struck us as we rushed to her side and noticed black

streaks crawling up her arm from her wounds.

"Wh-What's happening to her?" I asked.

"I think it's Blake," Elaine said.

"Please don't call him Blake," I begged. "This creature doesn't deserve that name. He stole Father and is using him as a vessel for his own survival!"

Elaine looked at me. "You're right. But now we have to help her. We can't just leave her here."

I nodded, trying to stay calm. "Let's take her to your bedroom. She needs to rest and we need to figure out how to heal her."

Together we picked Erin up and carried her to my mother's bedroom and laid her gently on the bed. Elaine grabbed the blanket and covered her, brushing a strand of hair from Erin's forehead.

"Just rest now, Erin. We'll find a way to fix this," Elaine murmured softly.

Back in the living room, Hannah stood carefully, wincing slightly as she shifted her weight. "I think I should go home," she said softly. "I don't want my guardian to worry if I'm late. Besides, you need to focus on helping Erin."

I walked over to her, my heart heavy with guilt. "I'm so sorry, Hannah. I didn't realize how dangerous this would be. I never meant to put you in harm's way."

Hannah gave me a reassuring smile, though I could see the pain in her eyes. "It's okay, Sophia. You didn't know. I wanted to help."

I hugged her tightly, my voice trembling. "Thank you for being here, Hannah. Please get home safe. And let me know if you need anything, okay?"

Hannah nodded and returned the hug, her embrace warm and comforting despite everything. "Take care, and keep me informed."

She left, closing the front door behind her.

I turned back to my mother. "What are we going to do now?"

Elaine sighed, her face lined with worry. "We need to find a way to stop the infection from spreading."

I nodded firmly. "We're going to save her, Mom."

Elaine squeezed my hand, her eyes full of determination. "Yes, we will. We have to."

Xavier Wevers

# Chapter IX

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The night air hung heavy with unspoken tension as I awakened from a restless sleep. The bedroom was bathed in an eerie half-light, shadows playing tricks on my senses. I sat up in bed, the sheets clinging to me like a shroud.

As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I made out a shadowy figure at the foot of the bed.

"What do you want?" I asked, rubbing my eyes to sharpen my focus.

The figure beckoned with a ghostly hand, compelling me to follow. The floorboards creaked under my weight, but the figure moved with otherworldly grace, gliding soundlessly across the room.

"You're the woman I saw through the window the first day we arrived, aren't you?"

The woman nodded slowly, her face shrouded in an ethereal mist.

"Are you the one who haunts this house? Why did you try to get rid of us? Were we in danger?"

Another nod, more deliberate this time.

"Did you perhaps hide the basement door?"

The woman nodded again, her expression unreadable.

"How can I save Aunt Erin?"

The woman shook her head, a look of profound sorrow in her eyes.



"Are you saying she cannot be saved?"

A nod. Tears began to form in my eyes.

"Did you want us to find the diary and the old letters?"

The woman nodded once more.

"So, you want to help us, right?"

The woman nodded, her eyes glowing softly with an ethereal light.

"So you hid the basement at first, haunted the place to scare us away. But when you realized that only made me more curious, you let the basement door reappear, hoping we'd find answers. You led us to the diary and the letters... which means you knew about them. ... Wait... Eliza?!"

The woman smiled, her form glowing with an ethereal white light.

"Eliza, is it really you?"

The woman opened her mouth, and an angelic voice spoke. "Sophia, only you have the power to defeat Azruleth."

My eyes widened at this revelation. "I-I don't know what to say! I-it can't be me!"

Eliza reached out, her hand passing through mine, leaving a chill. "Take this talisman. Use it to bind Azruleth."

"Wait... Eliza? What's happening?"

Darkness enveloped the room.

"It's Azruleth. You have the power to end it!" Eliza's voice echoed as she suddenly vanished into thin air.

I looked through the window and saw the scene outside changing. The stone path that wound through the night seemed both familiar and ominous. My breath was taken away as I saw Hannah, her figure obscured by shadows, walking

along that very path. With a jolt, my room transformed, and I found myself standing on the stone path, the cold night air biting into my skin.

Hannah walked carefree, but I saw a red car barreling toward her, its driver distracted. The collision, the impact, horrific! The scene played out in agonizing detail, leaving an indelible mark on my consciousness.

I woke up startled, my heart pounding in my chest. The room was bathed in the soft glow of dawn, and a cold sweat clung to my skin. I reached for my glasses and felt the talisman around my neck. Quickly, I removed the talisman and tucked it into my pocket, then made my way to the shed where the bikes were stored. As I mounted my bike, the wheels spun to the rhythm of my racing thoughts. The navigation on my phone led me to Star Route Street.

As I cycled through the quiet streets, I tried to reach Hannah with messages and calls, hoping to warn her before it was too late. Star Route Street came into view, and my heart quickened. The stone pathway stretched before me, a surreal echo of the nightmare. And there, just as foreseen, I spotted Hannah walking along the stone pathway.

The nightmare and reality intertwined. Memories of the impending collision flooded my mind, and dread tightened its grip. The red car appeared in the distance. Panic rose within me as I pedaled faster, shouting Hannah's name.

Hannah, confused by the sudden urgency, turned away from the near-collision. A sigh of relief escaped me, but the weight of the nightmare still clung to my soul.

Another car appeared, this time coming from my direction. The driver, out of control, barreled toward me. The near miss shredded the rear tire of my bike against the sidewalk. I glanced at Hannah and found her staring at the car.

"Hannah, watch out!" I screamed. However, instead of moving, she stood transfixed as the car hurtled toward her with alarming velocity. Suddenly, her dog jumped out of nowhere, pushing her out of harm's way just in time. The car sped by, its tires screeching against the pavement.

My heart pounded in my chest as I ran to Hannah, concern etched into my face.

"Are you okay?" I asked worriedly.

"I'm fine," she replied weakly, a brave smile trying to hide the pain. "Don't worry about me, check on the driver."

I approached the mangled car. The driver, blood pouring from a deep cut on his forehead, was still alive. Relief washed over me as I checked for a pulse.

"I can feel it, he's alive!" I exclaimed.

Hannah's worried expression changed to a shaky smile. "Let's get him out of there!" she insisted, trying to stand but faltering immediately. "M-my back!" she stuttered, clutching her shirt. "I think I need to rest."

Concerned, I turned to find her sprawled on the ground. Hannah's dog was licking her face and nudging her gently, trying to wake her up. I focused back on the driver and felt moisture seeping through my socks. Looking down, I realized it was fuel leaking from the wrecked car.

Panic set in as I struggled to free the trapped driver. Quickly deciding to return to Hannah, I scooped her into my arms and carefully laid her on a patch of grass further down the road, away from the leaking fuel, doing my best not to aggravate her injuries. Looking at her, I noticed her blood-stained hands.

I made my way back to the car, only to have an explosion go off in front of me. The flames from Hannah's house cast an

ominous glow. The heat was intense and smoke was billowing into the sky. Sirens wailed in the distance, getting louder as help approached.

Fearing for my safety, I kicked off my shoes and socks and threw them away before they caught fire. Barefoot, I sprinted back to Hannah's side, trying to reassure her amidst the chaos. "It's going to be okay," I assured her, my voice shaking with worry.

Looking around, my heart sank when I noticed that the dog was missing. "Doggy?"

I rose to my feet and carefully navigated the area, avoiding debris and smoldering remains. Suddenly I spotted something lying near the car in the midst of the chaos. Could it be the dog? As I rushed towards it, my foot collided with a sharp object, slicing through my skin.

Grimacing from the pain, I collapsed to the grass. With shaking hands, I examined my left foot and found a piece of glass embedded in it. I carefully removed the glass and pressed my hand against the wound, trying to stop the bleeding.

Determined, I got back on my feet and approached the figure lying next to the car. Through blurred vision, I realized it wasn't a person—it was an animal. "Doggy?"

With cautious steps, I navigated the wreckage, keeping my wounded foot as safe as possible.

"Doggy, are you here?"

Peering into the rubble left by the explosion, I saw a wagging tail amidst the smoke. Carefully dodging the debris, I spotted the dog standing guard over someone.

"H-how did you get here?" I asked in disbelief.

The dog barked and nudged my hand, a comforting presence amidst the chaos. Kneeling beside the dog, I checked the injured person's pulse.

"He's alive! You saved him, doggy!" I exclaimed gratefully.

The dog wagged its tail happily, its eyes reflecting relief and pride.

Help finally arrived, and I recounted the harrowing events to the emergency responders.

"Are you injured, miss?" one of the officers asked, concerned.

"Just my foot," I replied, trying to stay composed despite the pain.

They helped me into the ambulance and tended to my foot. While the paramedics focused on helping Hannah and the driver, I was informed that my mother had been notified of the situation.

"Go home to your mother," the officer kindly instructed me.

The dog nudged my leg, as if urging me to take him with me. "I think he wants to come with you," the officer said with a smile.

I nodded gratefully and took the dog with me. As we started to walk, the dog bounded ahead, eager to lead the way.

After a few steps, the pain in my foot increased and made me slow down. "It's just you and me now, doggy," I said with a faint smile. "Hannah never told me your name, so I'll call you... Rune."

Rune wagged his tail happily and accepted his new name with a bark of approval.

"Do you like your new name, Rune?"

As we walked away from the crash site, I looked back at the officer. Something seemed wrong—his head was shaking and a strange black substance was oozing from his skin. I rubbed my eyes, hoping it was a trick of the light, but when I looked again, he was gone. Confused, I scanned the area, but everything

seemed normal.

Shaking off the unsettling feeling, I turned my attention back to Rune. "Wait for me!" I called, and Rune slowed down so that I could catch up.

When I returned to the house, my mother and Aunt Erin were already waiting anxiously at the front door, their faces etched with worry.

"What happened?" my mother asked, her voice trembling with concern.

"It's Azruleth," Aunt Erin interjected urgently. "He's trying to manipulate you."

"Azruleth?" Elaine frowned, clearly confused.

"The demon," I replied quickly, trying to explain.

Aunt Erin shot me a questioning look. "How did you know I was talking about a demon?"

"I wanted to talk to you about it. I had a vision of Hannah's fate and had to intervene. Also... I saw Eliza. Her ghost appeared at the end of my bed," I confessed hesitantly.

Elaine's eyes widened in shock. "Eliza? But she's... she's dead."

Aunt Erin's expression turned serious. "Eliza? I haven't heard that name in years. What did she say?"

"She gave me the talisman we've been looking for. It's supposed to destroy Azruleth," I said, trying to keep my voice steady despite the rising tension.

Aunt Erin's face twisted in concern. "Destroy? Be careful with Eliza. She may mean well, but her methods may be dangerous. Did she mention that using the talisman means offering your own body as a prison for Azruleth? You'd stay alive, but you'd always hear his thoughts in your head, never finding peace."

Shock and fear surged through me. "Wait, what?"

"That's right," Aunt Erin confirmed, her voice grave. She looked worriedly at Elaine. "We're not safe here."

Erin's arm trembled violently as the infection spread, and she collapsed to her knees. Elaine rushed to support her, alarmed by the heavy bleeding.

"Is there any other way to stop Azruleth?" I asked frantically.

"There may be. We need a black obsidian diamond ring. It can harness the power of the house's doors and strengthen the barrier seal," Aunt Erin explained, trying to steady herself.

"Have you ever made one?" my mother asked, her voice quivering.

"I haven't, but there's a book that details how to create them," Erin replied, struggling to stay focused.

"I think I have a small piece of obsidian diamond in my backpack," I blurted out suddenly.

"If you do, it might be our chance to save the world," Erin said urgently.

"The world?" my mother whispered, her voice barely audible.

"If Azruleth isn't stopped, he could unleash devastation on a global scale," Erin warned, her voice heavy with dread.

"Shouldn't we inform the police, or someone?" Elaine asked.

Erin attempted to laugh, but it came out as a painful cough. "Elaine, if you want to be taken to a mental institution, go ahead. Would you trust a new officer with 'There's a demon in my house, please help' in their first week?"

Elaine's eyes filled with tears, her concern deepening as she glanced at Erin's worsening condition. "But Erin, look at your arm! Those injuries... they're not normal. You need a hospital. They can help you, they can—"

Erin cut her off gently but firmly, her voice strained yet resolute. "No, Elaine. A hospital can't help me. They'll only claim my death, just as you said. There's no earthly explanation for what's happening to me. We need to focus on Azruleth. We

have to do this ourselves."

