



# Crown of Envy (Beyond Mercenary #4)

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**Category:** YA&Teen

**Description:** Stolen memories, scattered allies, and a looming darkness. Sounds like a typical Tuesday for this supernatural hunter.

I just escaped from the Unseelie Realm with Justice, a vampire. We're not supposed to be together—I'm a hunter, and he's a vampire—but in that realm, we discovered true love.

But there's no time to savor it. Our enemy still holds the phoenix, threatening to control life and death itself, capable of destroying not only our world but the Unseelie and Fae realms as well.

A new demon has risen—envy. It has the power to turn my team, and even Justice, against each other unless we find the Crown of Envy.

If I can't unite my team and Justice, our enemy will win.

To make matters worse, my memory is fractured. I can't remember my dad. My brother says he was my hero, but I don't recall a single thing.

The stakes have never been higher. We must find the Crown before envy tears us apart and our enemy seizes ultimate power.

Crown of Envy is a tale of resilience, unity, and the unbreakable bonds forged in the fires of adversity. In a world where envy threatens to destroy us, we must confront our deepest fears and find the strength within ourselves to save each other and set the stage for the ultimate showdown against darkness.

**Total Pages (Source):** 30

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## CHAPTER ONE

The acrid smell of brimstone filled the air as the demons and their hellhound closed in on us. Their growls and shrieks sent chills down my spine.

Justice's hand tightened around mine, his grip a lifeline in the chaos. His jaw clenched as he surveyed the approaching threat. Garrick sprinted behind us, his arms wrapped tightly around Maggie's limp form. She'd been under a spell and had been his enemy, but the spell had been broken thanks to that mirror. We still weren't out of danger, though.

I held the magic mirror, pointing it at the Veil of Shadows. The air rippled as a portal opened, revealing Edinburgh's familiar streets and the towering spires of McDuff Manor.

Justice tugged my hand. "Come on. Jump."

The wind whipped through my hair as I glanced over my shoulder. Garrick leaped behind us, still cradling Maggie against his chest.

My heart pounded as we leaped through the portal. We crashed in front of McDuff Manor, the impact knocking the air from my lungs. The sudden shift in temperature from the Unseelie dimension to Edinburgh's cool air made me gasp.

Damon sprinted toward us, his boots pounding against the cobblestones. His usually stoic face crumpled with relief as he skidded to a stop. He grabbed my shoulders, his eyes wild with worry. "Sawyer, thank God!" He pulled me into a bone-crushing hug,

his tears soaking through my shirt as he whispered my name like a prayer. “Sawyer, Sawyer.”

I clung to him, the mirror cool against my palm. “I’m all right, Damon.” My voice was muffled against his chest, but I couldn’t bring myself to let go.

He pulled away, his hands still gripping my arms. “Don’t you ever do that again, you hear me?” His voice was rough, his eyes searching mine. “What did the Grimoire take from you? Do you remember me? Your incredibly handsome and charming brother?”

I managed a weak chuckle, running my free hand through my tangled hair. “I don’t remember. I feel like I lost someone important, someone I looked up to, but that’s all I know.”

Damon’s face hardened, his jaw clenching tight. He stared at me, his eyes burning with a desperate intensity. “You don’t mean Dad, do you?”

The question hit me like a punch to the gut. “Dad?” The word tasted foreign on my tongue. My heart clenched, a hollow ache spreading through my chest. “I don’t... I don’t remember my father.”

Damon’s hands tightened on my arms, his fingers digging into my skin. “No, no, no. This can’t be happening.” His voice cracked, tears welling in his eyes. “Sawyer, you can’t forget Dad. He was our hero, our rock. He taught us everything we know about hunting, about saving people.”

I shook my head, tears blurring my vision. “I’m sorry, Damon. I’m trying, but it’s just...gone.”

He pulled me back into his arms, his chin resting on my head. “We’ll fix this,

Sawyer. I don't care what it takes. We'll get your memories back, I promise." His voice was fierce, determined. "I won't let you forget him. I won't let you forget what he meant to us."

I nodded against his chest. "Okay, Damon. I trust you."

He held me tighter as if he could shield me from the pain of my lost memories. "We'll get through this together, sis. You and me against the world, like always."

"I need to get Maggie inside," Garrick stated tensely behind us. "She's still unconscious."

Damon turned, eyes narrowing at the sight of Garrick cradling Maggie's nude form. With his usual smirk, he couldn't resist a quip. "Do you always kidnap naked ladies?"

Garrick's eyes flashed with irritation, but he held his composure. "She's been under a spell. She shifted from a wolf to a human too fast. Something went wrong."

"Right," Damon drawled, stepping closer but keeping a wary distance. "Because that makes it less creepy."

I placed a hand on Damon's arm, my fingers digging into his jacket as I shot him a warning look. "Enough, Damon," I hissed through clenched teeth. "This isn't helping."

Garrick's jaw tightened as he glared at Damon. With a dismissive grunt, he brushed past him, cradling Maggie's limp form closer as he strode into McDuff Manor.

The proprietor, Sean McDuff, greeted him at the door, his bushy red eyebrows knitting together in concern. He was a big bear of a man with a wild mane of red hair and a thick beard. "Oh, what happened to the poor lassie?" he rumbled.

Damon, Justice, and I followed them into the manor, the tension thick enough to cut with a knife.

Garrick's gaze never left Maggie's face as he spoke. "She was under a spell, and I think she was forced to shift." His fingers absently brushed a stray lock of hair from her forehead, his touch gentle despite the anger simmering beneath the surface.

Sean nodded gravely, leading them to an empty bedroom. The floorboards creaked under their weight as they entered the room. "I'll have my wife brew some special tea for her. Maybe that will bring her around."

He hurried down the hall. I wasn't sure if it was to get some tea or stay out of Garrick's way.

I pulled the mirror from my pocket, my reflection staring back at me with a troubled expression. The artifact seemed to grow heavier in my hand as I pondered the consequences of using it.

A cold knot formed in my stomach as a horrifying thought struck. What if Maggie's lifeless state was a punishment for being shown the mirror while controlled by the pride demons? If so, her condition was my fault. I swallowed hard, my throat tightening with guilt. Maybe we should have taken her back through the portal as a wolf?

Lisa came up behind us silently. I didn't even know she was there.

The soft glow of morning light seeping through the curtains filled the cozy bedroom. The faint aroma of freshly brewed tea and baked scones wafted from the kitchen below.

"Who is that?" Lisa's voice cut through the tension like a knife.

I jumped, my heart racing as I spun to face her. “God, Lisa, I didn’t even know you were there,” I gasped, trying to catch my breath.

Damon turned to her, a smirk playing on his lips. “Maybe you could put a bell on or something. Give a guy a heart attack, why don’t you?”

She rolled her eyes with a hint of amusement. “I’m a witch, Damon. Stealth comes with the territory.”

Damon nodded toward Garrick, who cradled Maggie’s limp form. His presence filled the room, his power palpable despite the quaint surroundings. “He’s the Unseelie king. And apparently, he has a habit of picking up unconscious naked ladies.”

Lisa’s eyes widened, then her brow furrowed with concern. “And why exactly is she naked?”

“She was under a spell,” Damon explained, his smirk widening. “Shifted from wolf to human. You know, your typical Tuesday.”

Lisa sighed, shaking her head in exasperation. She stepped forward. “All right, let me pass. I can help her.”

Garrick’s gaze locked onto her. “Who are you again?”

“Forgot about me already? I’m Lisa, and I’m a witch.” She met his stare unflinchingly.

That didn’t seem to ring any bells for Garrick. “Lisa who?” he pressed.

“I don’t have a last name. I only go by my first name and had it legally declared.” Her words held a hint of defiance.

Garrick arched an eyebrow. “Sounds to me like you’ve got something to hide.”

Lisa’s jaw clenched. “Maybe I do. Do you want me to help her or not?”

The tension in the room grew thicker as they faced off, neither willing to back down. I glanced between them, my mind racing with questions about Lisa’s past and Garrick’s intentions. The fate of the unconscious woman hung in the balance, and I could only hope they would put aside their differences long enough to save her, even in the unlikely setting of a charming Scottish bed and breakfast.

Damon’s smirk turned into a grin. “You heard the lady, Garrick. Let her help your damsel in distress.” He cast his gaze over Lisa. “And no funny business, witch.”

Lisa rushed around the bed and placed her palm gently over Maggie’s slick forehead. The touch seemed to stir something in Maggie, and she moaned, her face contorting in pain.

Lisa’s scowl deepened, her eyes filled with worry. “Both her human and wolf are in shock,” she stated, her voice tight. “I need to bring her around.”

Garrick’s hand shot out, his fingers wrapping tightly around Lisa’s wrist. His eyes blazed with fierce protectiveness. “You hurt her, and you’re dead.”

Lisa met his gaze unflinchingly. “Look, Unseelie king,” she stated firmly. “You can dance around and not let me help her, but then you’ll have to watch her slowly drift away. Is that what you want?”

Garrick’s grip loosened, his shoulders sagging as if the fight had drained out of him. “No,” he whispered with raw emotion. “I can’t lose her again.”

Lisa nodded, her expression softening as she edged around Garrick. “I need to get my

bag,” she explained. “I have some herbs that will help, but I have to brew them first.”

I glanced uneasily at Justice. If this didn’t work, Garrick would lose his mind, and we would have one dead witch on our hands. The thought put my nerves on edge.

Justice clasped my hand, his thumb rubbing over my shaking hand. I inhaled a quivering breath and drew on his support. He was a powerful vampire, and hopefully, he was strong enough to subdue an enraged Unseelie king.



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### CHAPTER TWO

The silence in the room was deafening as we waited for Lisa to return, each of us lost in our thoughts and fears. The only sound that pierced the stillness was Maggie's shallow, labored breathing, each ragged inhale and exhale a reminder of her fragile state. I watched helplessly as her face grew paler, the life seemingly draining from her body.

Garrick sat beside her, his head bowed and his eyes closed, his lips moving in a silent prayer. The words were too low for me to make out, but the desperation in his voice was unmistakable. He clung to Maggie's hand like a lifeline, his fingers intertwined with hers, his knuckles white.

I shifted uneasily, my heart pounding as the seconds ticked by with agonizing slowness. The air in the room felt heavy, weighed down by the collective worry and tension. I glanced at Justice, seeking reassurance, but found only a mirror of my concern etched on his face.

The creak of the door startled me, and I whirled, my breath catching in my throat as Lisa entered the room, her bag clutched in her hands. The determination in her eyes gave me a flicker of hope, but I still knew Maggie's life hung in the balance, and time was running out.

Sean came in with a steaming cup of water. "I have what you asked for, Lisa."

Damon lifted an eyebrow. "What is this, some kind of witch's tea party?"

Lisa shot him a sharp look as she took the cup. “If you want to help, stay quiet and let me work.”

Staying quiet was never one of Damon’s strengths. He glanced at Sean, who lingered in the doorway. “Sean, why don’t you grab some crumpets while you’re at it? Can’t have a proper tea party without them.”

I glared at my brother. “Damon, you’re not helping.”

Lisa ignored us, setting the cup down and pulling various herbs from her bag.

Garrick watched her uneasily. “What are those?”

She crushed them into the cup of hot water and stirred. The room filled with a soothing aroma, a stark contrast to the tension.

Damon moved closer, watching Lisa with an intrigued expression. “You sure this witchy brew is gonna do the trick?”

Lisa didn’t answer as she closed her eyes and moved her hand. Her voice changed and became almost sing-song.

“By the moon’s light and the earth’s grace,

Restore this form to its rightful place.

From darkness deep, bring forth the dawn,

Let her awaken with the coming morn.”

Damon edged away. “Well, that’s not something you see every day. If she starts

floating or her eyes go black, I'm outta here."

I shot him a look, half exasperated, half amused. "Damon, stop."

Damon smirked and shrugged. "Hey, just saying. I've seen my fair share of spells go sideways."

Garrick glanced at him with concern and irritation. "If you're scared, Damon..." He tilted his head. "Go for a walk."

Damon stepped closer, squaring his shoulders. "I'm not scared. I'm cautious. There's a difference. Besides, somebody's gotta keep an eye on all this witchy business. The last ones we met gave me the willies."

His tone piqued my interest. I frowned, wanting to hear what they'd found while I was gone, but this wasn't the time. Only Maggie mattered right now.

Damon shot a glance at Lisa, then looked at Garrick. "If it makes you feel better, I'll keep my commentary to a minimum."

Throughout the exchange, Lisa kept singing the same chant. She slipped her arm underneath Maggie's neck.

Garrick watched her like a panther ready to pounce.

Lisa held the cup to Maggie's lips. "Drink."

The liquid swirled in the cup by itself, and the smell of fresh herbs filled the room, almost as if it was filled with wildflowers.

A soft glow enveloped Maggie, and she started to stir. Garrick broke into a smile. I

almost thought I saw tears in his eyes.

Damon's smirk faded into a serious expression as Maggie's eyes fluttered open.

Well, I'll be damned," he muttered with genuine relief. "Looks like it worked."

Maggie smiled at Garrick, and tears welled in her eyes. "You're here," she whispered in a trembling voice. "I never meant..."

"Shhh." He leaned over, gently pressing his lips against hers in a tender kiss. "You're my queen."

She cupped his cheek with her hand, her fingers tracing the contours of his face. "Please forgive me," she pleaded.

He turned his head, pressing a soft kiss to her palm. "You were under a spell," he reassured her. "There's nothing to forgive."

A tear escaped, trailing down her cheeks as she smiled. "I love you," she murmured.

He laughed, the warm, rich sound filling the room. "I know," he replied, his eyes sparkling with adoration.

Lisa flashed a satisfied smile, her posture relaxing as she observed the couple. "She'll need rest, but she should be fine now," she remarked. "I think we should leave the two of them alone."

Damon nodded with a hint of respect. "Nice work, Lisa. Guess we owe you one." He glanced at Garrick and Maggie, who were embracing, their bodies molded together as if they never wanted to let go. "All right, lovebirds, you get your rest. We've got a world to save out here."

I shot him a disapproving look. “Damon,” I warned, shaking my head.

He shrugged, turning to leave the room. “What? Let’s give them some privacy.” He paused at the doorway and glanced back, his tone softening with genuine concern. “Take care of her, your highness.”

Garrick pressed a gentle kiss to Maggie’s forehead. “I will,” he promised fiercely. “She’s mine.”

As we gathered in the common room, the sound of a vehicle pulling up outside McDuff Manor drew our attention. I glanced out the window and saw a familiar red jeep come to a stop, its engine rumbling before falling silent.

The jeep, belonging to Brady, Grady, and Scott, had clearly seen better days. A spider web of cracks marred the windshield, the fractures spreading across the glass like a network of tiny rivers. It looked as though it had been through a rough journey, possibly even a collision.

The vibrant red paint was barely visible beneath layers of caked-on mud and grime. Dirt and debris clung to its sides and wheels, telling a story of a harrowing escape or a desperate pursuit.

The jeep doors swung open, and our three comrades emerged, their movements stiff and pained. They looked like they’d been through a brutal fight, their faces bearing the marks of their ordeal.

As they headed toward the entrance, a sense of relief and concern pumped through me. I ran outside with Justice, Damon, and Lisa behind me.

Damon was the first to reach them, his brow furrowed with worry. “What happened out there?” he asked. “You guys look like you’ve been through the wringer.”

Brady grimaced, reaching for a particularly nasty cut on his forehead. He winced as his fingers brushed the wound. “We ran into some trouble,” he admitted. “We know what demon we’re facing—envy. These demons are powerful, and they plant envy so intense in people’s minds that they’re willing to kill.” He glanced over his shoulder, his eyes darkening. “They wanted our jeep.”

Scott, the quietest of the three, simply nodded, his gaze intense and focused. His jaw clenched, and tension radiated from his body.

“We barely made it out of Glenraith.” Grady wiped an arm across his forehead. “People were turning on each other, beating and killing each other for crazy, meaningless stuff. It was like we’d stepped into a Stephen King movie.” He shuddered.

Brody faced me with a weak smile. “I see you made it back.” He gestured toward my hand. “With the mirror.”

I nodded. “It wasn’t easy, but we managed to retrieve it.” I couldn’t help but feel a sense of unease as I looked at the ancient artifact, knowing the power it held.

“That’s not the only thing we found,” Justice added.

Brody gave him a curious look.

“Garrick and Maggie came back from the Unseelie realm.” He tilted his head. “We need to talk inside.”

As we moved toward the house, a tremor ran up my arm. I glanced at the mirror, which seemed to pulse in my hand, drawing my gaze toward the jeep. “Hold on.” I stopped in my tracks. “There’s something about the jeep. The mirror is reacting to it.”

Scott frowned. “What do you mean?”

I held up the mirror, angling it toward the jeep. The surface shimmered and began to show an image. Everyone crowded around, watching as the mirror revealed a hidden compartment in the back of the jeep. Inside was an ancient, glowing jewel in a small ornate box.

Justice circled the vehicle and took out the black box. “Did you know this was here?”

Brody stepped back, but his gaze wasn’t focused on us. He was looking beyond the manor toward the thick forest at the edge of Edinburgh. “We need to get that thing out of there. Now. They’re coming.”

A green-eyed shadowy figure emerged from the trees, eyes glowing with malice. “You found it,” the figure hissed. “But it belongs to us.”

The figure raised its skeletal hand. Putrid, ink-black tendrils of energy shot toward us like vipers, searing the air with the stench of decay. They coiled around Justice’s wrist, and he released a blood-curdling scream as they tightened, the skin beneath them bubbling and blistering. The tendrils ripped the box from his hand with a sickening crack of breaking bone.

“Justice!” I cried. Bile scorched the back of my throat, and my knees quaked, threatening to give out. The figure loosed a rattling, malevolent laugh that scraped my soul and plunged icy shards of dread into my heart.

### CHAPTER THREE

Justice fell to his knees, his face contorted in agony as he clutched his wrist, a string of curses hissing through his clenched teeth. The foul creature melted into the shadows of the woods, its malevolent presence still palpable.

I scrambled to Justice's side, my heart pounding. "Justice, oh my god," I choked out, my fingers trembling as I clasped his arm. The heat of his skin seared my palm.

Brody slipped an arm around Justice and hauled him up. "We have to get him inside before the envy's poison takes hold," he gritted out, his gaze darting toward the tree line.

Cold sweat prickled my spine. "Poison?" I whispered.

"I don't know what else to call it." His grip on Justice tightened, his knuckles turning white. "But when those tentacles leave a mark—" He swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. "That's how the poison gets in."

Justice's legs gave out, and he collapsed, his body convulsing as he hit the ground. His eyes rolled back into his head, the whites stark against his rapidly paling skin.

Damon stalked forward, his eyes narrowing to glittering slits. "Great, just what we needed—demon venom," he spat, his nostrils flaring. "Let's move, people!" He gestured sharply toward the house, his voice cracking like a whip. "We've got a ticking time bomb here."



Lisa met us at the door, her eyes widening as she took in the scene. A hand flew to her mouth to stifle a gasp. “What happened?”

My lower lip trembled, and I fought back a sob, my vision blurring with unshed tears. “A demon attacked him,” I managed.

“It had long black tentacles.” Damon panted, his chest heaving as he and Brody lowered Justice onto the couch. “You’ve got to use your mojo to help him like you did Maggie.” His gaze locked with Lisa’s, a desperate plea.

Tears streamed down my face, leaving hot, salty trails on my cheeks. “Can you?” My voice cracked, raw with emotion.

“I don’t know. Let me get my bag.” Lisa’s words came out in a rush as she ran back to her bedroom.

She returned with her bag, her face pale and drawn. Her arms trembled violently as she wrenched the bag open. She plunged her hands inside, rummaging through the contents with a desperate urgency. The items within clattered and shifted like a chaotic orchestra.

Her teeth sank into her lower lip as she rifled through the bag’s depths. Her wide, haunted eyes flicked erratically between Justice’s still form and the tools she extracted with shaking fingers, each one seemingly more inadequate than the last for the daunting task.

“Don’t leave me. Please don’t leave me.” The words tore from my throat as I collapsed to my knees at the edge of the couch. My heart clenched so tightly that I could barely breathe, each beat a painful throb against my ribcage.

With trembling fingers, I gently brushed his sweat-soaked hair off his forehead. A

shuddering gasp escaped my lips as I traced the lines of his face, committing every beloved detail to memory, terrified that each moment might be the last.

His chest rose and fell in shallow, labored breaths, the only sign of life in his otherwise still form. I watched, transfixed, as I silently willed his eyes to open, to look at me with that familiar, heart-stopping intensity. Yet they remained closed, his lashes dark smudges against his ashen skin.

Lisa spread out various vials and herbs on the table, her hands moving with practiced urgency.

“Hold him steady,” she instructed.

Damon and Brody held Justice as Lisa found a small vial of green liquid and a sprig of an herb.

“This won’t cure him, but hopefully, it will slow the poison,” she explained. She poured the green liquid into a bowl, crushed the herb into it, and stirred, muttering an incantation under her breath.

“By the earth’s breath and the moon’s light,

Hold back the poison’s blight.

Slow its course, delay its harm,

Until we find the cure’s charm.”

She dipped a cloth into the mixture and gently applied it to Justice’s wound. The liquid sizzled on contact. Justice’s eyes flew open, and he gritted his teeth, a groan escaping his lips.

Lisa placed her hands over the wound, her eyes closed in concentration. A soft glow emanated from her palms. Justice's eyes closed, then his breathing began to steady.

"There, that should buy us some time. At least, I hope it does. I have never treated anything like this before." Lisa pulled back and wiped the sweat from her forehead. "We need to find a permanent cure—and fast."

I stroked Justice's thick hair, my fingers trembling as they combed through the soft strands. "What does that mean?" My voice was barely a whisper, as if speaking the words too loudly might make them real.

Lisa didn't waver from my gaze. "He's a vampire and stronger than us, but I don't know anything about this type of demon venom." Her eyes filled with a helplessness that made my stomach twist.

My hand stilled in his hair as a wave of icy fear washed over me. "You're not saying..." I choked out, my throat tightening around the words. "You're not saying he could die, are you?" My heart thumped, the blood roaring through me.

She pressed her lips together as she searched for the right words. After a long moment, she released a shaky sigh, her shoulders sagging. "I don't know, Sawyer," she admitted.

I wiped my tears away. "I can't lose him. I just can't. Not after everything we've been through."

She grasped my hand, her fingers cold and clammy. "I wish I had answers for you. Damon and I met with a coven, though. Maybe they've encountered these envy demons." Her eyes reflected the same despair that threatened to engulf me.

Sean came into the living room. "What happened?"

A red-haired woman with big blue eyes followed him. The woman wore a long black robe like something a monk would dress in. She looked down at Justice. “If you don’t find the Crown of Envy, he’ll die before the next full moon.”

Lisa put her hand on my shoulder. “That’s in less than three weeks.”

I stared at the red-headed woman. “Who are you?”

She gave me a sympathetic look. “I’m Zara McLeod.”

Lisa squeezed my shoulder gently. “She’s a witch from the Thistlewood Coven in Edinburgh and here to help.”

I glanced at Damon. He shrugged, but there was a tick in his jaw. A sure sign he didn’t trust this woman.

I stood slowly. “What exactly is this Crown of Envy?”

Brody straightened, his gaze filled with determination as he surveyed the room. “All right, everyone, listen up,” he announced. “Justice needs some rest, but we can’t afford to waste any time. Let’s gather around the dining room table and assess our current situation.” He gestured toward the table, his movements purposeful and efficient.

“We need to discuss the mirror and the crown, then formulate a strategic plan for our next move. Every second counts, and we must work together to overcome the challenges ahead. It won’t be easy, but I have faith in every one of you. Together, we will find a way to protect the innocent and bring justice to those who threaten our world.”

The crew followed Brody as I lingered back. Justice slept peacefully.

Damon came up alongside me, his eyes narrowed. “Friggin’ witches, man. I’m telling you, Sawyer. We gotta be careful with this one. Those magic-slinging chicks from Edinburgh are bad news.”

“I thought you went with Lisa to this coven.”

He shrugged and smirked. “I did. Doesn’t mean I trusted anything they said. Their meeting place was like a Halloween store complete with cauldrons, masks, potions, and creepy-shaped candles.” He shivered as if he’d walked through a ghostly apparition, then crossed his arms, leaning against the wall, his gaze focused on Zara.

I clasped his arm, feeling the tension in his muscles. “Come on. We don’t want to miss anything important.”

“They may be creepy, Sawyer, but I could feel their power,” he told me. “They’re a force to be reckoned with. If they know where this crown is, I bet they’re up to their eyeballs working with those envy demons.”

I swallowed hard, a knot forming in the pit of my stomach. The thought of the witches collaborating with the envy demons sent a wave of dread through me. They’d already wounded a vampire. What could they do to the rest of us?

### CHAPTER FOUR

Damon and I walked into the dining room, where two chairs waited for us. A third remained empty, putting a hollowness in my chest. It was where Justice would usually sit. God, please let him be all right.

Zara regarded us with an intense, unwavering gaze. “Now that we’re all here,” she began with a hint of condescension.

I bristled at her tone, my hands clenching into fists beneath the table. I bit my tongue, fighting the urge to snap back at her. Damon grumbled under his breath.

Zara ignored him. She drew a deep breath, her shoulders rising and falling with the effort to maintain her composure. “The Crown of Envy is from the Court of Blossoms,” she explained, her words measured and deliberate. “Centuries ago, the envy demons invaded Edinburgh. The fae came and forced them back to hell with the crown.”

She paused, her gaze distant as if lost in the memories of the past. “Then, during the Jacobite rebellion, the crown vanished, and we haven’t been able to locate it.”