Elaine swallowed hard, grappling with the harsh reality of their situation. She knew Erin was right, but the thought of facing such supernatural threats without any external support terrified her.

"We'll find a way," Elaine said, her voice wavering. "I can't lose you, Erin."

Erin managed a weak smile. "We won't lose each other. We'll fight this, together."

We hurried into the house, feeling the urgency in every step. As we entered the dimly lit hallway, I unzipped my backpack with trembling hands, the noise echoing loudly in the tense atmosphere. I rummaged through the contents, searching desperately for the stone that held our hope.

Finally, my fingers closed around it—a shimmering gem amidst the mundane items. I handed it to Erin, who examined it closely in the faint sunlight filtering through the window. Her expression fell slightly.

"This isn't it," she murmured sadly. "We need a stone with green crystals, imbued with ancient binding magic."

Feeling a pang of disappointment, I nodded, understanding. "So, what do we do now?"

Sensing my curiosity, Erin paused to gather her thoughts.

"Once we have the right stone, we must wait until 3 a.m., the witching hour, to awaken its true power. That's when the veil between realms is thinnest, allowing access to the stone's dormant powers. We must delicately extract each crystal, treat them with reverence, and fuse them into a single core imbued with the stone's essence," Erin explained with intensity.

"Once the core is formed, we will move through the corridors of the house and at precisely 2:55 a.m., magical doors will reveal themselves, each bearing a unique symbol. But beware—Azruleth knows this ritual. He'll use the shifting

nature of the doors to thwart us and seize the power for himself."

Just as Erin finished her explanation, a loud knocking erupted from the living room. The knocks grew louder and more insistent, echoing through the silent house. We exchanged anxious glances, our conversation interrupted by the urgent presence at the front door.

Xavier Wevers

# Chapter X

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The sound reverberated through the hallway, sending a chill down our spines.

Erin's eyes widened with alarm. "Who could that be at this hour?"

Elaine exchanged a worried glance with me, her voice barely above a whisper. "Should we even answer it?"

"We have to," Erin insisted, her tone resolute despite the underlying tension.

With cautious steps, Erin led the way to the front door, her hand trembling slightly as she reached for the doorknob. Elaine stood close beside her, her breath shallow with apprehension. I lingered a few steps behind, my senses on high alert, ready to react to any unforeseen danger.

Erin took a deep breath to steady herself, then swiftly turned the doorknob. The door creaked open slowly, revealing the dimly lit porch outside. No one was immediately visible, just the faint glow of the porch light casting long shadows on the steps.

"Hello?" Erin called out tentatively, her voice barely audible over the beating of our hearts.

There was no response, only the rustling of leaves in the cool night breeze. Elaine glanced nervously at Erin, who hesitated before taking a cautious step forward, peering out into the darkness.

Suddenly, a figure darted into view, startling us all. It was Janessa, her face etched with worry and desperation.

"Janessa, what brings you here?" Erin asked, concern



evident in her voice.

"I heard about the accident at my house and rushed over. Have you seen my other dog?" Janessa replied anxiously, her eyes darting around the porch.

Stammering slightly, I replied, "N-no, I haven't seen another dog."

Janessa's shoulders sagged with disappointment, but she quickly regained her composure, her gaze shifting between each of us. "I need to find her. She's... important."

Elaine stepped forward, her expression softening. "We'll help you look. Come inside, we can talk more there."

As Janessa hesitated at the doorway, a sudden howl pierced the night air, echoing from the direction of the woods beyond the house. The sound sent a shiver down my spine, and I exchanged a worried glance with Elaine.

"Did you hear that?" Elaine whispered, her voice filled with apprehension.

Janessa's eyes widened with fear. "That... that wasn't a normal howl."

Erin glanced back at us, her face pale but determined. "We need to find out what's going on. Quickly, let's gather our things."

Janessa's urgency was palpable as she continued, her voice laced with distress. "I left both my dogs, Sky and Maci, at home, and since Sky went with you... I—"

Elaine interjected gently, her concern evident. "Aren't you more worried about Hannah?"

Janessa's expression softened briefly before returning to a state of heightened concern. "Of course I'm worried about her, but she's in good hands at the hospital. My dog, Maci, on the other hand..." Her voice trailed off as she glanced around nervously, her thoughts clearly on finding her missing pet.

Sensing Janessa's urgency, Elaine reached out to touch her shoulder gently, offering reassurance. Janessa recoiled abruptly. "Don't touch me!"

Undeterred, Elaine gestured toward her car parked nearby. "My car is this way. Let's go."

Janessa nodded reluctantly, her mind clearly elsewhere. As we walked, I quietly asked, "Where's your car?"

Janessa sighed with frustration, her voice tinged with worry. "Look outside, it's a beautiful day. I walked to work and left my car in the garage, which was probably destroyed in the explosion."

I nodded in understanding as we reached the car. Rune, now identified as Sky, eagerly hopped into the back seat. Erin stayed behind, clutching the obsidian diamond with a determined expression.

During the drive to Star Route Street, Elaine struck up a conversation, attempting to ease the tension. "How long have you had Sky and Maci?"

Janessa's face softened as she thought back. "Since Hannah moved into my house. We found them abandoned at the front door one day, no tags, no owner in sight. Hannah looked at me with those pleading eyes, and we decided to keep them. It's been over two years now."

I caught Janessa's eye in the rearview mirror, offering a small smile. She met it gratefully. "I never got the chance to thank you properly," she said earnestly. "I'm sorry if I startled you earlier, but thank you for saving Hannah."

Meeting her gaze, I assured her, "I wasn't scared, just surprised. I understand your feelings; they must be overwhelming right now."

Janessa nodded appreciatively. "You're wise beyond your years. I hope to get to know you better. Hannah couldn't stop

talking about you; she was thrilled to have you as a friend."

Surprised, I asked, "She talked about me?"

Janessa nodded with a warm smile. "Yes, she called me as soon as she got back from visiting you. I'm grateful she's opening up again. She used to be so joyful, but after losing her parents in that fire, life became unbearable. She faced rumors and bullying at school until she decided to shut herself off. I had to send her away for treatment. When she returned a month later, she couldn't remember a thing. Since then, I've made it my mission to protect her and give her the care she deserves."

Elaine interjected gently, "I'm sorry to interrupt, but we're here."

Exiting the car, we surveyed the scene before us. The explosion had left a devastating trail of debris and destruction. Janessa's once-charming house lay in ruins, its walls blackened and crumbling. The acrid scent of smoke lingered in the air.

Overwhelmed, Janessa's eyes filled with tears as she scanned the wreckage. "Maci! Where are you, girl?" Her voice echoed through the eerily quiet street, but there was no response.

Elaine placed a comforting hand on Janessa's shoulder, her voice gentle yet determined. "We'll find her, Janessa. Let's search the area together."

Janessa nodded bravely, her resolve outweighing her grief. Together we combed through the rubble, calling out for Maci, hoping against all odds for any sign of her beloved dog. Time seemed to stretch endlessly as minutes turned into hours, but there was still no sign of Maci.

Tears streamed down Janessa's face as she sank to her knees, her heart heavy with despair.

Elaine knelt beside her, offering a comforting embrace.

As Janessa's despair threatened to overwhelm her, a faint whimper caught our attention. We turned, our hearts racing, searching desperately for the source of the sound.

Suddenly, from the bushes behind us, Maci emerged, her fur dusty and eyes wide with fear and confusion.

Relief flooded Janessa's face, tears streaming down her cheeks as she rushed forward. "Maci! Oh, Maci!" she cried out joyously, gathering the injured dog into her arms. She showered her with kisses.

"We need to find Janessa and her dogs a place to stay for the night," Elaine suggested.

Janessa nodded silently, her eyes fixed on the charred remains of her house.

"We should check with a nearby neighbor," I added, scanning the quiet street for any signs of life. "There's a house just down the road. Maybe they can offer some help."

Janessa agreed, her voice barely a whisper.

Together, we carefully navigated through the debris, stepping over fallen beams and shattered glass.

As we reached the neighbor's house, Elaine knocked on the door.

Moments later, the door creaked open, revealing a concerned face peering out.

"We're neighbors from down the street," Elaine began, quickly explaining the situation. "There's been an explosion at Janessa's house. Is there any chance you could offer her and her dogs a place to stay?"

The neighbor's eyes widened in shock, but compassion quickly replaced surprise. "Of course," she replied without hesitation. "Come on in. I have a spare room and some blankets. You're more than welcome to stay."

Relief washed over us as we followed the neighbor inside.

She led us down a hallway adorned with family photos and into a cozy guest room. The warmth of the room was a welcome contrast to the cold outside.

"Thank you so much," Janessa murmured gratefully, her voice choked with emotion. She gently placed Sky and Maci on the soft bed and sat beside them, stroking their fur soothingly. The dogs nestled close to her, finding comfort in their owner's touch.

The neighbor smiled warmly. "I'll leave you here to rest for the night. If you need anything, don't hesitate to ask."

Elaine put a comforting hand on Janessa's shoulder. "Take care, Janessa. We'll check on you tomorrow."

Nodding gratefully, Janessa managed a small smile as we quietly left the room, leaving them to their much needed peace.

By the time I got home, the sun had dipped below the horizon, casting a serene glow over the landscape.

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 lifted a weight from my shoulders, giving me a little break from all the stress.

But just as I was closing my eyes and enjoying the peace, something caught my attention. I quickly opened my eyes and looked into the bathroom mirror. There, through the steam, I caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure behind me. It sent a shiver down my spine, 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.

I turned around quickly, my heart pounding, but there

was nothing there. Just the empty bathroom, steam curling around the corners. I faced the mirror again, the figure still visible. Its eyes seemed to bore into mine, holding me in place with a disturbing gaze. I took a deep breath and tried to calm my nerves. Slowly, the figure began to fade, disappearing into the steam until it was completely gone.

I stood there for a moment, staring at my reflection, trying to make sense of what I'd seen. Was it real, or was my mind playing tricks on me? Either way, the encounter left me feeling shaken and uneasy.

After the shower, I dried off and slipped into my pajamas, still feeling the residual chill from the mysterious figure. I climbed into bed, the soft sheets providing some comfort.

Before I drifted off, I grabbed my phone to update Jess on the events. I needed to share what had happened to get some perspective.

**Me:** Hey Jess. You are not going to believe the day I had.

**Jess:** Hey! Tell me everything. What happened?

**Me:** So much. We explored the basement and found a diary that belonged to my dad's grandmother, Eliza. My Aunt Erin showed up and led us through a hidden door into an underground cave system where the old Gibson Mortuary is located. We tried to use an echo to contact my dad, but a demon took over. Erin was infected by the demon and is resting now. Then I saw Eliza's ghost.

**Jess:** Wait, slow down. Hidden doorway? Underground cave? Demon? This is crazy. You're serious?

**Me:** I know it sounds crazy. But Eliza's ghost told me there's no way to save Erin and betrayed me by saying I'm the key to saving the world, but it means sacrificing myself. I'm not okay with that! We'll find another way.

**Jess:** Wow, okay. That's a lot. I'm trying to wrap my head around it. You saw Eliza's ghost? And she talked to you?

**Me:** Yeah. And it gets crazier. I had a vision of my friend Hannah dying. I was able to intervene and stop it, but now she's in the hospital and her house was destroyed in a fire, just like her childhood home. Her guardian, our math teacher Janessa, is staying with a neighbor.

**Jess:** So you're saying you had a vision, saved someone from dying, and then they ended up in the hospital anyway? That sounds like something out of one of those paranormal forums I'm always on.

**Me:** Exactly. It's like living in one of your online supernatural stories. But this is real, and it's happening right now. I have to figure out how to save Erin and deal with this demon.

**Jess:** This is scary and unreal. But you know I'm obsessed with this stuff. You have to be super careful. Do you think Erin knows more about this?

**Me:** Maybe. I'll talk to her tomorrow. Right now I just need to try and get some sleep.

**Jess:** I wish I could be there to help. Maybe I should go to Nightmoor?

**Me:** No, Jess. It's too dangerous. I don't want to put you in danger.

**Jess:** Okay. Just promise you'll keep me posted and stay safe.

**Me:** I promise. Thank you for always being there for me. Goodnight.

**Jess:** Goodnight. Stay safe.

Xavier Wevers

# Chapter XI

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The next day, I went back to school.

As I walked through the familiar hallways, a rush of emotions—relief, excitement, and a hint of worry—washed over me. I couldn't wait to see my dear friends Jake, Alisha, Anthony, and Liam.

It didn't take long to find them, gathered in our usual spot. Their faces lit up when they saw me, and I could tell they were eager to hear what had happened in my life.

"Where's Liam?" I asked, noticing his absence.

"He's out sick," Alisha sighed.

We found a quiet spot away from prying eyes and I gathered my friends around me. Taking a deep breath, I began to tell the story that had turned my world upside down. Their faces reflected my initial disbelief and shock. I could see their minds working, trying to understand and figure out how to help.

The bell rang, signaling the start of the school day, but we managed to steal moments between classes to discuss the strange occurrences. During lunch, we found a secluded corner of the cafeteria to continue our conversation.

"This sounds like something out of a horror movie," Anthony said, his eyes wide with fear.

"I know, right?" Jake added. "But we need to stick together and figure this out."

After school, we decided to meet at my house to delve deeper into the mystery.

We gathered in the cozy living room and I painted a vivid picture of the mysterious figure's presence in my home, the



whispers that echoed through the halls, the strange shadows, and the constant feeling of something ominous lurking around.

Suddenly, a realization hit me and I turned to Alisha. "Alisha, where did you put the obsidian stone from our chemistry class?"

Alisha's eyes locked with mine, then she looked around the room. "My parents have it, why?"

"Do you remember the color of the diamonds on it?" I asked.

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. "Aunt Erin? Where are you?" I called out.

Erin's voice echoed back, "I'm in the attic!"

We crossed the bridge to the other side of the house and climbed the ladder to the attic.

Gathered in the attic, Erin turned her attention to us. "Are these your classmates?" she asked with a friendly smile.

"Yes, they are," I confirmed with a playful wink. "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 and stuttered 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?"

"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:

Separating Myth from Reality.

Secrets of Demonology.

A Guide to Hidden Powers.

Decoding Ancient Mysteries.

Demonic Essence: Understanding Their True Nature.

"Ah, here it is," Erin said, pointing to a section entitled: "Power Rings." She began to read.

### **Power Rings**

The Power Rings were known as powerful magical objects. It was believed that they were originally created by dark wizards to give humans 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 near.

For a long time, it became really scary to go outside. As time passed, these evil creatures grew stronger. They could sense when someone had magic. When some people in the city started to go missing, people got scared. To stop these bad things, the dark wizards 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 stopped and looked at the page. Some of the words seemed hard to read.

"Can I take a look?" I asked with a hopeful smile. Erin turned the book so I could see.

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

.... . . . R...g o. . . S...ryer.  
P.... . . . the . . . . . me.d.ng.  
. . . y. . . .the . . . . . .  
Co..ina.ion of . . . . . an. . . . n. . . . . . . i....g  
fr.m . . . .  
. . . . . he . . . of . . . .  
. . . . . ma..s . . . i.... . . . e.... .h.  
Coun..ng all th..e different rings, you e.. up with a  
total of 13 compl.tely di.fe.ent 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. We just need the binding ring."

Anthony let out a sigh of relief before he suddenly realized 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 returned 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, as no one has ever successfully collected all 13. Some 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 magicians that Tri-Lings might be able to use all 13 rings at once. Tri-Lings are believed to be exceptionally rare beings, part human, part demon, and part god. Their unique nature

is said to give them the ability to harness immense power without succumbing to madness.

The origins of the Tri-Lings are shrouded in mystery. Some legends suggest they were born from forbidden unions between gods, demons, and humans. Others believe they were created through ancient rituals meant to merge the strengths of these three entities. Regardless of their origin, Tri-Lings are said to possess unparalleled abilities, making them both feared and revered.

We've never seen a Tri-Ling ourselves, but some say they've been spotted near the forest. Some think they're still around, while others think they never existed. They are said to have the ability to channel the power of the rings without suffering the detrimental effects that would plague ordinary humans.

"Tri-Lings... you don't really think 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 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.

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

## *Alisha*

"We're almost there!" I said excitedly. Anthony glanced around, clearly uneasy as he scanned the empty streets.

"Do you really think this Azruleth stuff is real? All that talk about magic? It sounds a bit far-fetched to me. Honestly, I'm only here because of Sophia. She believes in it all. We've lived in this town our whole lives and never seen anything supernatural."

I stopped walking and took his hand. "I don't know if it's true, and honestly, I don't care. 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 smiled, then started laughing. "Why are you so serious? I was just kidding. Let's go get that stone from your parents' house."

I held his arm tighter, noticing the blush on his cheeks. "Don't play around, I know you. You weren't kidding."

Anthony smiled awkwardly and nudged my shoulder playfully. "All right, let's go."

As we started walking again, I gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and whispered, "You can't catch me," before darting away.

Anthony's eyes lit up with determination. "Oh, you're in so much trouble!"

We both ran to my house, me reaching the front door first. As I fumbled with the keys, Anthony caught up, breathless.

"So, what was that kiss about?" Anthony asked, grinning.

"Boy, not now." I pushed him aside and stepped through the door. "Are you coming or not?" I called as he hesitated.

"Y-Yeah, coming!"

I walked into the living room with Anthony close behind.

"Mom? Dad?"

The house seemed empty. I went to their bedroom and started rifling through drawers.

"Where could they have put the stone?" I muttered.

"It's not here. Maybe the kitchen?" Anthony suggested.

"The kitchen? That's a weird place to hide a stone."

"Well, you never know," he said with a shrug.

I bumped into him playfully. "Okay, let's check."

Anthony blushed and quickly looked away, heading for the kitchen.

"Is it here?" I asked as I followed him.

"I don't see it anywhere."

He turned to me and smiled.

"Why are you smiling, Ant?" I asked.

"N-Nothing, Lish," he chuckled.

"Boy, stop staring at me!" I teased.

Anthony looked away awkwardly.

"Well, I don't know where it could be. I checked upstairs, the living room, and the kitchen. I doubt my parents would keep a stone in the bathroom."

"Why are you asking me? They're your parents."

I walked into the bathroom and opened the cabinet.

"Could you check under the sink?"

"S-Sure."

While he searched, I returned to the hallway, frustrated.

"Where could that stupid stone be? I'm sure they didn't take it with them..."

Anthony emerged from the bathroom.

"You don't even have to tell me," I sighed.

"Let's take a break, clear our heads, and try again later," Anthony suggested, pulling me to the couch.

"Here you go, nice and comfy," he said, wrapping a blanket around me.

"Wow, you look so cute and comfy. Can I give you a hug?" he asked, blushing.

I stared at him for a moment, then wrapped my arms around him, pulling us both under the blanket.

"Is this what you wanted?" I asked playfully.

Anthony blushed. "Maybe..."

I held him tighter, pulling him onto the couch until I was on top of him.

"I-I feel kind of stuck now, help!" he laughed.

I tried to move, but the blanket had us both wrapped up. "Uh, I'm kind of stuck too."

"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.

He tried to cover his face. "There's nowhere to hide," I chuckled. When I looked into his eyes, I saw my own reflection.

I gently pressed my lips to his, and we shared a kiss. After a moment, he pushed me away. "I-I can't breathe!"

I giggled and shifted until the blanket loosened and we could breathe properly again. We looked at each other and laughed.

"That was something," Anthony said, kissing me again.

I heard footsteps and the front door unlocking. I quickly pushed Anthony away, and we both sat up straight on the couch.

"Mom? Dad? 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 dispels negativity," 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?"

"We should probably go now," I said, grabbing Anthony by the arm and pulling him out.

"Be back by nightfall!" my father called as we ran off.

"We got the stone!" I shouted excitedly.

Anthony slowed down and grabbed my arm. "I want to talk about us. What did that kiss mean?"

"What did what mean?" I teased.

"You know..."

"You know what?" I played dumb.

"The kiss, Alisha. The kiss!"

I touched his lips. "You mean this kiss?" I looked at Anthony, who seemed completely startled.

"Uh, Earth to Anthony?"

"Y-Yeah, sorry. Heh." He chuckled.

"D-Does that mean we're a thing now?"

I smiled. "There's only one way to find out, right?"

Anthony's smile widened. "Heh, I guess so."

I leaned in for another kiss but suddenly tapped his shoulder and took off running. "Come and get me!"

"Hey! What was that? Give me that kiss!" Anthony called, chasing after me.

# Chapter XII

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Jake closed the front door behind us as we headed for the hospital.

"Do you mind 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 which 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 get 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 for 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 by the name of Hannah Gibson. Can you tell me what room she's in?" Jake asked the nurse behind 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.

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. A sense of relief washed over me as I saw that she was 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, my voice echoing in the quiet neighborhood.

As we neared Sophia's house, I glanced back to see Anthony lagging behind, panting heavily. "Faster, Ant!" I urged.

Anthony finally reached the porch, doubled over and gasping for breath. "How... How are you so fast?" he wheezed.

"It's just practice, Ant. Nothing more," I said with a grin.

Anthony straightened up, giving me a playful glare. "Hmph."

I rang the doorbell and waited, but there was no response. After a few minutes, Anthony tried ringing it again, but still nothing.

"Maybe she's too busy to hear the bell?" Anthony suggested.

"Nonsense! Let's find another way in," I declared, stepping back to survey the house.

"Alisha, what are you doing?" Anthony called after me.

"Looking for a way in," I replied, scanning the area.

"Why don't you ask Sophia if there's a spare key outside?" Anthony suggested.

I paused. "Good call, Ant!" I pulled out my phone and texted Sophia.

Do you know if there's a spare key outside? We're locked out, and your aunt isn't answering the doorbell.

A moment later, Sophia replied, There's a loose floorboard on the left side of the porch; the key should be there.

I hurried over to the left side of the porch and felt for the loose floorboard. "Got it!" I exclaimed, lifting the board to reveal the key.

"Here we go," I said, pushing Anthony aside as I

approached the front door.

"Move, boy!"

I inserted the key into the lock but quickly realized it didn't fit.

"What now?" Anthony asked.

"The key's already in the lock from the inside. We can't use this one," I explained.

"Seriously?" Anthony groaned. "What kind of door is this?"

"It's an old door with a single lock mechanism," I said. "Do I need to explain everything to you?"

Anthony smirked. "Does this mean I can finally claim that kiss?"

"Ant, you are unbelievable," I said, rolling my eyes. I leaned in and gave him a quick kiss on the neck. "Enough for now?"

Anthony grabbed me and kissed me on the lips.

"Ant! We're on a mission here. Stop distracting us," I said, blushing.

Anthony chuckled and took my hand. Suddenly, my phone buzzed again.

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

"We shouldn't be much longer," I said.

Then, without warning, a deafening scream shattered the silence, causing us both to jump. "W-what was that?" Anthony whispered, his voice shaking.

"I don't know, but it came from inside the house!" I ran to the front door and tried to kick it open. "Help me, Anthony!"

"You... you want to break down the door?" he asked, wide-eyed.

"Yes! Now come help me!"

Anthony grabbed a rock and smashed it through the door window.

"Watch it! You could've hit me!" I yelled.

"Sorry! But it worked, didn't it?" Anthony replied, a little sheepishly.

I reached through the broken window and unlocked the door. We stepped inside, and I immediately noticed a strange, glistening liquid covering the floor and walls. "This wasn't here before," I said, my voice trembling.

"No, it definitely wasn't," Anthony agreed, his eyes wide with fear.

I cautiously made my way up the stairs, motioning for Anthony to stay put. "You, wait here," I whispered.

Anthony nodded nervously as I climbed the ladder to the attic. The room looked empty. Where was Erin? I walked over to her desk and noticed an open book. My eyes widened as I read the passage:

### **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. "What is it?" he asked.

"Take a look at this," I said, pointing to the open book. Anthony leaned over and read the ominous passage about Azruleth.

"Wow, this is intense stuff," he murmured, glancing around the attic. The liquid trails seemed to lead in multiple directions.

"Do you think Azruleth could be behind all this?" Anthony asked, his voice tinged with fear.

"It's possible. We need to find out what happened here," I replied, my heart pounding.