Damon leaned back in his chair, his arms crossed. “How did you lose it?” he asked, his tone dripping with skepticism.

Zara’s eyes flashed, her jaw clenching. “We didn’t lose it,” she replied tightly. “Someone stole it, but we don’t know who. They used dark magic.”

Brody leaned forward, his brow furrowed in concentration. “Did this crown have green emeralds?” he asked.

Zara blinked, surprise flickering across her face. “Yes, it did,” she confirmed. “How did you know that?”

“We found the emerald in our jeep,” Brody explained, his gaze locked with Zara’s. “Justice was holding it when the creature attacked him.”

Damon’s hands smacked the table, the sudden movement making Zara flinch. His eyes bored into hers. “You should know that,” he pressed, his voice low and accusatory. “You must have seen something. You were here at the Manor with Sean.”

Zara’s gaze faltered, and she shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “I was talking to Sean, but I didn’t see what happened,” she admitted.

Brody broke the standoff between Zara and Damon. “What does this crown look like?”

She turned away from Damon, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. “It is a beautifully crafted artifact,” she began in a trembling voice. “Forged from a rare and shimmering green metal that glows faintly in the dark.” Her hands clenched into fists, her nails digging into her palms.

“It is adorned with intricate carvings of serpents and thorny vines,” she continued, her voice strengthening with reverence and bitterness. “They symbolize the dangerous and consuming nature of envy.” She closed her eyes, drawing a shuddering breath as if the mere thought of the crown’s power was overwhelming.

“Embedded in the crown are seven large emeralds. Each represents a different facet of envy.” A single tear escaped, trailing down her cheek as she opened her eyes.

She turned back to face the others, her shoulders sagging. “It is a powerful and dangerous artifact,” she commented. “In the wrong hands, it could bring unimaginable destruction and suffering. We have searched for it for centuries, but every lead, every glimmer of hope, has turned to ash in our hands.”

She bowed her head, her hair falling forward to obscure her face as she fought to regain her composure, the weight of her failure pressing down.

Zara’s words stabbed me in the heart, and frustration bubbled inside me. Justice and I had just found each other. This wasn’t happening. I couldn’t lose him now.

I threaded my fingers through my hair, my mind racing with the enormity of the challenge. “If you couldn’t find it, how are we supposed to?” My voice was tight with desperation. The thought of not finding the crown wasn’t an option. I’d rip this country and all the realms apart to locate it.

Zara motioned toward the mirror I had put on the table. “With that. It will give you clues about where to find the Crown of Envy. All you have to do is ask it.”

Damon leaned back in his chair and smirked. “So what, we ask the magic mirror on the wall who’s the fairest of them all, and it’ll solve our little dilemma? Gotta say I like the sound of that. Beats traipsing through an enchanted forest or taking a bite of any suspicious-looking apples.” He chuckled darkly. “Though with our luck, even that damn mirror would probably try to screw us over. Nothing’s ever easy in this messed-up fairy tale we call life, is it?”

I picked up the mirror. “Where is the Crown of Envy?”

The mirror’s surface shimmered, and an ethereal voice that sounded hauntingly like my mother’s emanated from it. “Seek the forgotten depths beneath the streets of Edinburgh, where the dead slumber in eternal unrest. There, in the heart of the



catacombs, lies the crown you so desire.”

That voice sent shivers down my spine every time I used the mirror. I never thought I’d hear our mother’s voice again.

Damon looked at me, the blood draining from his face. “Mom?” he whispered.

I glanced at my brother, seeing the pain and longing etched into his features. Our mother’s death had left a gaping hole in both our lives, but Damon had always taken it especially hard since he was the one who found her body.

Damon stared at the mirror as if in a trance. “Mom, is it really you?”

I clasped his shaking hand. “Damon, it’s not her. It’s the mirror using her voice.”

He blinked, tears glistening as he tore his gaze from the mirror to look at me. The raw vulnerability on his face made my chest tighten. After a moment, he nodded, swallowing hard as he tried to compose himself.

He shook his head. “Well, that’s just peachy. As if we didn’t have enough nightmare fuel already, we’ve got Mom’s voice giving us directions from beyond the grave.”

An image formed in the mirror of damp stone walls, eerie carvings, and winding passages cloaked in shadow. My heart raced, and a cold sweat broke out on my skin. The witches had searched for centuries without success. If the crown was hidden in such a foreboding place, something powerful must be guarding it.

“The path ahead is fraught with peril,” the mirror warned, its tone more ominous. “An ancient sentinel stands watch, a creature of darkness that has thwarted all who dared to claim the crown. Tread carefully, for its gaze brings madness and its touch, oblivion.”

I bit my lip, my heart pounding as I forced the question past the lump in my throat. “Will we have to give up a memory like we did with the Grimoire?”

Please say no, please say no , I silently begged. I could feel the blood rushing in my ears, the room suddenly feeling too small, too suffocating.

The last thing I wanted to do was give up another memory. The thought of losing another piece of myself, another cherished moment, made my stomach churn and my palms grow clammy. I swallowed hard, trying to calm the rising panic.

I glanced at Damon, searching his face for reassurance, but his expression was grim, his jaw set in a tense line. He understood the depth of my question, the sacrifice we might have to make.

The mirror remained silent for a moment that stretched into an eternity, and I held my breath, my nails digging crescents into my palms as I waited for its answer. The air grew thick with tension, and a bead of sweat trickled down my spine, cold and clammy against my skin.

Please, I thought desperately, my eyes stinging with unshed tears. Don’t make us give up any more of ourselves. We’ve already lost so much.

Finally, the mirror’s surface shimmered, and a soft voice echoed. “The Crown of Envy requires a sacrifice,” it intoned. “To wield its power, you must reveal a deeply held secret or hidden truth. This secret must be something that has caused you great personal turmoil or has the potential to change the course of relationships or events around you.”

My heart sank. A cherished memory had been the price for the mirror’s guidance, and now a hidden truth was the cost for the crown’s power. The mirror continued. “Confess your hidden truth aloud in the presence of the crown. This confession will

bind the essence of your truth to the crown, symbolizing the purification of your soul and your readiness to combat the demons of envy.”

The gravity of the requirement settled over me like a heavy shroud. The sacrifice demanded more than a secret. It demanded vulnerability, honesty, and the courage to face the consequences. My mind raced, recalling every hidden truth, every painful secret I had buried. Could I bring myself to reveal anything? Would it be enough to unlock the crown’s power and help us defeat the envy demons?

The mirror’s voice softened, almost compassionate. “After the crown has accepted your sacrifice, it will activate its full powers, allowing you to harness its abilities to counteract and weaken the envy demons. Remember, the path to overcoming envy lies in the strength to confront the truths we hide within ourselves.”

As the mirror fell silent again, I knew what had to be done. The crown awaited, its power dormant yet potent, ready to be awakened by the revelation of a truth I had kept hidden for far too long. I drew a deep breath and steeled myself for the confession that could change everything.

### CHAPTER FIVE

A heavy silence fell over the table. We retreated into ourselves, delving deep into the darkest recesses of our souls, where we hid our most closely guarded secrets. The thought of bringing those secrets to light, even to each other, filled the air with a deafening sense of unease.

I glanced around at the others, seeing the same trepidation on their faces that I felt twisting in my gut. These were secrets we hadn't shared with anyone, not even our closest confidants. Secrets that could shatter the carefully constructed facades we presented to the world, revealing the vulnerable, flawed, and sometimes broken people we were beneath the surface.

Damon released a low whistle, shaking his head. "A hidden truth, huh? Great. Just what we need. Another deep, dark secret to spill." He ran a hand through his hair. "Why can't these things ever ask for a drop of blood or something simple?"

He glanced around the room. "All right, who's got a secret they're ready to share with the class? And it better be a good one because it sounds like this crown doesn't mess around." He crossed his arms and leaned back. "Guess we're gonna have to dig deep, folks. But hey, if it's what we need to take down those envy demons, we've got no choice."

"You can't share this secret alone. It must be revealed to everyone. Once revealed, you will have the power to wear the crown and dispel the envy back to hell," the voice intoned, its tone haunting and insistent.

A cold, clammy sensation washed over my skin, and my stomach twisted into knots. The thought of baring my deepest, darkest secret to everyone made my palms slick with sweat, and I had to fight the urge to bolt from the room.

The image in the mirror shimmered and changed, revealing Maci holding the green emerald the creature had ripped from Justice's hand.

My breath caught in my throat, and I leaned forward, my heart pounding as the voice continued. "You're not the only one seeking it. Your enemy has one of the jewels, and the jewel will act like a beacon, drawing her to the crown. If she and the demons of envy find it first, they will destroy it, and the demons of envy will remain in this realm forever."

I slumped in my chair, my shoulders sagging. "Great, another race against Maci," I muttered with exhaustion and frustration. I dragged a hand down my face, feeling the sweat on my chin wet my palm.

I glanced around the table at my companions. We were in this together, for better or worse. But as my gaze lingered on each of them, I couldn't help but wonder what secrets they held close to their hearts and how those secrets might change everything.

Brody sat taller in his chair, squaring his shoulders, then gestured toward the mirror. "All right, let's focus on the mission. This mirror holds the information we need. What exactly is this entity we're up against, and more importantly, what's our plan to take it down? We need to be prepared for anything."

We turned to Zara. She sighed, her shoulders slumping. "No one knows what this entity is since we haven't been able to find it."

"Sawyer, can you ask the mirror about the creature guarding the crown?" Brody questioned. "We need to know what we're facing."

I gripped the mirror, my palms sweating as a chill ran down my spine. “Show us the creature guarding the Crown of Envy,” I commanded in a trembling voice.

The mirror rippled, its surface shimmering like quicksilver. A gasp escaped my lips, my body involuntarily recoiling from the sight of a massive, serpent-like creature with shimmering emerald scales that absorbed and reflected light, giving it an otherworldly glow. Its piercing, luminescent green eyes bored into my soul and sent a wave of terror through my body. Intricate patterns that pulsed with an eerie light, mesmerizing and terrifying, adorned the creature’s body.

The snake opened its mouth, revealing long, sharp fangs that gleamed menacingly. A low, guttural hiss escaped its throat, echoing through the room and making the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. My heart raced as I struggled to catch my breath.

Damon stared at the reflection, his brows furrowed. “Well, that’s awesome,” he muttered sarcastically, his jaw clenching. “It’s like a freakin’ basilisk from Harry Potter, but with a serious case of the uglies.”

Despite the fear churning in my gut, I couldn’t help but smirk at Damon’s comment. He had a way of facing even the most terrifying situations with a cocky grin and a sharp tongue.

“Sawyer.” He clasped my stiff arm. “Looks like we’ve got ourselves a real-life Slytherin mascot to gank. Better break out the big guns for this one.”

Brody stepped forward, his voice calm and reassuring. “We’ve faced tough challenges before, and we’ll face this one head-on. Zara, your knowledge is invaluable. Keep searching for any information to help us understand and defeat this creature. Sawyer, you and I will work on a strategy. We need to be cautious, but we also need to be bold. This creature may be powerful, but so are we when we work

together.”

I nodded, feeling a renewed sense of purpose. Brody’s words had a way of inspiring courage and unity, even in the darkest of moments.

The creature moved around the crown as if daring anyone to steal it. The snake radiated an aura of ancient power that made my skin crawl.

I glanced nervously at the team. “What exactly is this creature? Is it a snake?”

“No,” the voice in the mirror answered. “The creature is an Aegis serpent. It has the power to look into the hearts and minds of those who approach, uncovering their deepest secrets and hidden truths. Only those truly ready to reveal their darkest secret can approach the crown.”

I squirmed in my chair, my palms damp as I processed this information. “What if you’re not ready?” I asked.

“The creature can sense it, and its bite is lethal,” the voice replied gravely.

Dread pooled in my gut, twisting and churning like a nest of restless snakes. The thought of facing my deepest, darkest secrets sent a shiver down my spine, and I gripped the armrests of my chair, my knuckles turning white with force.

Damon scrubbed his face with a hand, frustration and determination crossing his features. “Great,” he muttered. “A snake that doubles as a lie detector.” He leaned forward, his eyes intense. “All right, let’s think this through. We need that crown, but we’re not walking into a death trap without a plan. So, who here is ready to spill their darkest secret? And how do we make sure the rest of us don’t get bit?”

The mirror spoke again. “To find the right catacomb, you must complete three tasks

before you can receive the key. Only six of you can go.”

Damon crossed his arms with irritation and resolve. “Three tasks, huh? Because it’s never easy, is it?” He sighed, glancing at his team. “All right, let’s get this show on the road. We’ve faced worse. And hey, at least it’s not a hunt where we don’t know what we’re up against yet.”

Then he turned to the mirror, his eyes hardening. “Listen, if my sister gets chosen for any of these tasks, I’m going with her. No arguments, no exceptions. We’re family, and we do this together. So bring it on.”

“Hold me up, and I will determine who is worthy. I will call out your name,” the mirror declared.

With trembling hands, I grasped the handle, my heart pounding as I slowly lifted the mirror. I swallowed hard and aimed it at Brody first.

A brilliant light burst from the mirror, bathing Brody’s face in an ethereal glow. His eyes widened, and he drew a sharp breath as the mirror spoke. “Brody O’Hara, you are chosen.” Brody’s shoulders sagged, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

I moved the mirror, my grip tightening as the light passed over Grady and Scott. They both flinched, but nothing happened. The mirror remained silent, and disappointment etched itself on their features.

As I turned the mirror toward Lisa, my stomach churned with nervous energy. The light fell on her face, illuminating her delicate features. “Lisa Denham, you are chosen,” the mirror proclaimed.

Lisa’s eyes grew wide. She inhaled sharply, her body stiffening as if she’d been



struck. Her hands clenched into fists on her lap.

Damon's brows furrowed, his gaze darting between Lisa and the mirror. "I thought you didn't have a last name," he commented with suspicion.

Lisa shifted, her shoulders hunching as if she wanted to disappear. She licked her lips, her gaze dropping to the floor. "I don't go by that name anymore," she whispered. A sheen of sweat glistened on her forehead.

Another light from the mirror shined on Damon. "Damon Grant, you have been chosen."

Damon smirked, his green eyes glinting with amusement and satisfaction. "Damn straight," he mumbled.

"Sawyer Grant, you have been chosen," the mirror continued, its light now focused on me.

Soft footsteps approached behind me, and I turned, my heart skipping a beat. "Justice," I murmured, taking in his haggard appearance. His face was pale and drawn, with dark circles beneath his eyes, and he looked like he was about to collapse. Without hesitation, I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him close. "Are you okay?" My voice cracked, heavy with concern.

Justice leaned into my embrace, his stubble grazing my cheek as he planted a gentle kiss there. "I'm going too," he muttered, his warm breath tickling my skin.

As if the mirror had heard him, a bright light flickered across his tired face. "Justice Cristea, you've been chosen," it announced.

I shook my head vehemently, my stomach twisting. "No, you can't go," I protested.

My fingers dug into his shoulders as I clung to him.

Justice's arm tightened around my waist, pulling me flush against his body. His jaw clenched, determination etched into his face. "Do you really think you can stop me?" His voice was low and rough with emotion. "You belong to me, and you're not going into danger without me."

I wanted to argue, to beg him to stay at the manor. My heart raced, and tears pricked at the corners of my eyes. However, the hardened tone in his voice put that to rest. Like my brother, he'd come or at least follow me. A sigh escaped me as I rested my forehead against his chest, the steady beat of his heart both comforting and terrifying.

### CHAPTER SIX

The last person, to all our surprise, was Zara. Three men and three women. There had to be a reason for that. Damon didn't look happy. She was definitely not trustworthy in his book, but it was up to the mirror to pick.

Justice and I retreated to the patio, seeking solace from the grumbling team members who hadn't been chosen. As we stepped outside, I noticed clouds had rolled in, obscuring the sun and casting a cool shade over the area. I inhaled deeply, the sweet, crisp air filling my lungs and providing momentary relief from the tension inside.

We settled into Adirondack chairs on the patio, the weathered wood creaking slightly beneath our weight. Sean had also procured some blood bags for Justice, and he slowly brought one to his lips, his hands trembling. He took a long, slow sip, his eyes closing as the blood flowed into his mouth. Gradually, the color returned to his face, the ashen pallor giving way to a healthier, more vibrant complexion.

My gaze drifted to his hand and wrist where the demon had left its mark. Angry red lines marred his skin, resembling the welts left behind by a whip. I swallowed hard as I recalled Zara's chilling words. He would be dead by the next moon. The thought of poison seeping into his bloodstream made my stomach churn, and a cold sweat broke out on my forehead.

I reached out, my fingers hovering above the wounds, afraid to touch them and cause him more pain. My heart ached, and a sense of helplessness washed over me. I wanted to take away his suffering, to find a way to heal him, but I knew the demon's curse was far beyond my abilities.

I bit my lip, fighting back the tears that threatened to spill from my eyes, and forced myself to look away. I focused on the distant horizon and the gathering clouds as if they could somehow provide an answer to our predicament.

He caught my worried look. “I’m a vampire, Sawyer. It will take longer to kill me than a human. It’s lucky I was the one holding the jewel when that demon attacked.”

I nodded and tried to give him a reassuring smile, but my heart ached. After all we’ve been through, I couldn’t lose him.

Justice set his empty blood bag on the small wooden table beside him, the plastic crinkling as he released it. He leaned back, his gaze fixed on the sky above. “Looks like it’s going to rain,” he murmured.

I shifted to face him fully, my brows knitting in concern. “Justice, would fresh human blood slow the poison down further?” I asked, my heart racing at the thought of offering myself to him.

His head snapped toward me, his eyes narrowing as he met my gaze. “Don’t even think about it,” he warned. He turned his attention back to the tumbling gray clouds overhead, his jaw clenching.

I reached over, my fingers trembling as I clasped his hand in mine. His skin was cool to the touch, and I felt the strength in his grip, even in his weakened state. “You’re not invincible,” I reminded him softly, my tone laced with an undercurrent of fear.

Justice’s shoulders sagged. He sighed heavily, his thumb brushing over the back of my hand. “Sawyer, you have to be at one hundred percent,” he insisted. “If I drink from you, it would drain you. If something happened to you...” He trailed off and swallowed hard. “I would never forgive myself.”

Tears stung my eyes, and I blinked rapidly, trying to keep them at bay. My chest tightened, and I struggled to breathe, his words squeezing the life from my lungs. I wanted to argue, to insist I would do anything to save him, but the raw vulnerability and the depth of his love for me in his eyes stopped me. Instead, I simply nodded, squeezing his hand tighter. I silently vowed to find another way to help him, no matter the cost.

The door creaked open, and Brody stepped onto the porch, his broad shoulders squaring as he gazed at the incoming rain. As the first droplets fell, the roaming hills seemed to come alive, their vibrant green hues intensifying with each passing moment. Even the flower pots hanging on the porch appeared to brighten.

Justice glanced at Brody. “Are the rest of them still upset that they weren’t chosen?” he asked.

Brody nodded, his chiseled features set in a thoughtful expression. “Scott and Grady have been trying to plead their case on why they should go on this journey,” he explained. “But the mirror remains stubbornly silent, unwavering in its decision.”

A grin tugged at my mouth, and a flicker of amusement flared in my chest. Brody and Scott were good men, and I knew it must have stung them not to have been chosen for this crucial mission.

“You notice it’s three men and three women?” His piercing gray eyes looked between Justice and me.

“We did.” I nodded slowly, my mind racing with the implications. “You think it means something?”

Brody’s jaw clenched. He folded his arms, the fabric of his shirt stretching taut over his muscular frame. “Yes, I do. What exactly, we won’t know for sure.” He paused,

then his brow creased as he continued. “Zara’s not part of this team, and I can’t help but wonder why the mirror didn’t pick Maggie instead.”

A twinge of unease burned in my gut, and I shifted in my seat, the rough wood of the chair digging into my back. Brody’s words hung heavy in the air, and I could sense the tension emanating from Justice beside me. The question of why the mirror chose Zara over Maggie nagged at the back of my mind, and I couldn’t shake the feeling there was more to this than any of us could possibly know.

I shrugged noncommittally. “Maybe Maggie’s not well enough to travel,” I suggested, trailing off as I considered the possibility.

Brody shook his head, his blond hair catching the fading light. “Justice isn’t well enough to travel, and the mirror chose him,” he countered.

Justice sat taller, his spine straightening as he met Brody’s gaze. “I can travel,” he insisted.

A teasing smile played on Brody’s lips, and he cocked an eyebrow at Justice. “If I carry you.” His gray eyes sparkled with mirth.

“Doesn’t matter. I’m going,” Justice maintained, a flicker of defiance in his eyes.

Brody held up his hands in a placating gesture, his smile fading. “I didn’t say you weren’t,” he assured him. “The mirror’s the one picking the players in this game. I’m not sure I like it. Something doesn’t feel right.” He turned to me. “Why doesn’t Damon like Zara?”

I sighed, my shoulders sagging under his perceptive stare. “I’m not sure,” I admitted. “Damon’s never been big on witches.”

“He’s not big on vampires, either,” Justice mumbled bitterly.

I looked at Brody, taking in his pensive expression, the way his features seemed to be carved from stone. “You don’t trust Zara, either?”

His gaze hardened, and his frame tensed. “We need people we can trust on this journey,” he stated. “Our lives may depend upon it.”

A shiver ran down my spine as the responsibility of the mission pressed heavily on my heart. The air seemed to crackle with tension. I glanced between Justice and Brody, searching for any sign of reassurance but finding only grim determination.

### CHAPTER SEVEN

A deafening crack of thunder split the sky, making us flinch involuntarily. A light rain fell, pattering against the leaves and the porch roof. The air grew heavy with the scent of petrichor, the earthy aroma that often accompanied the first rain after a dry spell.

A profound silence descended upon us, broken only by the rhythmic drumming of the droplets against the wooden planks. The world seemed to hold its breath as if waiting for something momentous to happen. As the wind picked up, the flower pots swayed gently, and the chimes tinkled a haunting melody.

I kept turning over what Brody said about Zara, then broke the silence. “You consider Lisa part of the team?”

“I do. She’s proven herself many times by helping the team and wanting to find her phoenix, Aurora, to help all my kind. Zara seems to want the Crown of Envy for her coven. There’s something not right about that.”

Justice and I glanced at each other. Brody was highly perceptive, and I trusted his judgment. He was all about saving people and working as a team. None of us, including Lisa, had our own private agenda. I hadn’t even thought about Zara’s reason for wanting the crown.

“So, you think we should be wary of her?” Justice asked.

Brody nodded. “I do. People with personal agendas tend to turn on their teammates to



get what they want.”

A cold chill ran down my back like a spider creeping over my flesh. I shuddered at having an enemy in our midst. The mirror had been in the Unseelie realm, and maybe it was tainted, so it wouldn't always pick the pure of heart to complete these tasks.

“We could be wrong about Zara,” I pointed out. “She might prove to be a loyal team member.”

“Maybe,” Brody ventured, but his jaw locked tight.

Justice finished his last blood bag. “That creature was desperate for the jewel. I have a hunch we won't be the only ones trying to complete these tasks.”

“Yes, the mirror said as much,” Brody agreed. “We need to rely on each other. Our enemy is as desperate as we are to get the crown, or they wouldn't come out in the open like that. They won't hesitate to use any means possible to thwart us.”

“That's a cheery thought,” I mumbled. “But when has any task we've undertaken been easy?”

Brody looked at me. “Sawyer, how is your memory?”

I blinked. “What? Why do you ask?”

“You lost part of your memory when you retrieved the mirror. That could include your fighting skills. We need to know what you're capable of.”

“I know how to fight.”

“Before you went into the Unseelie realm, you were absolutely a skilled hunter,” he

mentioned. “But the Grimoire stole memories from you, and the team needs to know that you still possess those skills. If you don’t, we have to figure out how to proceed.”

His argument made sense, but it irritated me.

I folded my arms. “What do you want me to do?”

Brody got directly to the point. “Demonstrate your skills, starting with your bow and arrows.”

I glanced at Justice. He gave me a sheepish look. “You don’t remember your dad, and he’s the one who taught you the skills.”

I bristled at his statement. It was true. I remembered someone training me, but I couldn’t put a face to them. I couldn’t remember what my dad looked like or even his name, but I wasn’t ready to dive into that. Proving I was a badass warrior woman was more important, not only for them but for me, too.

I stormed into the manor, my footsteps echoing on the hardwood floor. The familiar scent of polished wood did nothing to calm my nerves as I headed to my bedroom. My fingers trembled as I reached for my bow, the smooth yew comforting under my touch. I slung the quiver over my shoulder, the weight of the arrows a reminder of a past I couldn’t fully remember.

This was ridiculous. I knew how to shoot. It was like reliving my childhood, where I had to prove I was as capable as a boy at using a weapon. I frowned, but I couldn’t remember who I’d had to impress. That was so strange. I sensed it had been really important to me, but I couldn’t recall who. Guys in gym class? Maybe. Damon? Possibly. Or Dad? It could have been, but nothing came to mind. My slate was wiped clean.

As I turned to leave, Damon appeared in the doorway, his brow furrowed with concern. He moved toward me, his hand outstretched.

“Whoa there, little sister.” His voice was gentle as he clasped my arm with a warm, grounding touch. “What’s the matter? You’ve got that stormy look that could shatter glass.”

I tried to brush past him, but Damon held firm. I sighed and met his worried gaze.

“Brody wants me to prove I can still handle weapons,” I spat, the words tasting bitter on my tongue.

Damon’s grip loosened, his expression softening. “Sawyer, you don’t remember Dad?—”

“I know!” I cut him off sharply enough to make him flinch. Frustration bubbled inside me, threatening to spill over. “I know,” I repeated, softer this time. “Everyone keeps reminding me.”