We ventured back downstairs, following the mysterious tracks. The furniture was overturned, and the atmosphere grew more eerie with each step. Anthony pointed to one of the tracks.

"Look at this," he said, crouching down. "It's like it's leading somewhere."

We followed the trail to the basement door, which was slightly ajar. I hesitated, my hand hovering over the handle.

"Stay close," I whispered.

# Chapter XIII

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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.

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 before?" he asked, his voice shaking.

"I have, with my family," I replied.

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.

A sudden rustling noise echoed through the corridor ahead. Jake and I froze, exchanging tense glances. The sound grew louder, accompanied by hushed voices.

"Did you hear that?" Jake whispered, his grip tightening on my arm.

I nodded, straining to make out the voices. "Stay close," I whispered back.

We edged forward, the flashlight beam dancing over the walls. As we rounded a corner, the source of the noise became clear. Alisha and Anthony emerged from the shadows, their faces pale with fear.

"Alisha! Anthony!" I called out, relief flooding my voice.

Alisha turned sharply, her eyes wide. "Sophia! Jake!" she exclaimed, rushing towards us. "We've been trying to find a way out. It's like a nightmare down here."

Anthony, trailing behind her, looked equally shaken. "We heard something following us," he added, glancing nervously over his shoulder.

I hugged them both tightly, grateful to have found them. "We need to stick together," I said, my voice firm.

Suddenly, a loud thud reverberated through the hall, followed by an eerie silence. We all turned towards the sound, our breath catching in our throats.

"We need to move, now," Jake urged, his eyes darting around the darkened passage.

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. "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.

# Chapter XIV

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An hour had passed since we had gathered in the attic to prepare for the ritual. 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.

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. "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. "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.



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 my mother 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. "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.

"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.

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

# Chapter XV

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"Blake, are you coming? The water isn't even that cold!" I called, as I floated lazily in the pool.

Blake looked at me and grinned, nodding. He jogged towards the pool, almost slipping on the wet tiles before making a dramatic leap into the water. He surfaced, shaking his hair like a dog, sending droplets everywhere.

"How's the water, everyone?" he asked, his excitement bubbling over.

"It's perfect!" Erin said, lounging on an inflatable raft, her sunglasses perched on her nose. "Couldn't have picked a better day for a swim."

Victoria, who was perched on the pool's edge with her feet dangling in the water, started a playful splash war, sending a small wave towards Erin.

"Ey!"

As laughter and water splashed around, Blake swam over to me. "This is great," he said, his voice filled with contentment. "I'm glad we did this."

"Me too," I replied, feeling a warm rush of affection for the whole group. "It's been too long since we all hung out like this."

Victoria eventually decided to get out. "I'm going to dry off for a bit," she announced. Jay, who had been floating nearby, swam over and offered his hand to help her out of the pool.

"Need any help?" he asked, smiling up at her.

Victoria shook her head. "I'm fine, but thanks," she said, making her way into the house.

She waved at us before disappearing inside.



Blake watched her go and then turned to me. "How long has it been since we all got together like this?"

"Almost eight months. Can you believe it? Time flies."

Jay, who had followed Victoria out of the pool, came back with a thoughtful look on his face.

"Do you guys have any name ideas for the baby yet?" Blake suddenly asked.

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

Victoria, who had come back with some towels, handed one to Jay.

"You told them already?" she asked with a smile.

Jay nodded. "I did. I hope you don't mind."

Victoria gave him a puzzled look but then smiled warmly. "It's all right. I think it's a great name."

Blake and I climbed out of the pool, our skin cooling in the evening air. "Who's ready for dinner?" I called out, wrapping a towel around myself.

Erin immediately responded. "Yes! I'm starving. I could eat a horse."

I chuckled. "Well, you'll have to wait a bit while we get things ready. But I promise it will be worth it."

Erin's playful pout made me laugh, and she splashed water at us one last time before diving back in. The sound of their laughter filled the air, and I turned to Blake with a grin.

"Blake, let's go make dinner," I said, nudging him playfully.

He sighed. "Do I have to?"

"Yes, you do," I replied, taking his hand. "Come on, it'll be fun."

As we walked towards the house, hand in hand, I felt a wave of contentment wash over me. It was moments like these, surrounded by friends and laughter, that made everything feel just right.

But as we approached the kitchen, a strange sight caught my attention. An eerie glow emanated from the slightly ajar basement door, casting an unearthly hue across the hallway.

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

Blake turned 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 was gone. 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 made our way to the kitchen, leaving the mysterious glow behind.

"We could make a dessert out of 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, and a shared excitement passed between us. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" he asked, a grin spreading across his face.

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

Blake chuckled, shaking his head. "Seriously, you thought of caramel apple turnovers too?"

I laughed, the sound mingling with the distant laughter of our friends outside. "Great minds think alike! But let's be real, an apple pie might be simpler."

"Yeah, okay, apple pie it is," he agreed, still smiling. "But next time, we're making those turnovers."

I grabbed a few pans and set them on the stove, ready to start preparing dinner. "So, what are we making?"

"Nothing too fancy, just something simple," I said, my eyes twinkling with mischief.

Blake raised an eyebrow, leaning against the counter. "How simple are we talking?"

"Lasagna!" I declared, my enthusiasm bubbling over.

Blake looked at me in surprise. "Elaine, I thought you said simple?"

I leaned in closer, my voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "Lasagna is easy to make if you have an extra pair of hands. Besides, we need something hearty before dessert, right?"

Blake's smile widened, and he leaned in to kiss me on the cheek. "Whatever makes you happy."

With a grin, I started preparing the lasagna, layering pasta, savory meat sauce, creamy béchamel, and melty cheese. The rich aromas filled the kitchen, making my mouth water. Blake stood beside me, helping with the sauce and occasionally sneaking bites of cheese.

"This smells amazing," Blake said, sprinkling a layer of cheese on top. "I can't wait to dig in."

"Me neither," I replied, brushing a stray lock of hair from my face. "But first, the pie."

We turned our attention to the apple pie. The scent of sliced apples, sugar, and cinnamon wafted through the air as we worked together, peeling and slicing the apples, mixing them with spices, and preparing the crust.

"You know," Blake said, his hands covered in flour as he rolled out the dough, "I never thought cooking could be this much fun."

"That's because you're doing it with me," I teased, nudging him playfully.

Blake laughed, and I couldn't help but join in.

Once the lasagna and pie were ready, I put them in the ovens, setting the timers. "They'll be ready just in time to surprise everyone."

Blake wrapped an arm around my waist, pulling me close. "You always know how to make things special, Elaine."

I looked up at him, feeling a warm glow inside. "It's because I have you to share them with."

Blake looked at me, his eyes softening. "I love these moments with you."

I smiled, resting my head on his shoulder. "Me too, Blake. Me too."

Xavier Wevers

# Chapter XVI

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

"Blake, wake up!" I yelled, jumping out of bed.

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

"It's 11 in the morning!" I yelled as I rushed 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 noticed 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, Blake sprang into action. He grabbed 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 to the car. Despite the morning rush, 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 screamed in disbelief.

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

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

"It's not about your qualifications. The previous candidate



accepted the position, forcing us to withdraw all other applications."

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

The officer nodded, sympathetic 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 it had happened.

I met Blake in the lobby and he was checking 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 stammered.

Blake hugged me tightly, understanding my deep disappointment. "I'm so sorry, honey. Do you want to come back to my place?"

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

We left the building, the weight of rejection 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 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 faint smile and nodded. We found a nearby cafe and 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 grabbed my hand. "Elaine, you're incredibly talented and dedicated. Sometimes 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 discouraged. The rejection stung, and I couldn't shake the feeling that I had missed a great opportunity.

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

When we finished eating, 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 ups and downs together. This is just a temporary setback, and I have no doubt you'll go on to do great things."

When 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.

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

Blake thought for a moment, then began, "Well, just last week, Mrs. Haggerty next door told me that her dog, Max, chased a squirrel up a tree in her yard. It was quite a spectacle."

I chuckled. "That's adorable. Max always brings a smile to my face. And I love that Mrs. Haggerty keeps us up to date on his adventures."

"I just remembered," Blake said, his eyes brightening. "There's a new bakery nearby that has the most amazing pastries. Shall we check it out?"

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

We strolled over to the bakery, a quaint little shop with the smell of freshly baked goods wafting from the open door.

The display case was filled with an array of colorful pastries, and it was a pleasure just to look at them.

We selected a variety of treats to share and took a seat by the window. The first bite of a delicious raspberry-filled croissant almost made me forget my earlier refusal. It was a reminder that there are still many simple pleasures in life.

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

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

Arriving at Blake's house, our sense of calm was shattered by an unexpected sight. The front door was slightly ajar. We exchanged puzzled glances. Blake's face tightened with concern as he slowly and carefully pushed the door open. With precision, he closed it gently 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 suddenly feeling alien.

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

He frowned, his protective instincts kicking in. "Who

cares," he replied, his voice deep 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 up visible in the corner of the room.

As we climbed the ladder, our ears strained for any hint of who was up there. The footsteps continued, a slow and deliberate pace that sent shivers down my spine.

We exchanged a last look before Blake slowly pushed the hatch 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 huddled in a shadowy alcove.

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

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 full of concern.

Victoria's father didn't answer, his gaze unyielding. He moved toward 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 transfixed by something in the attic.

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

We exchanged worried glances before moving 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 an eerie silence.

We slowly led Victoria's father back down the ladder, his trance-like state showing no signs of abating. When we reached the living room, we had to decide whether to leave him or take



him with us.

We grabbed the map and made our way to my house. The drive was filled with an eerie silence, both of us lost in our thoughts, wondering about the meaning of the 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.

When we entered the house, we found it in a state of disarray. It looked as if someone had ransacked the place, looking for something. Furniture was overturned and the once cozy atmosphere was replaced by an unsettling sense of foreboding.

"Erin? Are you here?" I called, hoping for some 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 series of notes that Erin had left behind. It was clear that she had been doing research. Her notes were filled with cryptic references to Nightmoor.

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

We studied the notes carefully, jotting down key information and making connections between the various pieces of the puzzle.

"They all seem to be converging on Nightmoor Manor. But what is the purpose of the ceremony? And who is behind it?"

The name Azruleth had never reached my ears before, but there was an ominous aura surrounding all of this.

Just as we were considering our next steps, a sudden sound caught our attention. The front door, near 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, replied, "Erin wanted to meet."

She showed me the text from Erin on her phone.

"It seemed really important, but I have no idea what she was talking about."

"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 I can't do anything now. I may not be as fast as I used to be, but I can still do most things."

I nodded and smiled apologetically. "Sorry. I didn't mean to sound rude. It's just that Nightmoor has been a bit unusual lately, and we've been caught up in something unexpected."

A strange feeling washed over me, like an invisible pair of eyes watching our every move, making my skin tingle with unease. It sent shivers down my spine, but I kept my discomfort to myself. Blake and Victoria exchanged glances. They could sense something was wrong, but I couldn't bring myself to say anything.

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

Both Blake and Victoria turned to me, their concern obvious. "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 just at home here yesterday and everything seemed fine," I said, my voice tinged with confusion.

Blake looked at me with a furrowed brow. "I wish I had answers for you, but we're both in 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 believe some of the things she said. Now it's starting to make sense. First the eerie glow in your house, then the disturbing eyes I felt on my back. Who knows what it all means? Maybe this is why my interview fell through."

Blake scratched his head, obviously thinking about my words. "I don't know about all that, honey. Although, I have to admit, seeing an eerie glow in my house does sound pretty sinister."

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

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

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

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

I nodded, my heart pounding.

We reached the front door, and to our surprise, it was again slightly ajar.

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

"Wait, Dad, is that you?" Victoria said, her voice full of confusion.

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

Victoria turned to us, her eyebrows furrowed. "Wait, what? Forgot?"

I exchanged a quick look with Blake. "Your father showed up in our attic a few hours ago acting very strange."

Victoria's eyes widened in shock. "And you didn't think to contact me? His daughter?"

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

"Mr. Stevens was 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 and runes and whatnot."

Victoria's expression changed from shock to concern, her worry now directed at her father. "I should go check on him," she said.

Victoria placed a gentle 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 come out of his trance, his vacant eyes focusing 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 collect his thoughts. "I don't... I don't remember exactly. It's all so blurry."

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

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

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

Tears welled in Victoria's eyes as she looked down at her father.

"Remember, Papa, it's me, Victoria. Your daughter. We used to spend hours in the garden and you'd tell me stories about the stars. Dad. Please come back to me."

Blake and I exchanged worried glances.

"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.

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

I turned to Blake, our shared concern reflected in our eyes, and he rushed to grab his phone. He dialed 911, explained the situation to the operator, and with a shaking voice, requested an ambulance.

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.

A heavy, heartbreaking silence filled the room, broken only by the sound of Mr. Stevens' labored breathing.

The paramedics rushed in, their efforts valiant but futile. They confirmed what we already knew, and the unbearable reality settled over us.

Mr. Stevens was only 52 years old. His life, with so much potential ahead of him, had been abruptly cut short.

Victoria, overwhelmed with grief, clung to her father's lifeless body.

As we stood there, grappling with the harsh truth, the paramedics offered their condolences and began the necessary procedures. They had to contact the authorities and prepare for the inevitable investigation that follows a sudden death.

Victoria, still clinging to her father, was caught in a whirlwind of emotions.

"Dad, I..." Her voice broke, unable to articulate the immense pain she felt.

The paramedics finished their procedures and expressed their sympathies as they left the room.

Blake and I exchanged glances, acknowledging the helplessness that had overtaken us.

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

Blake nodded.

"You're right. And we need to figure this out 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 trembling with grief. "My mother died three years ago..."

I reached out to touch her shoulder gently.

"You don't have to go through this alone. You always have us, and you have Jay. Just don't lose hope."

Victoria's shoulders trembled 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 bleak?"

I took a deep breath, my heart aching for her. "You're about to become a mother yourself," I said softly. "Just try to stay positive. I know it's hard. I just came out of one of the deepest depressions I've ever been through."

Victoria pulled back slightly and looked at me with tear-filled 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 and collected 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 came home late, often drunk, and we barely spoke. I felt like I was living with a stranger."

Victoria's eyes widened in sympathy. "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 and living her own life. So it was mostly just me and my dad. When we had dinner together, it was like we were in different worlds. He would barely look at me, and when he did, his eyes were filled with this... emptiness."

I paused, trying to hold back the tears that threatened to spill over. "One night, when I was about twelve, I overheard a phone call. My father was arguing with someone, yelling 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.

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

By the time I was fourteen, I was battling severe depression. I started cutting myself just to feel something other than numbness."

Blake's eyes filled with tears and he pulled me closer.

"But it only got worse. When I turned fifteen, my mother left us exactly three years ago. We kept writing letters to each other. It felt like having a pen pal, which was quite exciting, although I would have preferred my mother to just take care of me.

But suddenly the letters stopped. I didn't get any back. Why did she cut off contact so suddenly?"

I looked around the room, my voice shaking as I continued.

"I went to my father and asked him if anything had happened. He shook his head and shut the door. I thought it was nothing because he's always been like that. I tried to contact my grandmother, but she was unreachable.

Another year passed.

I was sixteen, and the cuts I had made were beginning to show outside my clothes. My father noticed them during our oh-so-pleasant dinner. He picked up a knife and pointed it at me.

'Is this how you feel about your life?!"

I looked up at my father, tears forming in my eyes.

For once, my sister finally banged the table and spoke up for me.

'No, you should be ashamed of yourself, look how you're treating us,' my sister shouted and stormed off.

I quickly got up and followed her. 'What are you doing?' I asked her.

'I'm leaving right now!'

'B- but what about me?'

Erin looked at me, 'You've always been the tougher sister. You'll be fine.'

The moment she said that, my emotions went out of control, and I slammed her suitcase shut with her hands between them. 'You little—' she started.

I went straight to 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 disappeared down the street, out of sight.

I looked back at myself, pulled up my sweater, and saw the scars on my body.

'It's time to leave this dump as well!'

I sneaked into my father's room and grabbed his suitcase. I put all my important things in it and snuck out the window.

I was a few steps away from the house when I suddenly heard a heavy thud, followed by a loud scream.

I crept back and peeked through the window. He was on the phone again.

My curiosity got the better of me, and I crept 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 down on the floor.

'Don't you dare bring that up again!' He slammed the phone down and stepped into the kitchen.

I cautiously decided to pick up the phone.

'H- Hello? Who is this?' I whispered.

'Who am I talking to?' the other person asked.

'E- Elaine...' I answered softly.

'Elaine! It's me, your grandmother. I've been trying to reach you, but your father has cut off all contact.'

'I-is there something you want to tell me?' I asked, scared.

'It's about your mother. This may be hard to hear, so listen carefully. She adored you, she loved you with all her might. But the universe wasn't so kind to her. She got sick. That's why she left. It wasn't because of you, my child. She just had to go.'

'B-but why didn't you do something about my father?'

'Your father is a very powerful man, he can do whatever he wants.'

I looked around, 'I think he's coming back!'

'I'll tell you quickly. You need to know the reason why your mother stopped responding at all...' my father suddenly snatched the phone away from me, 'Give it back!' I said aggressively.

My father looked me in the eye, '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 don't 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 suddenly he grabbed me around the waist.

'You'll never learn, will you?'

He locked me in the basement."

Victoria looked at me with a disgusted expression. "What kind of childhood is this? Who would do such a thing?"

Blake stood up, anger flashing in his eyes. "No! I can't accept this. It's not human!"

I nodded cautiously.

Victoria also stood up. "Where is he? He deserves what's coming to him!"

Blake's face darkened, but I quickly interjected, "Don't worry guys, he's dead."

Victoria's eyes widened in shock. "W-what happened to him?"

I looked at her, our gazes locking. "I killed him."

# Chapter XIX

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"**Y**ou killed him?" Blake's voice trembled with disbelief.

"Yes," I admitted, my voice barely above a whisper. "But it wasn't as simple as that."

Victoria's eyes widened in shock. "How did it happen?"

I took a deep breath, gathering the strength to recount the darkest chapter of my life. "It started when my father locked me in the basement. Erin, my sister, came back just in time to free me.

'What happened?' she asked, her voice filled with concern.

I broke down, sobbing uncontrollably.

'Hey, don't cry. I came back!' she said, trying to comfort me.

I punched her lightly on the back. 'That's for leaving me in the first place!'

Erin smiled, 'I deserved that. Now let's get out of here before Dad wakes up.'

She grabbed a knife from the kitchen drawer, just in case.

Did you know about Mom?" I asked her as we crept towards the door.

Erin's expression turned serious. "No, why? Did you find out something?"

I nodded. "Grandma told me Mom was sick. That's why she left."

"We need to find out more. Maybe Grandma knows what to do."

We reached the front door, but before we could escape, Dad appeared, grabbing Erin by the arm. She acted on instinct,



stabbing him with the knife she had taken for protection.

"You hurt me?" he growled, enraged.

Erin stood her ground, defiant. "It's time to turn the tables," she said, her voice strong.

But Dad was quicker. He pulled the knife from his wound and lunged at Erin, stabbing her multiple times.

"Wait, what?" Victoria interrupted, her voice shaking. "Your father stabbed your sister?"

I nodded, my throat tight. "She was only nineteen."

Victoria's face twisted with disbelief. "Your family... it's unbelievable."

Blake interjected, his voice firm. "Victoria, that's enough."

"Sorry," she muttered, looking chastened.

I continued, my voice steady but filled with emotion. "As he taunted me, I saw my sister's bloodied body and something snapped inside me. I grabbed the knife from the floor and, in a moment of blind rage, I plunged it into his chest. He staggered back, blood pouring from the wound, and collapsed."

Victoria gasped. "You really killed him with your bare hands?"

I nodded, feeling the weight of that moment all over again. "Afterwards, I called for an ambulance. Grandma arrived and took care of everything, telling the police the whole story. They believed it was self-defense."

"And then?" Blake asked, his voice soft.

"Then, Grandma handed me a letter from Mom. It explained everything. She had left to find the courage to leave Dad for good, but by the time she wanted to come back, he had cut off all contact. She got sick and couldn't return."

The room fell silent.

Suddenly, a strange noise echoed through the house. I looked up, my heart racing.

"What was that?"

Blake shook his head. "I didn't hear anything."

Victoria looked around nervously.

"I need to clear my head," I said, standing up. "A bath might help."

Blake and Victoria nodded. "Take your time," Blake said. "We'll be here."

I headed to the bathroom, hoping the warm water would calm my nerves. As I sank into the tub, I tried to relax, but a sudden chill in the air made me shiver. I felt a cold breath on the back of my neck and sat up abruptly.

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

No answer.

"Get a grip," I scolded myself.

I closed my eyes, letting the water soothe me. But the feeling of unease wouldn't go away. I dipped my face into the water, trying to drown out my thoughts.

When I came up for air, I was gasping, panic setting in. "Everything's okay," I told myself. "I'm fine."

I looked at my reflection in the mirror, tears gathering in my eyes. "Nothing is okay," I whispered. "Why do I feel so weak..."

I turned away from the mirror and lay back in the tub, fighting to hold back my tears. The sound of footsteps approached, and I quickly wiped my face. Blake and Victoria stood in the doorway, concern etched on their faces.

"Elaine, are you okay?" Blake asked, worry evident in his voice.

Before I could respond, the bathroom door slammed shut, pushing them out into the hallway.

"Elaine?! Are you okay? What just happened?"

Victoria tried to open the door, but it wouldn't budge.

"Elaine, can you check if it's locked on your side?" Victoria suggested. "Elaine?"

A few seconds of tense silence passed before Blake decided to act. He broke down the door, the sound echoing through the house.

"Elaine, are you okay?" Blake called out, but the bathroom was empty.

"Elaine!?" Victoria shouted, panic in her voice.

A strange sound came from beneath the bathroom tiles.

"Elaine, is that you?"

Blake and Victoria felt around the bathroom tiles, looking for a clue. "I think this tile is loose," Victoria said, her voice shaking.

Blake examined the tile and managed to pry it loose, revealing a dark opening beneath.

# Chapter XX

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## "Guys?"

My voice echoed, lost in the darkness surrounding me. My head throbbed painfully as I regained consciousness.

The only light came from a small, flickering flame, casting eerie shadows on the rough-hewn stone walls of the room. The air was thick with a musty, ancient scent, making it hard to breathe.

"Guys?" I called out again, louder this time, hoping for a response.

"Where am I?" I muttered, struggling to move.

It was then that I realized I was bound to a cold, hard surface—a stone table. Panic surged through me as I strained against my restraints, but they held firm.

The small flame danced on a makeshift torch attached to the wall, its light revealing the contours of the room. The flickering light created an unsettling atmosphere, the shadows seeming to whisper secrets of this forgotten place. I strained to see beyond the limited illumination, hoping for some clue as to where I was.

"Is anyone there?" I called out, my voice trembling. The echo of my words bounced back at me, the silence broken only by the faint crackling of the fire.

In the distance, a disturbing sound reached my ears—a slow, deliberate scraping that sent shivers down my spine. My heartbeat quickened as the sound grew closer. Panic gripped my chest as I struggled harder against my restraints.

Suddenly, a figure emerged from the shadows. A hooded silhouette, shrouded in darkness, moved steadily toward me.



Fear coursed through me as I tried to make out the features of the approaching stranger.

"Who are you? Where am I?" I demanded, my voice rising in desperation. The hooded figure remained silent, the details of their face obscured by the deep shadows of the hood.

The figure reached the table and, with an eerie calm, placed a hand on my forehead. A surge of energy coursed through me, as if a dormant force within me had been awakened. Visions flashed before my eyes—images of ancient mortuary chambers, cryptic symbols, and labyrinthine passageways.

As quickly as the visions came, they vanished, leaving me breathless and confused. The hooded figure withdrew, their purpose still a mystery.

"Tell me what's going on! Where are Blake and Victoria?" I demanded, frustration and fear mixing in my voice.

The hooded figure remained silent, but pointed to a narrow passageway that led deeper into the underground chamber. A faint glow emanated from its depths, offering a glimmer of hope in the oppressive darkness.

The hooded figure released the chains, and with no other options, I followed the path, my steps echoing in the void. The passage opened into a larger chamber bathed in an ethereal blue light. Strange markings adorned the walls, and in the center of the room stood an ancient pedestal.

As I reached for the pedestal, the hooded figure pointed to a hidden passageway I hadn't noticed before.