I exhaled an angry breath, losing myself in the swirl of expectations. The bow in my hand suddenly felt alien, a relic of a life I couldn’t fully recall.

“If you’ll excuse me,” I murmured, pushing past Damon.

He didn’t try to stop me this time, but I felt his eyes on my back as I walked away. The concern in his gaze was like an anchor around my neck, adding another layer to my guilt and frustration.

By the time I returned to the porch, Brody had set up a target on a pine tree about twenty yards from the manor.

He stood out in the drizzling rain, his broad shoulders hunched against the chill, while Justice remained in the chair, his weakened state preventing him from joining us.

Damon sauntered up beside me, a smirk on his lips as he glanced at the distant target. “You can hit that blindfolded, Sawyer,” he drawled.

I strode toward Brody, pulling an arrow from my quiver with a smooth, practiced motion. “From here,” I stated, my voice steady and sure.

“To start,” Brody replied.

I felt his eyes on me, evaluating my every move. I had a feeling that was why Damon was out here, too, since I couldn’t remember Dad. His words and image were lost to me, leaving a hollow ache in my chest.

Damon stood beside me, his presence a comforting warmth in the cool, damp air. I nocked the arrow, my fingers curling around the bowstring as I raised the bow, my arm perfectly parallel to the ground. The familiar weight of the weapon in my hands felt like an old friend, and a sense of calm washed over me.

I drew a deep breath, focused on the target, and released the arrow. It zinged through the air, a deadly streak of silver, before stabbing the target dead center.

Damon clasped my shoulder, his calloused hand a reassuring weight. “At least you remembered something Dad taught you,” he murmured.

“Let’s see how far back you can go,” Brody’s tone was devoid of praise, his eyes still assessing.

I gritted my teeth, irritation flaring at his lack of acknowledgment. But I reminded myself that Brody had been in the Army, and the Army wasn’t big on compliments.

Especially after he'd been with Sector Nine, the division that hunted supernaturals and had been Justice's worst enemy.

Brody had me move back to thirty, forty, and fifty feet. Each time I hit the target dead center, the thwack of the arrow a satisfying sound in the rain-soaked air. I glanced at Justice, and he winked at me. The pride shining in his eyes made my heart swell.

Justice maneuvered to where we were standing, his movements careful and deliberate. "You do know the bow and arrows came from the Court of Blossoms, don't you, Brody?" he asked. "If it hadn't worked, something would have been terribly wrong."

"I know," Brody replied quietly, his brow furrowed. "From what I learned, the Unseelie realm is unpredictable, and I wanted to see if it left another mark on Sawyer besides stealing her memory of her father."

I scowled. "Do you think I'm going dark side?" My voice was sharp with defiance.

Brody shook his head, his expression softening. "No. But let's see what else you can do."

Damon whipped out a blade from the sheath on his belt, the metal gleaming in the muted light. "Sawyer was always excellent with a blade," he remarked with pride as he held the weapon toward me.

I extended my palm, my fingers twitching in anticipation. Damon placed the blade in my hand, the cool metal sending a shiver down my spine. Without thinking about it, I dropped into a lunge stance, my muscles coiling with tension. In one swift, fluid motion, I threw the blade, my eyes locked on the target. Like with the arrows, the blade found its mark, striking the center of the target with a satisfying thud.

I put my hands on my hips with a triumphant grin as I faced Brody. “Satisfied, Captain?” I asked with a playful challenge.

Brody smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “I am,” he admitted.

Suddenly, the door burst open, and Lisa rushed out, her face pale and stricken. “Come in here quick,” she urged in a tight voice. “The mirror is showing us something. Something’s coming.”

My heart leaped into my throat. I ran over to her, my pulse pounding in my ears. “What?” I demanded.

“A dragon,” Lisa whispered.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

My stomach churned with fear and adrenaline, but I pushed it aside, focusing instead on the task at hand. My mind raced, and a cold sweat broke out on my forehead. Maci was coming, and I knew she wouldn’t be coming alone. She must have an army of demons with her, their dark forces ready to descend upon us.

They were after the mirror, that much was clear, but fierce determination surged through me. We wouldn’t hand it over without a fight.

### CHAPTER EIGHT

As we rushed into the room, our gazes locked on the mirror. The surface shimmered and rippled, and slowly, an image began to take shape. At first, all I could see was a dark, looming shadow, but as the picture clarified, my heart nearly stopped.

It wasn't Maci or a horde of demons but a majestic purple dragon soaring through the sky. Its scales glittered in the sunlight, and its powerful wings beat the air with effortless grace.

Zara had been hovering around the mirror. Her brows furrowed as she stepped closer and tilted her head. "Is that..."

"A purple dragon. It's Chelby," I whispered. "The queen of the Court of Blossoms."

Damon released a low whistle. "Well, I'll be damned," he muttered, running a hand through his short, spiky hair. "Never thought I'd see a friggin' purple dragon, especially one that's a queen showing up on our doorstep."

A wave of relief washed over me, followed quickly by a surge of confusion. Why would Chelby be coming here, and what did her appearance mean for our quest? I glanced at the others, seeing the same questions reflected in their eyes.

I swallowed hard, my mouth suddenly dry. Whatever Chelby's arrival meant, one thing was clear. Our journey was about to take an unexpected turn, and the stakes had gotten even higher.

Damon crossed his arms, his jaw clenching. “Well, looks like we’ve got our work cut out for us,” he stated gruffly. “If a dragon queen’s involved, you can bet your ass this ain’t gonna be a cakewalk.”

He turned to me, his blue eyes intense and focused. “We’ve got this, Sawyer. We’ve faced worse before, and we’ll face worse again. And if Chelby’s on our side, we’ve got a powerful ally in our corner.”

“Wait a minute.” Zara’s eyes widened as she pointed at the mirror, her voice trembling with excitement. “Is that a guy on a flying horse?”

I nodded. “That’s Jonas, her mate, and his pegasus, Zeus,” I explained, my heart quickening at the sight.

Brody’s brows furrowed, his mouth set in a grim line as he headed outside. “Something’s wrong,” he muttered, his steps quickening.

We were all right behind him. High in the sky was a dark shadow. The elegant purple dragon descended with Jonas and Zeus close behind.

Chelby landed behind the manor, her massive form casting a shadow over the grounds. In a shimmering instant, she shifted into a naked woman that resembled Aphrodite coming out of the shell, her skin glistening in the sunlight. I averted my eyes, remembering that when shifters changed from their animal form, they emerged in their birthday suits, leaving nothing to the imagination.

Jonas slid off Zeus and wrapped Chelby in a cloak. “We’ve got some news for you.”

I stiffened, waiting for something dreadful.

Chelby stepped forward, her gaze heavy with foreboding news. “We’ve discovered



the location of the catacombs,” she whispered. “But there’s a catch.”

Damon’s eyebrow arched, a sardonic smirk at the corners of his mouth. “Of course there is,” he drawled. “What is it this time?”

Chelby drew a deep breath. “The entrance is hidden within the Forest of Shadows. It’s cursed, and some people have disappeared into the catacombs, never to reappear. It’s protected by ancient magic and traps.”

She reached into her cloak and produced a small, ornate box. The intricate carvings on its surface seemed to shift in the flickering torchlight. “You’ll need this.” She pressed the cool metal into my palm.

I ran my fingers over the box, feeling a faint vibration from within. “Inside is a compass that will guide you through the forest,” Chelby continued. “But only if you’re pure of heart.”

With trembling hands, I opened the box. The golden compass inside pulsed with an otherworldly light, its needle quivering as if alive. “What’s the catch?”

Chelby’s gaze bore into mine. “The compass is enchanted. It will lead you true, but it will also test your resolve. If any among you harbors ill intent or deceit, it will lead you astray, directly into the traps.”

Damon growled. “Great, more magical tests,” he spat. “Anything else we should know?”

Jonas stepped forward, his weathered face grim. “Yes.” He nodded solemnly. “There are creatures within the forest that will try to deceive you. They can take on the appearance of your loved ones, your worst fears, anything to throw you off course.”

A shudder ran through me at the thought. Jonas placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder, his touch grounding me. “We must trust in the compass and each other,” he emphasized.

I glanced at my team, noting the determination and apprehension in their eyes. My heart raced, but I steeled myself. “We can do this,” I declared, my voice stronger than I felt. “We have to. For all of us.”

Chelby’s grip on my shoulder tightened, her nails digging in slightly. “One more thing,” she added. “There’s a chance this could be a trap. Maci’s forces are cunning, and they might have anticipated our moves. She desperately wants this compass. Stay vigilant.”

Brody looked at her. “According to a magical mirror, we have three tasks to complete before we can enter the catacombs. Do you know what these tasks may be? The mirror hasn’t revealed them yet.”

Chelby’s eyes widened slightly. “A mirror, you say? Was it ornate with an intricate floral design on the frame?”

I nodded. “Yeah, that sounds like it. Why?”

Chelby exchanged a glance with Jonas. “That mirror is known as the Mirror of Aethereal Truths. It was stolen from the Court of Blossoms centuries ago. It’s a powerful artifact, known for setting trials to prove one’s worth.”

Jonas added, “If the Mirror of Aethereal Truths is guiding you, it will not be easy. The tasks it sets are intended to test your heart, mind, and soul. Only the worthy can pass.”

Damon released a low whistle. “Great, so it’s got a fancy name and a bad attitude.”

“I’d like to see this mirror,” Chelby remarked.

Zara had been silent, staring at Zeus in awe. “What about the pegasus?”

Jonas shrugged. “He’ll be fine. Humans can’t see him. He’ll graze on the grass.”

Zeus neighed as if in agreement.

We entered the manor and led Chelby and Jonas to the mirror on the dining room table. The air inside seemed thick with the scent of lingering magic as if we were suddenly in a rose garden.

Chelby stepped forward, her hand outstretched toward the mirror. I noticed a slight tremor in her fingers as she reached for it. The moment her skin made contact with the cool glass, a ripple spread across its surface like a stone dropped in still water.

The mirror spoke again, using my mother’s voice. “I will not return to you until this task is completed.”

The words were like a cold frost, settling over us with an unnatural chill. I broke out in goosebumps. When I exhaled, a cloud of mist formed in front of my face, hanging like a ghostly apparition.

I wasn’t the only one. As I glanced around, I saw everyone’s breath materializing in front of them, wispy tendrils dancing in the suddenly frigid air. It was as if we had been transported to the highlands on a cool fall day despite being indoors.

The voice continued, and my mother’s tone grew more urgent. “If the Chosen fail, you guard the boundaries of the Court of Blossoms. The enemy will attack soon.”

Chelby gasped and stumbled backward. Jonas caught her arm, steadying her. The

mirror's surface stilled, again appearing as nothing more than ordinary glass.

The temperature seemed to plummet further with each passing second. I wrapped my arms around myself, my teeth beginning to chatter. Damon's eyes met mine, wide with awe and apprehension. Even Chelby, usually so composed, was visibly shaking, her lips turning a pale blue.

The mirror's surface remained unnaturally still. The chill emanating from it was almost palpable, as if winter itself was seeping into the room through that small pane of glass.

As we stood there, our breaths mingling like smoke signals, the gravity of the situation settled over us. Whatever magic was at work here, it was powerful enough to alter the environment around us. And if this was only a taste of what we were up against, our task ahead seemed more daunting than ever.

### CHAPTER NINE

The dining room was steeped in an uneasy silence, the kind that felt like the air itself was holding its breath. The large wooden table, once a place for meals and laughter, now served as our war room. The dim light from the chandelier above cast long shadows on the walls, flickering slightly as if it, too, was nervous about what was to come.

Brody glanced around, his gaze filled with determination. The room's familiar scent of aged wood and the faint remnants of yesterday's lunch seemed oddly out of place with the tension hanging in the air. His gaze finally settled on me. "Sawyer, we have to know what our first task is. The fate of the Court of Blossoms hangs in the balance."

I nodded, wishing I wasn't the one everyone depended on. There was so much room for disappointment. I wasn't a superhero.

I picked up the ornate handheld mirror off the table and cleared my voice. "Please show us the first task."

In response, the mirror's surface shimmered and rippled, revealing a thick, spooky forest. The leaves rustled in an eerie cadence, and a soft, ethereal voice emerged from the symphony of sounds around us.

"Seek ye the Heart of the Grove," the voice intoned, each word resonating with an ancient power. "There lies the first task, hidden from sight, where shadows dance and light fades. Trust in one another and the path shall be revealed."

I inhaled deeply, my pulse quickening. “The Heart of the Grove. Sounds like our first destination.”

“I know that forest.” Jonas’ face clouded with concern. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully as if recalling an old memory. “I’ve seen a map of it back at the Court of Blossoms. It’s said to be dark and mysterious. If I’m right, you’re going to the Grove of Whispers.”

Damon’s eyes narrowed, his jaw tightening. He stepped closer to Jonas, his hand instinctively moving to the knife at his belt. “What do you mean by dark and mysterious?”