"H-help me," the figure whispered, their voice weak and strained.

"Help you?" I asked, stepping closer.

The figure's hood obscured their face, but their soulless red eyes pierced through the thick air, watching me intently. Determination rose within me as I reached out and carefully

pulled back the hood.

"Blake?!" I gasped, recognizing him immediately.

He tried to smile, but his eyes were filled with pain. He hugged me tightly. "I-mi. B," he managed to say, his voice barely audible.

"Blake, I can't understand you," I said, my heart aching at the sight of his suffering. "What happened to you?"

Blake took a step back, staring at me with sorrowful eyes. He opened his mouth to speak, but no sound came out. It was then that I realized—he was missing his tongue.

"Oh my God, Blake," I whispered, horrified. "I'm so sorry. I'm just so confused. You were talking to me in the bathroom a moment ago."

Blake's eyes glowed angrily red as he tried to communicate. "T.h.... N...." He grabbed my hand and led me into another room, his movements urgent and desperate.

The room was pitch dark, the fog too dense to see through. "Blake, what are you doing?" I asked, my voice tinged with fear.

Blake walked away, leaving me standing alone in the darkness. Suddenly, flames ignited around the room, casting a dark red, orange glow. The walls were covered in strange markings, and I turned back to Blake, who stood against the wall.

"Are these markings the number of days you've been down here?" I asked, shocked.

Blake nodded, tears forming in his eyes.

"You've been down here for months?" I said, my voice breaking.

Blake fell to the ground, overwhelmed by emotion.

"Hey, hey. I'm here now. Let's find a way out of here, together," I said, helping him to his feet.

"Elaine!?"

I heard Victoria's voice call out in the distance.

"Victoria's down here too?!" I asked, looking at Blake.

He nodded, worry etched on his face.

"Victoria, I'm here! Follow my voice!"

I looked back at Blake and helped him as we took a few steps forward. "Victoria, I can hear you. Follow my voice!"

"Elaine!? I hear you, I'm coming!" Victoria's voice echoed through the chamber.

A glow appeared in the distance, and I squinted to see better. "Blake, I think it's Victoria's flashlight!" I said, trying to reassure him.

But Blake's concern only grew. "Hey, Blake. It's okay. You're with me!" I said, squeezing his hand.

As Victoria's silhouette came into view, Blake froze, waving his arms frantically. "Hey, hey! What's wrong with you? It's just Victoria!" I said, trying to calm him.

But as I turned to look at Victoria, I noticed something terrifying. "T-there are two silhouettes," I whispered, dread filling me.

The hooded figure remained silent, his eyes boring into mine, the air around us thick with tension. Victoria's silhouette grew clearer as she approached, her flashlight illuminating her worried expression.

"Elaine, we're here. What's going on?" she asked, her voice trembling slightly.

The hooded figure took a step back, and in the distance, I could hear Blake's voice calling out, growing louder with each passing moment. He rushed toward us.

"Elaine, what's happening?"

"Wait. Where did he go?" Victoria whispered, her flashlight sweeping the room in search of the mysterious figure.

Suddenly, a distant voice shouted, "Elaine! Victoria!

Blake!" It echoed through the ancient passageways.

We followed the sound, our footsteps echoing off the cold, stone walls. The voice grew clearer, leading us to a larger chamber adorned with strange symbols. In the center stood the hooded figure, his silhouette blending into the darkness.

"Elaine, Victoria, Blake, welcome," he said, his voice resonating with an otherworldly timbre.

"What do you want?" Blake demanded, his stance firm and unyielding.

The figure lowered his hood, revealing a face that mirrored Blake's.

"I am the embodiment of the darkness within. I am the shadow that remains when the light fades."

A wave of fear washed over me, but Blake remained resolute. "You will not manipulate us. What is your purpose here?"

The impostor chuckled, a sound that sent chills down our spines. "I feed on the fear and insecurity within you. The more you resist, the stronger I become."

"We will not let you control us," Victoria declared, her voice unwavering.

The impostor's eyes glowed with a disturbing intensity. "You have no choice. The mortuary feeds on your deepest fears, and I am its harbinger."

The symbols on the walls pulsed with an otherworldly energy, and a sense of impending doom loomed over us.

"We need to find a way out of here," Blake said, his eyes scanning the walls for any sign of an exit.

The impostor's laughter echoed through the chamber. "There is no escape. The walls bend to my will."

The darkness around him seemed to swirl and twist, merging into a tangible form. Before our eyes, he transformed into an enormous creature, his features distorted into a nightmarish visage.

"You may call me Azruleth," the creature declared in a distorted voice that reverberated through the chamber.

Fear gripped my heart as I took in the monstrous form. Azruleth towered over us, exuding malevolence. The symbols on the walls glowed with an unholy light in response to his transformation.

"What are you?" Victoria demanded.

Azruleth's eyes, now glowing with an eerie intensity, fixated on each of us in turn. "I am a manifestation of the fears that lurk in the depths of this mortuary. I am the embodiment of your nightmares."

Azruleth let out a guttural laugh that echoed 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 mortuary."

The walls seemed to close in, the symbols pulsing with increasing intensity. The air thickened with an oppressive force, and I felt the weight of our collective fears bearing down on us.

"We have to find a way to fight back," Victoria whispered, her eyes darting around the chamber.

Blake kept his composure. "There must be a weakness. We can't let it feed on our fear."

As Azruleth advanced, the markings on the walls flickered with an eerie glow. The air itself seemed to warp and twist in response to his malevolent presence.

"Your struggles amuse me," Azruleth taunted. "But you are powerless against the darkness within."

"Stay together," Blake commanded. "If this creature feeds on our fears, we must face it head-on. Don't let it break your will."

The tension was palpable as Azruleth raised his dark, twisted appendages.

Suddenly, a surge of energy ran through the chamber, and

Azruleth sent a wave of power directly at Blake. The force was overwhelming, sending him crashing into the wall and separating us.

"Blake!" I cried, rushing towards him, but another wave of energy held me back.

"I can't move!" I said, my voice trembling.

"Neither can I," Victoria said.

Azruleth, reveling in his dominance, sent a force through the ground, lifting Blake into the air. "Let's see how strong you are without your beloved partner," Azruleth laughed maniacally.

I looked around, desperate to make sense of the chaos, and noticed a new silhouette.

"Who's that?" I whispered to Victoria.

"I'm not sure I want to know," she replied, fear in her eyes.

A terrible scream suddenly echoed through the chamber, followed by the sound of cracking bones. I looked back at Blake in horror.

"How's that for a human? He can bend pretty well. Does he do any athletics?" Azruleth taunted. "Let's check his neck."

"No, stop!" I shouted, tears streaming down my face as I watched. "Blake!"

Victoria was paralyzed with fear. "I can't watch," she said, her voice shaking.

Suddenly, a beam of light illuminated the new figure. "Erin? I think that's Erin!" I told Victoria.

Victoria looked up, hope flickering in her eyes. "Erin, help!" she yelled.

Erin glanced at us, her face determined. "How am I supposed to help when you blew my cover?" she shouted back.

Azruleth turned his attention to Erin, throwing Blake aside. "Erin, get out of here!" I screamed, but she stood her ground.

"This ends here!" Erin declared, pulling a ring from her pocket and putting it on her finger.

"Be gone!" she shouted, her voice filled with conviction.

Azruleth laughed. "And how are you going to do that?"

The ring glowed with a powerful light, and the entity within expanded, engulfing Azruleth.

The entity slowly returned to Erin's ring, and silence fell over the chamber. Our willpower returned, and we could move again.

"Blake!" I called, rushing to his side.

He was silent.

"Check if he's breathing!" Victoria urged.

"I can't lose him," I said, my voice shaking.

Erin knelt beside Blake, checking for a pulse.

"I can't feel or hear anything..."

*"Mom?!"*

*"What's happening?"*

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

*"The memories are overwhelming her."*

Elaine lay on the floor, tears streaming down her face.

"I... I remember, I remember everything."

Victoria knelt beside her, wrapping her arms around her.

"I'm so sorry for what happened to Blake."

Elaine looked up, her eyes filled with sorrow.

"S-Sophia," she tried to say, but her head felt light and dizzy. Overwhelmed, she fell unconscious into Victoria's arms.

"Mom?" I called out, my voice echoing around the room.

Victoria sighed, her concern growing. "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. She lay there, still unconscious.

# Chapter XXI

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Time ticked relentlessly, the stillness of the night broken only by the steady rhythm of the clock. Moonlight streamed in through the small attic window, casting long shadows across the floor.

We gathered for the ritual at precisely 2:47 am. Victoria's eyes met mine, a mixture of determination and unease flickering in them.

"Here's the plan," Victoria began. "This powder will lead us to the right rune. The closer we get, the brighter it will glow. When we touch the right rune, it will turn into a magical ring, giving the wearer the ability to cast protective spells."

A spark of excitement ignited within me at the mention of magic, but Victoria's stern expression quickly extinguished it.

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

The smile that had briefly touched my lips disappeared.

"Where did he die? How old was I?"

Victoria's eyes softened for a moment, but she shook her head. "Another time, Sophia. Right now, we need to focus."

I nodded, feeling the weight of the mystical powder in my hand. The clock moved inexorably towards 2:55 am, the hour of our ritual. Victoria reiterated the importance of finding the rune of binding, her voice urgent.

As the minutes ticked away, I sprinted through the corridors, my heart pounding in rhythm with my footsteps. Time was slipping through my fingers, and the pressure mounted as the clock inched closer to 3 am. Doubt gnawed at me—what if we

failed?

At 2:55, the doors began to reveal their runes. I checked each one meticulously, but the powder remained dormant. Fear tightened its grip on me as I glanced at my phone—2:57 am.

"Alisha, any luck?" I called.

She shook her head, her worry mirroring my own.

2:58 am.

"Everyone, I think I found it!" The declaration rang out, filling me with desperate hope.

I ran towards the voice.

"You found it?" I asked, but was met with an eerie silence.

As I cautiously approached, the door next to me creaked open.

"Hi, niece."

"Aunt Erin?" I whispered

Erin smiled, her eyes softening. "There's so much going on, and I didn't want to burden you."

I tried to cover my suspicion with casual conversation. "We could have helped. You don't have to do everything yourself."

Erin chuckled slightly. "I appreciate that, but some things are better done alone."

Her look was reassuring, but my eyes drifted to her arm. The cuts looked worse than when I first saw them, now red and swollen, oozing a sinister infection.

"Erin, your arm... It looks terrible."

She glanced at her wounds and shrugged. "It's nothing to worry about," she assured me, but I noticed a faint red glow in her right eye. "Just a little mishap. It'll heal."

I watched her closely as she took a few steps closer, tilting

her head toward her injured arm.

Half her body seemed contorted, twisted by the infection. "Are you sure you're okay?" I asked again, my voice shaking.

Erin's smile broadened and she straightened.

Both of her eyes suddenly glowed a full, menacing red. "Ah, dear Sophia, did you really think she was in control?"

My heart pounded as I took a step back. "What do you mean?"

Azruleth's laughter was a deep, sinister rumble. "Poor naive child. Erin was my puppet, her body a mere vessel. You all walked right into my trap."

Fear surged through me as Erin's form continued to contort, the infection visibly spreading beneath her skin. "What do you want from us?" I asked, trying to keep my voice calm.

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

With no time to react, Erin defied gravity and crawled up the wall and across the ceiling. I fled, the haunting image burned into my mind.

As I turned a corner, Erin was standing there, her smile twisted and malicious. Panic drove me to the stairs.

2:59 am.

I bumped into Victoria at the bottom.

"Did you find the door rune?" I asked, breathless.

"No," she replied, frustrated. "We'll try again tomorrow."

"It can't wait," I insisted.

A chilling sound echoed through the halls. I pointed up to where Erin was crawling on the ceiling.

Victoria's face paled. "Follow me," she commanded.

The clock struck 3 am.

Victoria's grip on my hand tightened. "We have to find a safe place," she said firmly.

"But the others?" I protested, fear in my voice.

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

Victoria pulled me along. The echoes of our friends' voices and Aunt Erin's malevolent presence haunted the corridors.

Xavier Wevers

# Chapter XXII

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"Blake!" I called out as I ran toward him.

He remained motionless, unresponsive to my cries.

"Check if he's breathing!" Victoria suggested anxiously.