Jonas’ shoulders sagged as if a load of books had dropped on him. He met Damon’s intense gaze. “It’s said only the dead can pass through there.”

Damon chuckled dryly and shook his head. “And what happens if you’re alive? You turn into a corpse?” His fingers drummed his thigh, a nervous tic betraying his attempt at nonchalance.

“If you wander off the path, you’ll turn to stone,” Jonas explained.

Damon’s eyebrows shot up, sarcasm and disbelief playing across his features. He spread his arms wide with a cocky grin despite the tension in his shoulders. “You mean Medusa is hiding in the bushes?”

The air in the room thickened with each revelation. As the gravity of our situation settled over us like a smothering cloak, it sent my thumping heart rattling. Damon’s attempt at humor did little to lighten the mood, his forced smile not quite reaching his eyes.

Jonas shook his head solemnly. “This is no joke, Damon. The Grove of Whispers is

not to be taken lightly.”

Damon’s grin faded into a look of grim determination. He squared his shoulders, his hand resting on the hilt of his weapon. “Well, looks like we’re in for one hell of a nature walk.”

Brody straightened his shoulders. “Then that’s where we’re headed,” he announced. He stepped forward, his posture exuding confidence despite the danger ahead. “Listen up, team. We stick together. No one goes off alone. Keep your eyes and ears open at all times.”

His hand went to the butt of his sword, fingers brushing its edge as if drawing strength from it. “We don’t know what we’re walking into, but I know this. Together, we can face whatever’s out there. We’ve trained for this. We’re ready.”

His gaze hardened, a flash of steel in his gray eyes. “Remember why we’re here. People are counting on us. So stay sharp, watch each other’s backs, and if anyone sees anything out of the ordinary, you speak up immediately. Understood?”

We all nodded, our expressions mirroring Brody’s resolve.

“Good.” Brody nodded. “Get packed. We leave tomorrow at dawn.”

“There’s one more thing.” Jonas lowered his voice, reached into his pocket, and retrieved a small vial of shimmering blue liquid. The glass caught the light, sending tiny blue reflections dancing across our faces. “Princess Lyra wanted me to give this to you. She wouldn’t tell me why, but now what she said made sense. This potion will help you understand the whispers, but it only lasts for an hour. Use it wisely.”

I took the vial, feeling its cool weight in my palm. A tingle ran up my arm as my fingers closed around it. “Please tell her thank you. Who is she?”

Chelby stepped forward, her eyes gleaming with reverence and concern. “Princess Lyra is a powerful fae with the gift of sight,” she explained. “But she has refused to talk about what she sees in the future, which is odd.”

Damon’s eyebrows shot up. He released a low whistle, shaking his head. “Oh great, another magical McGuffin.” His voice dripped with sarcasm. “Because things weren’t complicated enough already.”

He eyed the vial suspiciously. “So let me get this straight. We’ve got a mystery potion from a psychic fairy princess who’s suddenly gone all cryptic?” He snorted, a wry smile tugging at his mouth. “Man, I thought mine and Sawyer’s family was weird.”

Chelby’s eyes flashed as she gave him a stern look. “Princess Lyra would have her reasons.”

Damon sighed heavily. “All right, fine. Magical forest, stone-cold curse, and now Tinkerbell’s secret sauce. Just another day in paradise, right?”

“You should have more faith in her,” Jonas suggested.

Damon turned to face us, his expression suddenly serious despite the hint of humor in his eyes. “Seriously, guys. We’re really trusting a potion from someone we’ve never met? For all we know, this could turn us into frogs or something.”

A surge of determination coursed through me. “I think this is the whole point of why we’ve been chosen,” I offered. “We have to learn to trust each other and our instincts. My instincts tell me to trust Princess Lyra. We need allies, Damon.”

He paused, considering. “I guess if it’s a choice between being a frog or a statue...” He shrugged, his trademark smirk returning. “Eh, what the hell. At least frogs can



jump. But if I start croaking, you all better find a way to change me back. And we never speak of it again, got it?"

Chelby stepped forward, her eyes shimmering with concern and pride. She placed her hands on my shoulders, her touch warm and comforting. A slight tremor in her fingers betrayed her anxiety.

"I wish you luck." Conviction filled her soft voice. She swallowed hard before continuing, "We must return to the Court of Blossoms. Princess Lyra did say Jonas and I must remain in the kingdom. That is our destiny."

Her grip on my shoulders tightened as if she was reluctant to let go. Then, suddenly, she pulled me into a quick, fierce hug. I caught a whiff of her scent, a blend of wildflowers and something distinctly magical. My throat tightened with emotion.

As she pulled back, Chelby's eyes met mine, her gaze intense and meaningful. A shiver ran down my spine at the perceptive stare.

"This is yours," she whispered. "Trust in your team."

I nodded, feeling her words press against my chest like a physical force. My heart raced as adrenaline and uncertainty coursed through my veins. When did I become a leader? The question echoed in my mind, but as I looked at my teammates, their expressions full of determination and trust, I realized she was right. I wasn't alone. My team would back me up like I would back them up.

The vial in my pocket seemed to grow heavier, a tangible reminder of the journey ahead. I felt its cool surface through the fabric, pulsing with potential.

We escorted Chelby and Jonas outside, the cool evening air nipping at our skin. Zeus grazed on the lawn, his magnificent form bathed in the golden light of the setting sun.

His tail swished lazily, creating a soft whooshing sound in the stillness.

Chelby drew a deep breath. With a fluid motion, she removed her cloak, letting it fall to the ground. The air around her shimmered like heat rising from hot pavement. In the blink of an eye, where Chelby once stood, a beautiful purple dragon towered over us.

My jaw dropped, and I heard gasps from my teammates. The dragon's scales gleamed, their color perfectly matching the clouds hovering over the setting sun. The last rays of daylight danced across her form, creating an otherworldly spectacle.

Jonas, seemingly unfazed by the transformation, hopped up onto Zeus. The pegasus whinnied softly, pawing at the ground with anticipation. His elegant wings unfurled, the feathers catching the fading light.

I opened my mouth to say goodbye, but before I could utter a word, they were moving. The dragon's powerful wings created gusts of wind that whipped our hair and clothes. Zeus leaped into the air, his wings beating in perfect rhythm.

As quickly as they came, the dragon, the fae, and the pegasus disappeared into the dusk, leaving only a swirl of disturbed leaves and a sense of awe.

### CHAPTER TEN

Dawn came faster than I expected, the pale light creeping through my window and jolting me from a restless sleep. My body ached from tossing and turning all night, thinking of our impending journey.

On this mission, we didn't have to travel through a portal. A small mercy, I thought, remembering the disorienting sensation of our last interdimensional trip. Maggie was still recovering from being possessed, her absence a palpable void in our team. Even if Garrick had been chosen, I knew he wouldn't have left Maggie's side. The thought of their devotion brought a bittersweet pang to my chest.

With trembling fingers, I checked my gear one last time. My trusted bow felt cool and familiar in my hands, a stark contrast to the nervous heat radiating from my palms. I slung my quiver over my shoulder, the arrows rattling softly.

I zipped open my backpack, the sound unnaturally loud in the quiet morning. Inside, I had carefully packed the mysterious shimmering vial. Next to it lay the compass and the mirror. Each item seemed to pulse with latent energy. I added a change of clothes, a water bottle that sloshed reassuringly, a tightly rolled blanket, and a first aid kit that I prayed we wouldn't need.

At my side, I felt the reassuring weight of a sheathed dagger.

I glimpsed my reflection in the mirror and barely recognized the determined young woman staring back at me. My face was pale, dark circles under my eyes betraying my sleepless night. I hadn't bothered with makeup, save for a swipe of lip gloss to

soothe my dry, nervous lips. My blonde hair was pulled back into a loose ponytail, practical and unadorned.

This was definitely one of my hunter uniforms, I mused, running my hands over the familiar fabric. Each piece of clothing was chosen for functionality rather than style.

With a deep breath that did little to calm my racing heart, I shrugged on a thick leather jacket. The material creaked as I moved, already warming to my body heat. I hoisted my quiver and backpack over my shoulders.

I was as ready as I could be, I told myself, trying to ignore the knot of fear in my stomach. Hopefully, I didn't get turned into stone. The thought froze my blood, but I squared my shoulders, pushing the fear aside. Whatever lay ahead, I would face it head-on.

I opened the door on softly creaking hinges to find Justice standing there, his tall frame filling the doorway. The rich aroma of coffee wafted from the steaming cup in his hand, making my mouth water instantly. My heart skipped a beat at his thoughtful gesture.

I flashed him a warm smile, feeling heat rise to my cheeks. My hand instinctively moved to my chest. "A man after my own heart," I murmured.

"It's early, and I thought you could use a cup." Justice's deep voice sent a shiver down my spine.

I took in his appearance. His hair, usually tied back, now flowed freely over his shoulders like a dark river, framing his face. Dark circles still lingered under his eyes, but his color was a little better. The sight brought a mix of relief and worry churning in my stomach.

He must have drunk some blood, I realized. Yet the nagging question persisted, making my chest tighten. How long could he keep this up? We didn't have long to find the Crown of Envy to restore his health. What if we were too late? The thought made my breath catch in my throat.

As if reading my thoughts, Justice's cool fingers brushed my skin as he ran the back of his knuckles down my cheek. The gentle touch sent tingles across my face, momentarily calming my racing mind.

"You need to stop worrying," he murmured. "I told you, I'm a vampire and can last longer than humans."

I leaned into his touch, savoring the contact. "I know, but I love you and can't lose you." My voice choked on the words, emotion constricting my throat. The mere thought of going through life without him made my eyes sting.

In one swift motion, Justice set the coffee cup on a nearby table, the liquid sloshing dangerously close to the rim. Before I could react, his arm snaked around my waist, pulling me flush against his body. The sudden movement knocked the breath from my lungs, and my heart hammered.

His dark, intense eyes locked onto mine for a fleeting moment. In them, I saw a swirling mix of desire, desperation, and something deeper—a fierce, primal need that made my knees weak.

Then his lips crashed onto mine with an urgency that stole what little breath I had left. This wasn't a gentle kiss. It was raw, passionate, almost frantic. His mouth moved against mine with a fervor that spoke of barely contained hunger, not only for blood but for life itself.

One of his hands tangled in my hair, tugging slightly to angle my head, deepening the

kiss. His other hand pressed into the small of my back, eliminating any space between us. I felt every line of his body against mine, the coolness of his skin a stark contrast to the heat building within me.

His tongue swept across my lower lip, demanding entry, which I willingly granted. The taste of him—a mixture of copper and something uniquely Justice—flooded my senses, making my head spin. A soft moan escaped me, swallowed by his relentless kiss.

There was a possessiveness in the way he held me, in the way his lips claimed mine. It felt like he was marking me, branding me as his own. The dominance in his actions sent a shiver down my spine as excitement and surrender washed over me.

I clutched his shoulders, my fingers digging into the hard muscle, desperate to anchor myself in the storm of sensations. My lungs burned for air, but I couldn't bring myself to break away. At this moment, Justice's kiss felt more essential than oxygen.

When he finally pulled back, it was only by a fraction. His forehead rested against mine, our ragged breaths mingling in the scant space between us. My lips tingled, swollen from the intensity of the kiss. The rapid rise and fall of his chest matched my labored breathing.

With the taste of him still on my lips and the solid warmth of his body against mine, I understood. This wasn't merely a kiss. It was a promise, a declaration, and a desperate plea rolled into one.

Someone cleared their throat from out in the hall. I didn't need to turn around. I knew it was my overprotective brother.

Justice released me, grabbed the coffee cup off the table, and handed it to me. My lips were still swollen where he had kissed me. The tender moment had ended too soon.

I heard a familiar voice.

“Oh, come on!”

I turned to see Damon standing in the doorway, coffee mug in hand, his face a picture of exasperation. My cheeks flushed hot with embarrassment, but I didn't step away from Justice.

“It's too early for this crap,” Damon grumbled, his green eyes flashing with anger and resignation. He gestured wildly at us with his free hand. “Seriously? Some of us are trying to keep our breakfast down, you know.”

Damon inhaled deeply, running a hand down his face in a gesture I'd seen a thousand times when he was trying to keep his cool.

“Look, I get it. You're together.” The words emerged like they physically pained him. My heart clenched at the conflict in his eyes. “But do you have to be so...vampirey about it?” He pointed an accusatory finger at Justice. “And you, Twilight. You think you could dial it back a notch? She needs to breathe, you know. Oxygen. It's kind of important for us humans.”

Justice stiffened beside me, but he remained silent. I opened my mouth to defend us, but Damon cut me off.

“Just...get a room, will you?” he grumbled, shaking his head as he moved to push past us. “And if I see any fang, so help me...”

He left the threat unfinished, shooting one last warning glance at Justice before continuing down the hallway. I heard him muttering about the impossibility of normal family dynamics.

As Damon's footsteps faded, I released a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. I looked at Justice, seeing amusement and concern in his eyes.

"Well," I remarked, trying to lighten the mood. "I guess that's Damon's way of giving us his blessing?"

Justice braced his shoulders as if preparing to do battle. "Like he could keep us apart."

I cocked my eyebrow. "Protective, are we?"

"When it comes to you, yes." He chuckled, but I noticed the tension in his shoulders. This wouldn't be the last time we'd have to deal with Damon's protective streak. But for now, at least, we had bigger things to worry about.



### CHAPTER ELEVEN

Justice and I headed into the living room. My lips still tingled from our recent kiss, and warmth lingered in my cheeks. I nervously ran my tongue over my lower lip, tasting the faint metallic hint Justice always left behind.

As we entered the room, our team's quiet chatter ceased. The sudden silence was palpable, making the air feel thick and heavy. I fought the urge to fidget under their collective gaze, my heart rate picking up slightly.

I scanned their faces, wondering if they could tell we'd been kissing. Did my swollen lips and flushed skin give us away? The weight of their scrutiny made my skin prickle with self-consciousness.

Brody's expression remained impassive, his gaze flicking between Justice and me with an unreadable intensity. Damon studiously avoided eye contact, his jaw clenched tight enough that a muscle twitched in his cheek.

The others maintained a careful neutrality, but I noticed a few raised eyebrows, especially from Lisa and Zara. The tension in the room was almost tangible, like a taut rubber band ready to snap.

As the silence threatened to become unbearable, Garrick broke it. He leaned forward in his chair with a sly smile. The mischievous glint in his eyes made my stomach do a little flip.

"Well, well," he drawled. "Looks like someone got an early start on their goodbyes."

New heat rushed to my face, the blush spreading down my neck. Beside me, Justice shifted his weight, his arm brushing against mine in a gesture that felt both protective and slightly possessive.

The room seemed to collectively exhale, the tension dissipating with Garrick's lighthearted comment. As the others gathered their gear, I caught Justice's eye. His small, reassuring smile made my heart skip a beat.

With a deep breath, I squared my shoulders, pushing thoughts of our stolen moment aside. His strength always boosted me.

Suddenly, Sean bustled into the living room in a whoosh of air that carried the scent of fresh coffee and morning dew. The rising sun streamed through the windows, catching his red hair and setting it ablaze with golden light. For a moment, it looked as if his hair was on fire. The sight was so startling that I blinked hard.

"The car is ready for your journey," Sean announced. His words sent a jolt of adrenaline through me, making my palms suddenly clammy. This was it. We were really doing this.

Sean's fingers danced over a tablet in his hands, tapping rapidly. "I have set the GPS for the Grove of Whispers," he continued. "It's about a hundred miles from here."

The distance hit me like a physical blow. A hundred miles. It seemed both impossibly far and terrifyingly close. The weight of the journey ahead settled onto my shoulders, as tangible as my backpack. My mouth went dry, and I swallowed hard, trying to moisten my throat.

I glanced around at my team, noting their mingled determination and apprehension. Damon was checking his weapons one last time. Brody stood tall, his stance radiating confidence I wished I felt. Justice moved closer to me, his cool presence a balm to my

frayed nerves.

My gaze swept over Lisa and Zara, taking in their attire. They both sported sleek black leather pants that hugged their curves, the material creaking softly with each movement. The similarity in their outfits was so striking that I couldn't help but raise an eyebrow, wondering if they had gone shopping together.

As they shifted their weight, I caught a glint of metal at their waists. My gaze zeroed in on the blades nestled in their belts, the weapons a stark reminder of the dangers we were about to face. A shiver ran down my spine, my dagger suddenly feeling heavier against my hip.

Their backpacks, slung casually over their shoulders, drew my attention next. The bags looked oddly full, their contents a mystery that made my imagination run wild. I leaned forward as if I could somehow see through the fabric.

I wonder if they've packed vials of powders and potions, I mused silently, my throat tightening at the thought. My fingers unconsciously brushed against my pack, feeling for the reassuring shape of the vial Princess Lyra had given us.

A fleeting hope flickered in my chest. Maybe they have something that could restore us to our human form if we're turned to stone, I thought, my heart rate quickening at the possibility. Images of my friends and myself as lifeless statues flashed through my mind, making my stomach churn.

I swallowed hard, trying to push away the unsettling thoughts. Instead, I focused on the confidence radiating from Lisa and Zara. Their postures were relaxed yet alert, ready for whatever challenges lay ahead. Their preparedness was both reassuring and intimidating.

As if sensing my scrutiny, both women turned to meet my gaze. I quickly schooled

my features, offering what I hoped was a confident smile. Inside, I couldn't shake a nagging worry. What other surprises did they have tucked away in those mysterious backpacks? And would it be enough for what awaited us in the Grove of Whispers?

Brody checked his gun one more time, the movement precise and practiced. His gray eyes swept the team, lingering on each member before settling on Zara.

"All right, team, listen up," he stated. "Remember what Chelby said. We could be walking into a trap, and we need to stay sharp."

He holstered his weapon, then placed his hands on his belt, adopting the stance of a seasoned leader addressing his troops.

"We're stronger together," Brody continued. "Each one of us has a vital role to play. Trust your training, trust each other, and above all, stay vigilant." His gaze intensified. "The stakes are high, but I know this team. We've faced tough odds before, and we've come through. This mission is no different."

Brody straightened, squaring his shoulders. "Work together. Watch each other's backs. We all have a job to do, and I know we're up to the task." He nodded once. "Let's move out."

As the words washed over us, I felt admiration and a twinge of self-doubt. My chest tightened. Brody had a gift for leadership, steady and reassuring as he moved us with encouragement. The team visibly straightened, their faces set with renewed determination.

My fingers fidgeted with the strap of my quiver, a nervous habit I couldn't shake. I didn't possess those qualifications, that innate ability to inspire with a few well-chosen words. Awareness gnawed at my stomach.

Chelby's faith in me flashed through my mind, along with the cryptic messages from the mirror. They seemed to believe I could lead, but standing here in Brody's shadow, doubt crept in like a chill. I drew a deep breath, trying to steady my racing thoughts.

As I exhaled slowly, a new idea began to form. Maybe leadership came in different ways. I scanned our diverse team, each member bringing unique strengths to our mission. Perhaps my role wasn't to be another Brody but to bring something entirely different to the table.

I squared my shoulders. My style might not be speeches and rallying cries, but I had other strengths. Intuition. Adaptability. The ability to see the bigger picture.

With this realization, some of the tension eased from my muscles. I might not be the leader I thought I should be, but I could be the leader this team needed. Different, yes, but no less valuable.

We were ready. I was ready.

Justice moved to my side, his presence a comforting warmth against the morning chill. He clasped my hand, his cool fingers intertwining with mine. The moment our skin touched, a jolt of energy coursed through me as if his strength was physically flowing into my body. My breath caught in my throat. I squeezed his hand, drawing comfort from his support.

We started out. Damon fell into step alongside me, his familiar presence a balm to my nerves. He'd always been at my side fighting, a constant in my life of uncertainties. His undying loyalty surrounded me like a protective shield.

As we headed for the door, a nagging thought tugged at the edges of my mind. I frowned, my brow furrowing as I tried to grasp the elusive memory. Someone else had been there, too, fighting alongside us. The shadow of a figure flickered in my

mind's eye, just out of reach.

Maybe that had been Dad.

The thought sent a pang of longing through my chest. My free hand unconsciously moved to touch the locket hanging around my neck, a habit I'd developed whenever thoughts of my father surfaced.

At least, that's what Damon kept telling me. The frustration of my fractured past bubbled up, threatening to overshadow the moment.

Then, Justice's thumb brushed soothingly across my knuckles, grounding me in the present. I inhaled deeply, pushing the conflicting emotions aside. As long as he was at my side, I could face anything.

### CHAPTER TWELVE

Grady and Scott were waiting for us outside. The sight of them tightened my chest with an unexpected pang of guilt.

Grady leaned against the railing, his shoulders slumped and his gaze fixed on the ground. His fingers drummed an erratic rhythm on his thigh. Scott stood a few feet away, arms crossed tightly, his jaw clenched so hard I could almost hear his teeth grinding.

They reminded me of the kids in school who didn't get picked to be on a team. The memory flashed through my mind. The shuffling feet, downcast eyes, and the sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach when you're the last one standing. I swallowed hard, trying to dislodge the lump in my throat.

As we approached, both men straightened, their gazes darting between us with envy and resignation. The tension was almost palpable, making the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

Grady swallowed, clearly struggling to find words. Scott's fingers dug into his biceps, leaving white marks on his skin. The silence stretched between us.

Leadership fell upon my shoulders once again. I knew I needed to say something, to acknowledge their importance even if they weren't coming with us. But as I opened my mouth, the words seemed to stick in my throat, tangled with emotions I couldn't quite name.

This was the first real test of my leadership, I realized. Not facing monsters or magical forests but handling the human element of our team. The challenge made my palms sweat and my heart race, but I was determined to rise to the occasion.

I drew a deep breath. The cool morning air filled my lungs as I closed my eyes, allowing myself to be transported back to my painful childhood memories.

Suddenly, I was in second grade again. The classroom buzzed with excitement as a girl handed out glittery pink invitations to her slumber party. My stomach knotted tighter with each passing moment as I watched her distribute them to every girl but me. The bitterness of being excluded burned my dry throat.

I could still hear the whispers, see the sidelong glances. “Her parents are into the occult,” they’d said. The words stung like physical blows, leaving invisible bruises on my young heart.

As the memory shifted, I felt a ghost of comfort wash over me. My mom picking me up from school, her perfume a mix of lavender and hope. The cool smoothness of an ice cream cone pressed into my hand, her words of encouragement wrapping around me like a warm blanket. “You’re special, Sawyer,” she’d told me, her voice as soothing as a summer breeze. Those words had given me hope, a lifeline to cling to in a sea of rejection.

I opened my eyes, blinking away unexpected moisture. Grady and Scott stood before me, their postures mirroring the dejection I’d felt all those years ago. My heart ached for them.

I decided to trust my heart, not my mind, drawing on how I felt when I was the kid who wasn’t chosen.

Drawing strength from my mother’s memory, I squared my shoulders and met their



gazes. My voice came out gentle but firm, carrying the same warmth my mother had shown me.

“There’s a reason you were chosen to stay here.” Their eyes widened slightly in surprise. I stepped closer, placing a hand on Grady’s shoulder. I felt the tension in his muscles, wound tight like a spring.

“Maggie and Garrick are both vulnerable,” I continued, turning to include Scott in my gaze. “Especially Maggie. She was possessed once before.” I paused, letting the gravity of the situation sink in.

“It’s up to you both to protect them,” I finished, infusing my words with all the confidence and trust I could muster. I gently squeezed Grady’s shoulder before stepping back.

A change came over them. Grady’s shoulders straightened, the nervous drumming of his fingers slowing to a stop. Scott’s arms uncrossed, his hands falling to his sides as his jaw unclenched. The look in their eyes shifted from dejection to determination.

In that moment, a surge of pride and hope ran through me. Maybe this was what leadership truly meant. Not only guiding those who followed but also empowering those who stayed behind. As Grady and Scott nodded, the tension in my shoulders lifted, and I exhaled deeply.

I wanted to empower them like someone else had empowered me. I could almost hear their words, but they drifted away, leaving me wishing I could have heard. Something told me it would have boosted my self-confidence and squashed my self-doubt.

But I had to work with what I had and save my team, especially Justice.

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The morning sun glistened off the dark blue SUV Sean had obtained for us. My heart fluttered as I squinted against the glare. I immediately put on my sunglasses. Hopefully, the smiling sun was indicative that we would be successful this time. Or at least I hoped we would.

After we loaded our gear, Brody got in the front seat while we all piled in. Doors slammed as Damon and Lisa took the middle row. Justice, Zara, and I squeezed into the back, our bodies pressed together. Garrick, Grady, Scott, and Sean stood on the porch, their gazes tense with dread. I felt their anxiety like a physical weight. A hive of goosebumps broke out across my skin, a shiver running down my spine.

Justice put his arm around my shoulder and pulled me close. I laid my head on his shoulder.

Maggie still hadn't made an appearance and must still be in bed. The possession had really taken a toll on her. I hoped she'd be completely healed by the time we came back. My chest tightened at the thought of having a demon ride me like a nightmare come to life.

If you can ever be healed from something like that...

As we pulled away from the house, my stomach tightened. The familiar sights of Edinburgh's Old Town gave way to wider streets, the castle looming behind us in the rearview mirror.

“How far to the Grove of Whispers?” I asked, my voice barely audible over the hum of the engine.

Brody’s gaze flicked to the GPS. “About an hour and a half, assuming we don’t hit traffic on the outskirts.”

I nodded, swallowing hard.

As we drove through the city’s newer districts, the air in the car grew heavy with unspoken fears. Justice shifted restlessly beside me, his leg bouncing with nervous energy. Zara sat rigid, her gaze fixed on the passing buildings, jaw clenched.