"I-I can't lose him," I said shakily, tears welling up in my eyes.

Erin pushed us aside, getting down on her knees to check for a pulse. "I can't feel or hear anything," she whispered.

Erin quickly jumped up and hugged me, Victoria joining in.

"What do we do now?" Victoria asked, her voice trembling.

I looked down at Blake. "I can't-

Suddenly, I snapped awake, my surroundings coming into sharp focus.

"Blake?"

The dream felt so real, a painful reminder of Blake's sudden disappearance last year.

Today is the day I officially join the police force.

I stood up quickly and pulled my blonde hair into a ponytail.

"Sister? Are you home?"

Silence greeted me.

"She must be gone again. She's been disappearing for weeks!"

I navigated through my apartment and quickly made my way out the window onto the fire escape, looking out at the bustling city.

"New York is as crowded as ever! Traffic is backed up all



over the place!" I sighed.

"I guess I'll walk."

As I descended the fire escape, my thoughts drifted back to Blake. His disappearance had left a void in my life, one that I was determined to fill by becoming a police officer. Maybe, just maybe, I could find some answers along the way.

When I reached the street, I blended into the sea of people, each rushing to their destination. The city was alive with energy, and for a moment, I let it distract me from the nagging worries in my head.

I passed familiar landmarks: the corner deli where Blake and I used to get sandwiches, the park where we spent countless afternoons. Each place held a memory, a fragment of the past that I couldn't seem to let go of.

As I walked, I noticed a commotion in front of me. A crowd had gathered around something, and my curiosity was piqued.

Pushing through, I saw a street performer, his movements fluid and mesmerizing as he manipulated fire with expert precision. The crowd was enthralled, their faces lit by the flickering flames.

For a moment, I was caught up in the spectacle, but then I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned to see Officer Daniels, my mentor from the academy, standing behind me.

"Getting distracted on your big day, rookie?" he asked with a grin.

I smiled back, though it felt a little forced. "Just taking in the city one last time before duty calls."

He nodded, understanding. "It's a big day, joining the force. Are you ready for it?"

"I think so," I answered, although the truth was that I wasn't entirely sure.

"Good," he said, patting me on the back. "Let's go to the station. There's a lot to talk about."

We made our way to the precinct, and as we walked, Officer Daniels gave me an overview of what to expect.

The precinct was buzzing with activity as we arrived. Officers were coming and going, phones were ringing, and there was a palpable sense of urgency in the air.

Inside, I was introduced to my new partner, Detective Harris. He was a veteran officer with a reputation for being tough but fair.

"Welcome to the team," he said, shaking my hand firmly.  
"Ready to get started?"

"Absolutely," I replied, trying to match his confidence.

Our first assignment was to investigate a series of burglaries in the neighborhood. As we drove to the latest crime scene, Detective Harris filled me in on the details.

"The pattern is pretty consistent," he explained. "The burglar strikes late at night, targets homes with easy access, and always leaves a business card."

"A business card?" I asked, intrigued.

"Yes," he said, handing me a photograph. It was a small, intricately designed card with a symbol I didn't recognize.

"We're not sure what it means yet, but it's our best lead."

At the scene, we met the homeowners, a young couple visibly shaken by the break-in. They showed us the broken window through which the burglar entered and the items that were stolen.

"Did you notice anything unusual before the break-in?" Detective Harris asked.

The woman shook her head. "No, everything seemed normal. But when we got home, the place was ransacked."

I looked around, trying to figure out what happened. As I examined the window, something caught my eye—a small, metallic object stuck in the frame. I carefully pulled it out and

showed it to Detective Harris.

"Looks like a piece of a tool," he said, inspecting it. "Good find. Might help us narrow down our suspect."

Back at the station, we analyzed the evidence and began to build a profile of the burglar. As the hours passed, I felt a mixture of excitement and nervousness. This was what I had trained for, and yet the weight of responsibility was heavier than I expected.

Just as we were wrapping up for the day, my phone buzzed. It was a message from my sister.

Where are you? Need to talk.

I quickly typed a reply.

At the station. Is everything okay?

Meet me at the diner. Urgent.

My heart raced as I read her reply. My sister rarely reached out, and when she did, it was usually serious. I grabbed my things and headed to the diner, my mind racing with possibilities.

When I arrived, I saw her sitting in a corner booth, her face pale and drawn. I slid into the booth across from her.

"What's wrong?" I asked, my voice full of concern.

She looked around nervously before answering. "I think someone's following me."

"Following you? For how long?" I asked, my protective instincts kicking in.

"The last few weeks," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "At first, I thought I was just being paranoid, but then I started noticing the same person everywhere I went."

"Did you get a good look at him?" I asked, pulling out my notebook.

She nodded. "It's a man, tall, always wearing a hood. I tried to take a picture, but he's always one step ahead of me."

I jotted down the details, my mind racing. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I didn't want to worry you," she said, her eyes filled with guilt. "You have so much on your plate already."

I reached across the table and took her hand. "You're my sister. Of course I want to know."

We sat in silence for a moment, the weight of her words sinking in. This wasn't just about her safety; it felt connected to everything else—Blake's disappearance, the dream, and now this.

"I'll look into it," I promised, determination hardening my resolve. "We'll figure it out together."

The next day at the station, Detective Harris greeted me with a stack of new files.

"Morning, rookie. We've got a busy day ahead of us. Another burglary, same M.O. as the last one. We need to work fast."

We headed out to the latest crime scene.

When we arrived, the area was already cordoned off with yellow police tape. Officers were canvassing the neighborhood, talking to potential witnesses. I scanned the area, taking in every detail.

Inside the house, it was the same story: a broken window, ransacked rooms, and the signature business card left behind. As I examined the scene, I couldn't shake the feeling that we were missing something.

"Over here!" an officer called. We hurried over to see what they had found. It was another piece of the same tool we found at the last scene.

"This guy's getting sloppy," Harris muttered. "Or he's trying to send a message."

As we gathered evidence, I heard a noise—a faint rustling, almost imperceptible. I turned and caught a glimpse of

someone moving quickly between the houses. My heart raced.

"I'll be right back," I told Harris as I ran out the door.

I chased the figure through the narrow alleys, my footsteps echoing in the night. The suspect was fast, but I was determined. I pushed harder, my breath coming in sharp gasps. The figure ducked into an abandoned building and I followed without hesitation.

Inside, the building was dark and eerie. Shadows played tricks on my eyes, but I kept going, my flashlight cutting through the darkness. I heard footsteps above me and ran up the stairs.

"Stop! Police!" I yelled, my voice echoing off the walls.

I burst onto the roof, but it was empty. Frustration built as I scanned the horizon. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw him—Blake. He was standing on the edge of the roof, looking out over the city.

"Blake?" I called, my voice shaking. But he didn't answer. Instead, he turned and stepped off the edge, disappearing into the night.

"Blake!" I yelled, running to the edge. But when I looked down, there was nothing there. Just empty air and the distant sounds of the city.

Suddenly, my vision blurred and my surroundings began to warp and twist. The rooftop dissolved, and I found myself in an unfamiliar city. The buildings were old and crumbling, the streets eerily quiet. A cold breeze chilled me to the bone.

I walked through the deserted streets, my footsteps echoing ominously. The city felt like a ghost of itself, a place forgotten by time. As I turned a corner, I caught a glimpse of something moving in the shadows.

I broke into a run, chasing the shadowy figure through the narrow, winding streets. My heart pounded in my chest as I closed the gap. The figure darted into an old mansion, and I followed, the door slamming shut behind me.

Inside, the mansion was dark and foreboding. The air was thick with dust, and the only sound was the creaking of the floorboards beneath my feet. I climbed the grand staircase, each step feeling heavier than the last.

At the top, I found a door slightly ajar. Pushing it open, I stepped into a dimly lit room. There, standing in the center, was Blake. His back was to me, and he was staring at a portrait on the wall.

"Blake?" I whispered, my voice trembling.

He turned slowly, his face pale and haunted. "You shouldn't be here," he said, his voice echoing in the empty room.

"Where are we?" I asked, taking a step closer.

"This place... it's not real," he said. "It's a trap."

Before I could ask more, the room began to spin, and I felt myself being pulled away. I reached out for Blake, but he was already fading into the darkness.

I jolted awake, back in the abandoned building. My head was pounding, and my vision was blurry. I sat up, trying to make sense of what just happened. It felt too real to be just a dream.

As I made my way back to the station, my mind raced with questions. Was Blake trying to send me a message? Was he still alive somewhere, trapped in a place I couldn't reach?

At the station, I found Detective Harris waiting for me. "Where did you run off to?" he asked, concern etched on his face.

"I thought I saw something," I said, still trying to process everything. "But it was nothing."

He nodded, but I could tell he wasn't convinced. "Let's call it a day. We can pick this up tomorrow."

I nodded, grateful for the respite. As I headed home, I couldn't shake the feeling that Blake was trying to tell me something important. Something that could help me find him.

The next morning dawned with a grim determination. I threw on my uniform and headed to the station. Today, I was going to get to the bottom of this, no matter what it took.

The precinct was already bustling with activity when I arrived. Detective Harris was in his office, going over files from the latest burglary. I took a deep breath and walked in.

"We need to talk," I said, closing the door behind me.

Harris looked up, raising an eyebrow. "What's on your mind, rookie?"

"It's about Blake. I can't shake the feeling that his disappearance is connected to these burglaries."

Harris leaned back in his chair, studying me. "You've mentioned Blake before. What makes you think there's a connection?"

I hesitated, unsure how to explain the strange dreams and the feeling of being followed. "It's just a hunch, but every time we're at a crime scene, I feel like I'm being watched. And then there's this..." I pulled out the small metallic object I'd found at the scene. "I found another one of these at the last burglary. It feels like a clue."

Harris took the object, examining it closely. "It could be a lead. Let's see if we can trace it back to its source."

We spent the next few hours analyzing the tool fragments. Harris had connections in the city, and he called in a favor from a friend at a local hardware store. The friend identified the tool as a specialized piece used in high-end security systems, not something easily obtained.

"This narrows it down," Harris said, a spark of interest in his eyes. "There are only a few places in the city where someone could get their hands on this kind of equipment."

We compiled a list of potential suppliers and set out to visit them. Each store was crowded, filled with people shopping for everything from basic tools to advanced security systems.

We showed the tool fragment to the store owners, but most of them couldn't provide any useful information.

Finally, at the last store on our list, we got a break. The owner, a grizzled man with decades of experience, recognized the tool immediately.

"Yeah, I've sold a few of these recently," he said, scratching his beard. "Strange thing is, the same guy bought them all. Said he was setting up a new security system for a big client."

"Do you remember what he looked like?" I asked, my heart racing.

The owner nodded. "Tall, dark hair, always wore a hood. Kept to himself, didn't say much. But he paid in cash and always seemed to be in a hurry."

"Do you have any security footage?" Harris asked.

The owner led us to a back room where a series of monitors displayed footage from the store's security cameras. He pulled up the relevant clips, and we watched as the hooded man made his purchases. His face was mostly obscured, but there was something familiar about him.

"Can you make out any details?" Harris asked, glancing at me.

I leaned closer, studying the footage intently. The way he moved, the shape of his jaw—it all seemed so familiar.

"Wait," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "Can you zoom in on his hand?"

The owner complied, and we saw a faint scar on the man's wrist. My heart skipped a beat. "That's Blake. I'm sure of it."

Harris looked at me skeptically. "Are you sure, rookie? It could be anyone."

"No, it's him. I know it is." My voice was firm, leaving no room for doubt.

Harris sighed. "Alright. Let's follow this lead. If Blake is involved in these burglaries, we need to find out why."

As we drove back to the station, Harris filled me in on our

next steps. "We'll need to put out an APB on Blake. If he's seen anywhere in the city, we'll know."

The following days were a blur of activity. We followed up on every lead, interviewed witnesses, and pored over security footage. But Blake remained elusive, always one step ahead.

One evening, as I was getting ready to leave the station, my phone buzzed with a text message from an unknown number.

Meet me at the old warehouse on 5th. Come alone.

-B

My heart raced. It was Blake.

I grabbed my jacket and headed out, my mind racing with questions. Why had he contacted me now? What did he want?

When I arrived at the warehouse, the place was dark and abandoned. The air was thick with the scent of decay, and the only sound was the distant hum of the city. I stepped inside, my footsteps echoing off the walls.

"Blake?" I called out, my voice trembling.

A figure emerged from the shadows, and I felt a surge of relief. It was Blake. He looked tired and worn, but he was alive.

"Blake, what happened to you? Where have you been?" I asked, rushing toward him.

He held up a hand to stop me. "It's not safe, Elaine. I can't stay long."

"What do you mean? What's going on?"

Before I could ask more, my vision blurred and the city dissolved. Disoriented and out of breath, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned and looked into Blake's eyes.

"Blake?!" I gasped, barely daring to believe my own eyes.

He smiled, a mixture of relief and something else—something I couldn't quite put my finger on.

"It's me, Elaine."

I threw my arms around him, overwhelmed with emotion.

"I never thought I'd see you again," I whispered into his shoulder.

Blake held me tightly, his presence both comforting and disorienting. "We don't have much time," he said urgently. "We need to be together now."

Without question, I followed him into a nearby room. The moment was charged with an intensity I couldn't resist. We came together with a passion that felt both familiar and new. Our bodies entwined and I lost myself in the sensation of his touch, the warmth of his skin against mine. Every kiss, every caress felt like a dream I never wanted to wake up from. We made love with a fervor that was almost desperate, every movement a reminder of what we almost lost.

Afterwards, as we lay together, Blake suddenly tensed up. "I have to go," he said, pulling away.

"Why? What's wrong?" I asked, my voice full of concern.

"I can't explain right now," he answered, hurrying to get dressed. "But I promise I'll be back."

Before I could protest, he was gone, leaving me alone in the dimly lit room. My surroundings began to distort again, and I found myself back in the underground garage. This time something was wrong, a feeling of unease that I couldn't shake.

I returned home, my mind a whirlwind of confusion and doubt. In the bathroom, I looked in the mirror and gasped. Hickeys covered my neck and shoulders, stark evidence of our passionate encounter.

Suddenly, I woke up, my heart pounding. I was in my bedroom, the morning light filtering through the curtains. Panic gripped me as I remembered everything.

"S-Sophia! I have to get to her!"

My mind raced with thoughts, and as I headed for the door, Erin came around the corner, surprising me.

"Hey there, sister," she said, her voice carrying an unsettling edge.

I stared at her, my heart still racing. "Erin, what are you doing here?"

She stepped closer, her eyes gleaming with an intensity that made my skin crawl. "Just checking in on you. You seemed...distressed."

I swallowed hard, trying to steady my voice. "I'm fine. Just a bad dream."

Erin's smile was cold and knowing. "Dreams can be tricky, can't they? Sometimes they reveal more than we expect."

A shiver ran down my spine. "What do you mean?"

She shrugged, still watching me intently. "Just that you should be careful. You never know what's real and what isn't."

I stood there, my heart pounding in my chest, as Erin's words echoed in my mind. I needed to know where Sophia was.

"Erin, where is Sophia?"

Erin's eyes gleamed with a malevolent light. "Sophia? She's safe, for now. But you shouldn't worry so much about her."

"Safe? What do you mean? Where is she?" I pressed, feeling a surge of panic.

Erin twisted her lips into a cruel smile. "She's where she needs to be. Don't fret, sister."

I felt a chill run down my spine. Erin was deliberately vague, and it was driving me mad. "What have you done with her, Erin? Tell me!"

She leaned closer, her breath cold against my face. "You always ask too many questions, Elaine. Always digging where you shouldn't."

Suddenly, a memory flashed before my eyes. The mortuary, a few days ago. "You... your arm... H-how could I forget?!"

I looked at Erin's arm, and then my eyes drifted to her

chest. Black streaks were slightly visible beneath her skin. "It's spreading way too fast!"

Erin's expression darkened. "Why can't you ever just shut up! You always have to ruin everything, don't you?"

"Sister? Tell me what happened," I pleaded, my voice trembling.

Erin's eyes narrowed, but for a moment, I saw a flicker of something human in her gaze. "Blake was a pawn, Elaine. He was used to get to you, to weaken you."

"What are you talking about? What does Blake have to do with Sophia?" I demanded, desperation creeping into my voice.

Erin laughed, a harsh, mocking sound. "Oh, you really have been kept in the dark, haven't you? Think about it, Elaine. Sophia's age doesn't add up to Blake's death. She's too young. Our minds were altered, manipulated to believe otherwise."

A cold realization washed over me. "Sophia's father... isn't Blake, is he?"

Erin's laughter echoed through the room. "You finally got your brains back. I always knew you were the intelligent one. That's why I had to manipulate and infiltrate your mind. You've always been the most powerful one."

My head was spinning with the implications. "Then who... who is her father?"

Erin's eyes glittered with dark amusement. "Azruleth, of course. It needed a vessel, and Sophia was the perfect choice. But don't worry, sister. She's still your daughter, in a way."

A wave of nausea hit me as I struggled to process this horrifying revelation. "No, this can't be true..."

Erin stepped closer, her voice a dangerous whisper. "You can't deny it any longer, Elaine. The truth is out, and now you have to face it. But be careful. The demon isn't done with you yet."

A surge of anger and determination rose within me. "I won't let it take Sophia. I will protect her, no matter what."

Erin's smile widened, and for a moment, I saw the demon's twisted pleasure in her eyes. "We'll see about that, sister. We'll see."

As she turned to leave, I called after her, my voice firm. "Erin, this isn't over. I will find a way to save her. And I will save you too."

Erin paused at the doorway, looking back at me with a mixture of pity and scorn. "Save me? Oh, Elaine, it's far too late for that. But good luck trying."

Xavier Wevers

## *Hannah*

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

I reach for my phone, a nagging worry prompting me to call Janessa, my guardian.

"The number you have dialed has been disconnected or is no longer in service," the robotic voice echoes.

I persist, hoping it's a mistake, but the discouraging message repeats. Desperation creeps in as I scroll through my contacts and find Sophia's name. Dialing her number, I hear her vibrant voicemail, a stark contrast to the anxiety around me.

Curiosity mixes with concern.

How long have I been locked in this sterile room? A glance at the date on the phone assures me it's only been three days, but the eerie emptiness of the hospital raises unsettling questions. Taking a deep breath, I shed the hospital attachments and step into the empty hallway.

"Hello? Is anyone here?" My voice echoes, swallowed by the silence.

The hospital, once a hive of activity, now lies dormant, casting an unsettling silence. Dialing Sophia again only brings up voicemail, adding to my unease.

"Sophia, something's wrong. I just woke up and the hospital feels deserted. Has something happened at Manor House? Please call me back."

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 blackness, casting long shadows on the sterile walls. The fear intensifies as I navigate the dimly lit corridor.

"Stairs, I need to find the stairs," I mutter, my voice offering little reassurance.

The digital glow of my phone reveals a sign pointing left, guiding my uncertain steps.

As I push forward in the dimly lit hallway, shadows dance eerily, adding to the unsettling silence. The sterile smell of the hospital mixes with a newfound unease as my footsteps echo through the desolate halls. The glow of my phone flickers intermittently, a faint beacon against the engulfing darkness. The sign pointing left beckons me to the stairs.

Each step feels heavier, the silence deeper. My senses are on high alert, heightened by the ominous stillness that hangs in the air. I can't shake the feeling that something is wrong, a subtle undercurrent of unease tugging at the edges of my consciousness. As I turn a corner, the stairwell door emerges from the shadows.

I push it open cautiously, a creak breaking the silence and echoing through the void. The stairs descend into an abyss of uncertainty, but my only choice is to move forward.

As I descend step by step, the echo of my footsteps creates an eerie symphony. The air grows colder as I venture further into the unknown, the stark contrast to the warmth of the hospital unsettling.

When I reach 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. The desolation paints an eerie 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 grows more oppressive, as if the walls themselves hold secrets they don't want to share. I push open the heavy glass door and step into the predawn darkness outside. The cool night air bites my

skin, and I find myself standing on the threshold, caught between the unknown of the hospital and the mysteries that await beyond its walls.

I scan my surroundings, my breath visible in the cold night air. The streets seem as empty and deserted as they always have in Nightmoor. The sense of desolation is unsettling, but nothing seems out of the ordinary for this strange town. I consult my phone and enter Manor House into the navigation. A 40-minute walk lies ahead. I let out a tired groan; the prospect of navigating the dark streets in the biting cold isn't appealing.

I turn to look back at the hospital building and consider my options.

The chill in the air causes a change of heart, and I decide to head back inside. The dimly lit corridors of the hospital offer a refuge from the wintry night.

As I re-enter the hospital, my footsteps echo through the empty halls. Grabbing my phone's flashlight, I scan the area for any sign 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 wrap myself in the warmth.

"Ahh, this feels so, so much better!" I say excitedly, basking in the warmth of my newfound clothes. They're a little too big for me, but the oversized sweater still feels cozy and comfortable. I grab the jacket I spotted at the reception before heading back outside.

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

"Time to walk for 40 minutes, yay..." I mutter sarcastically and take my first steps into the deserted night.

The glow of the hospital fades behind me as I venture into the dark streets of Nightmoor. The journey is eerie, with only

the faint glow of streetlights to guide me. The silence is palpable, broken only by the occasional rustling of leaves or the distant creak of a door.

I pull my jacket tighter around me, shielding myself from the biting cold. The dimly lit streets stretch before me like a winding maze, each turn leading me deeper into the enigmatic heart of Nightmoor. As the minutes pass, I find myself lost in thought, contemplating the strange events that have brought me to this point.

The hospital, the deserted streets, the peculiar nature of the town—it all weaves together into a tapestry of mystery that refuses to unravel.

The imposing structure of Manor Street 8 looms in front of me as I approach the dimly lit entrance.

My hand reaches for the doorknob, but before I can make contact, the door abruptly swings open and slams into me.

Startled, I hear a familiar voice calling my name.

"Hannah?!"

I find myself on the floor, a little disoriented from the unexpected collision. Opening my eyes, I see Elaine to my left, her worried face hovering over me. A smile forms on my lips as I realize where I am.

"I feel something else..." I mutter, turning my eyes to the right. Victoria, Alisha's mother, is standing there, her presence bringing a mixture of relief and surprise.

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

"Are you okay?" Elaine's concern is obvious.

"Yeah, you scared us, dear," Victoria adds with a smile.

"I'm fine, just a little disoriented," I reply, trying to sit up.

"I woke up in the hospital. It was empty, and I didn't know what was going on. 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 slight chuckle. "Let's go 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 is more welcoming than the cold night outside.

"Did something happen at Nightmoor?" I ask, my curiosity growing. Elaine shares a quick glance with Victoria before answering, "It's complicated. We'll explain everything, but let's get you warmed up first."

Elaine gives me a blanket to wrap myself in while Victoria goes to the kitchen to get some tea. I quickly notice that something is different in the house; they're both acting strangely.

As Elaine pulls the blanket over me, I shiver, partly from the residual cold and partly from the eerie atmosphere that fills the room. Elaine's eyes seem distant, and Victoria's movements toward the kitchen are deliberate yet oddly disjointed.

"Can you tell me what has happened since the day I left?" I ask, trying to make sense of the surreal atmosphere.

Elaine scratches her head, her expression puzzled. "Day? It's been a whole year since I last saw you."

Shocked, I quickly reach for my phone again to check the date, January 25th. I open the calendar app, my eyes unable to believe what I see...

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

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

"Don't worry dear, you're safe now," Elaine reassures me, echoing Victoria's words.

I look up at both Elaine and Victoria, despair in my eyes.

"I asked you a question. Can you please answer?"

"Don't worry, dear, you're safe now."

Elaine grabs Victoria's arm, and they exchange a strange, knowing look.

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

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

"Hello, dear."

My eyes can't 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 been kind to her, 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 deep desire for this to be true. Elaine and Victoria watch me closely, their expressions a mixture of anticipation and something else, something I can't quite decipher.

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

Elaine and Victoria exchange another look before Elaine speaks, "We found a way to bring her back, Hannah. A way to undo the past, to rewrite the timeline."

A wave 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 a lot 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 really appreciate it if you could take a few minutes to fill out a short [feedback form](#). Your insights and opinions are greatly appreciated and will help shape the future installments of Nightmoor.

Thank you for being a part of this journey!

Best regards,

Xavier Wevers