The morning sun climbed higher, casting long shadows across the streets, but its warmth couldn’t penetrate the dread settling in my chest. Every traffic light, every roundabout brought us closer to our destination, the urgency of our mission increasing with each passing moment.

What would we find in the Grove of Whispers, hidden away in the Scottish countryside? And more importantly, would we all make it back to the familiar safety of Edinburgh’s streets, or would one of us remain a permanent fixture in that forest?

As Brody pulled out of Edinburgh, he kept glancing in the rearview mirror, his posture stiffening.

“Team, we’ve got a tail. Black sedan, three cars back. It’s been with us since we left the city limits,” he announced.

Damon glanced over his shoulder, his brow furrowed. “Well, ain’t that just peachy. What’s next, a marching band and a ticker-tape parade?”

“This is serious, Damon,” Brody replied. “We need to stay focused and work

together.”

“Oh, I’m focused, all right,” Damon quipped, rolling his eyes. “Focused on not becoming demon chow in the middle of nowhere. Any other brilliant observations, Captain Obvious?”

Brody’s jaw tightened, but he kept his eyes on the road. “Stay alert. We don’t know what we’re dealing with yet.”

“Yeah, ‘cause that’s worked out so well for us before,” Damon muttered. “For once, I’d like to deal with something we actually know about. Is that too much to ask?”

I felt the tension ratchet up another notch, my muscles coiling tight as a spring. My heart thundered like a bass drum. I stole a glance at Zara to gauge her reaction. She was the only one who didn’t seem nervous, her face an impassive mask.

I caught Brody’s gaze in the rearview mirror. He obviously noticed her lack of reaction, and anger flashed in his eyes as his jaw clenched. I could practically read his thoughts. She’s not part of the team.

An uneasy thought popped into my mind, and my stomach lurched. What if Zara used a spell to make sure she was chosen? Did she have that kind of power? If that was true, we definitely were walking into a trap. My heart rate quickened, and I had to force myself to take slow, measured breaths to avoid giving away my suspicion.

I stole another glance at Zara, studying her profile for any sign of deceit. Her face remained impassive, but now her calmness seemed less reassuring and more ominous.

I kept flicking my gaze between the rearview mirror and the road ahead. Every car that appeared behind us sent a jolt of adrenaline through my system, my body primed

for fight or flight. Yet here we were, trapped in a moving vehicle, hurtling toward an unknown danger with another potential threat on our tail.

The engine's roar filled the car as we sped down the winding road, the dense forest of Scotland blurring past. Headlights loomed ominously close behind us.

Brody's knuckles were white as he gripped the steering wheel. "Our company's getting closer. Any bright ideas on how to lose these guys?"

Damon looked at Lisa, his eyebrows raised expectantly. "All right, Sabrina, time to earn your keep. Think you can whip up some hocus pocus to shake our fan club back there? I mean, unless you want to wait for them to catch up and exchange friendship bracelets."

He glanced back at the road before adding, "And make it snappy, will ya? I'd rather not star in 'Fast and Furious: Demon Edition' today."

Lisa's expression turned pensive. "I think I can duplicate a mirage that looks like our car."

Damon shot her a glance. "You think, or you know?"

"I know," she replied firmly. She rummaged through her bag, pulling out a small vial of water, a sprig of rosemary, and a shard of a broken mirror.

Not surprisingly, Zara tensed. This time, I noticed a bead of sweat trickle down her temple, catching the light as it traced her jawline. Her gaze darted between Lisa's impromptu spell ingredients and the road behind us. A flicker of recognition—or was it fear?—crossed her face. She knew who was in that car.

Zara's fingers dug into the seat beside me, her knuckles white with strain. The

contrast between her earlier calm and current distress was jarring, raising a host of new questions in my mind. What did she know that we didn't? And, more importantly, whose side was she really on?

Lisa inhaled, centering herself as the car sped along. "I need everyone to stay quiet and focused. This is going to be tricky."

Damon's tone shifted to something more supportive but still very much Damon. "You heard her. Give the witch some space to work her mojo."

Lisa closed her eyes and chanted, her voice steady and clear despite the bumps and jolts of the speeding car.

"By water's edge and nature's grace, reflect our need in this place. A visage true, a form to see, create this mirage now for me."

The air inside the car seemed to hum with energy. The items in her hands glowed faintly, and outside, the outline of another car shimmered into existence on the road behind us. It was a perfect duplicate, an illusion that looked solid and real.

Zara's body went rigid, her eyes widening in alarm. A strangled noise escaped her throat, something between a hiss and a curse. She pressed herself against the side of the vehicle as if trying to put as much distance between herself and Lisa's spell as possible. Her face contorted in fear and disgust.

"No," Zara whispered, her voice hoarse. "You don't know what you're doing."

Lisa seemed oblivious to Zara's reaction, her focus entirely on the spell. "Brody, take the next turn," she instructed. "The mirage will keep going straight."

Zara's breathing became rapid and shallow. Sweat beaded on her upper lip, and a

vein pulsed at her temple. Her reaction was visceral, almost violent in its intensity.

Brody complied, yanking the wheel hard to the right and sending us down a narrow side road. We held our breath as the dark sedan behind us continued straight, following the illusory car.

“Nice work, Lisa.” I exhaled a sigh of relief. “That should keep them off our tail for a while.”

She opened her eyes, the glow fading from the items in her hands. “Let’s hope it holds long enough for us to get to the Grove of Whispers.”

Zara hung her head as if in disappointment.

Brody glanced at Lisa in the rearview mirror. “That was incredible. You saved our skins.”

Damon smirked. “Yeah, not bad for a witch on the fly. Now, let’s get to that grove and figure out what the hell we’re supposed to do next.”

Lisa was definitely part of the team. Her actions proved her loyalty. But Zara had something up her sleeve that turned my gut into double knots. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, a chill running down my spine despite the warmth in the car. Zara’s presence suddenly felt like a looming threat, and I had to resist the urge to inch away from her.

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

For the next hour, we didn't see any signs of the black sedan, but that did little to ease the knot in my stomach. The absence of our pursuers could mean they were waiting to ambush us at the Grove of Whispers. I tried to shake off the tension inside me, but I was like a time bomb ready to explode.

The air in the car remained thick with unspoken suspicion. No one confronted Zara directly, but the weight of unasked questions pressed down on us. I stole glances at her from the corner of my eye, watching for any signs of deceit.

A thought wormed its way into my mind, setting off a fresh wave of unease. Maybe Zara and the other witches, who may have been in that car following us, were after the Mirror of Aethereal and the magical compass. The possibility raised goosebumps on my arms.

As we drew closer to our destination, the tension ratcheted up. Every bend in the road, every patch of forest could be hiding our pursuers. The uncertainty of what awaited kept us all on edge.

The car was a pressure cooker of anxiety and suspicion. I needed to get Justice alone to tell him what I observed, but after we lost the sedan, he had fallen asleep. That wasn't like him. My heart clenched as I studied his slumped form, noting the dark circles under his eyes and the pallor of his skin.

What if the demon poisoning was getting stronger? My blood quickened, turning hotter, and I broke out in a slick sweat. I watched the slow rise and fall of his chest,



straining to hear his breathing over the hum of the engine.

My hand hovered near his arm, torn between waking him and letting him rest. If the poison was progressing, he needed all the strength he could get. But we also needed him alert, especially given Zara's uncertain loyalty and the potential ambush ahead.

I glanced around the car, noting the others' tense postures. They shared my concerns about Justice and Zara. The silence seemed to steal the air, and I could barely breathe.

As the miles rolled by, I was caught in a cycle of watching Justice, eyeing Zara suspiciously, and scanning the road for signs of pursuit. My neck ached from the constant movement. I felt like an owl, twisting and turning, hyper-aware of every shadow and movement. Fatigue crept in at the edges of my consciousness. I fought to keep my eyelids open, blinking rapidly against the gritty feeling of exhaustion.

I couldn't afford to let my guard down. Not with so much at stake and so many unknowns. I clenched my jaw, and my hands balled into fists. I had to find a way to warn my team, to prepare for whatever awaited us. Our lives might depend on it.

Brody pulled into the trailhead for the Grove of Whispers. Luckily, there was no sign of the dark sedan. As we stepped from the car and started unloading our gear, the atmosphere shifted palpably, as if we had crossed an invisible threshold into another dimension.

Justice wobbled as he exited the car, his usually steady frame swaying like a tree in a storm.

Shit-shit-shit.

My heart raced as I watched him struggle. The demon poison was definitely taking a toll on him, eating away at his strength with each passing moment. His face was

ashen, a sheen of sweat glistening on his forehead despite the cool air. Dark circles under his eyes stood out starkly against his pale skin.

Without hesitation, I moved to his side, looping my arm through his. Tremors ran through his body, and the heat of fever radiated off him. Normally, he would have pushed me away, his pride refusing to accept help. This time, he didn't. He leaned into me, a testament to how weak he'd become.

"I've got you," I murmured, trying to keep the fear from my voice as panic clawed at my chest. He needed fresh blood, and soon. The urge to offer mine was overwhelming.

I wished he would take mine. The thought of his fangs piercing my skin, of my life force flowing into him, healing him, should have terrified me. Instead, it filled me with a desperate longing. I'd give anything to see color return to his cheeks, to see strength flow back into his limbs.

"Justice," I whispered. "You need to feed. I can?—"

He cut me off with a weak shake of his head. "No," he rasped. "I can't... won't risk it."

The others gathered around us, concern etched on their faces. I saw the question in their eyes. Would Justice be strong enough for what lay ahead? As we stood at the edge of the Grove of Whispers, with unknown dangers lurking in its depths, I couldn't shake the feeling that our greatest threat might not be Justice's deteriorating condition.

Something was in there. Something evil that seeped into my heart.

The air grew thick and heavy, carrying a scent of damp earth and something ancient,

almost primordial. Mist curled around our ankles, its cool tendrils reaching for us with an unsettling purpose. The trees loomed overhead, their branches twisting and intertwining in unnatural patterns, creating a canopy that devoured what little sunlight managed to penetrate.

This reminded me more of the Unseelie realm than Earth. The shadows between the trees seemed to writhe and dance, hinting at otherworldly presences beyond our perception. An eerie silence blanketed the area, broken only by the occasional whisper of wind through leaves that sounded disturbingly like distant, indecipherable voices.

If the Unseelie were connected to this forest, why hadn't Garrick said anything? I glanced at my companions, wondering if they felt the same sense of otherworldly dread creeping over me.

The dense cluster of ancient trees stood before us like sentinels. Gnarled oaks and towering pines stretched skyward. A thick layer of fallen leaves and moss carpeted the forest floor, muffling our footsteps.

Two massive, weather-worn stones marked the grove's entrance, their surfaces etched with faint symbols that seemed to shift and change as we approached. As we passed between them, my blood ran cold. We were crossing a threshold into another world entirely.

Then the whispers started, faint at first but growing clearer with each step.

Come play with us.

Help us.

The air grew cooler and damper as we ventured deeper into the grove, the whispers a

constant, unsettling backdrop. Shadows danced at the corners of my vision, and more than once, I turned quickly, certain I'd seen movement among the trees. Yet, each time, nothing was there. Only more mist and shadows and those haunting, ethereal voices.

Come play with us.

Help us.

The whispers seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, twining around us like incorporeal vines. I glanced at my companions, trying to gauge if they heard the voices too or if I was slowly losing my grip on reality.

Brody held up his hand. "Sawyer, time to get the mirror and compass out."

Damon clasped Justice's arm, his eyebrows furrowing with poorly concealed worry. "Whoa there, Bambi on ice. You trying to recreate a drunken sailor impression, or is this your audition for 'Dancing with the Demons?'"

His tone was light, but his grip was firm, supportive.

Justice glowered at him. "I'm fine."

Damon shook his head. "Seriously, man, you look like you've gone ten rounds with a wendigo and lost. Maybe ease up on the demon juice cocktails, huh?"

I gave my brother a grateful look as I reached into my backpack. The mirror shimmered like a dark lake and began to glow. Once again, my mother's voice emerged, clear and resonant. "Seek ye the Heartstone amulet, hidden deep within the Grove of Whispers. This ancient artifact holds the power to reveal hidden truths and protect against dark magic. Only those who prove their worth may claim it."

Brody's eyes narrowed, his expression thoughtful. The lines on his forehead deepened. "The Heartstone amulet," he repeated slowly, tasting the words. "It sounds like it could be the key to navigating the challenges ahead."

A tense silence fell over the group. I could almost hear the gears turning in everyone's minds, weighing the potential benefits against the unknown risks.

Zara nodded eagerly, her gaze fixed on the mirror. Her eyes gleamed with an intensity that made me uneasy. "It's said to be imbued with the magic of this grove," she explained. "Anyone who possesses it can grow stronger. The amulet taps into the essence of this place."

Maybe the amulet would help Justice.

I watched her carefully, noting the slight tremor in her hands, the way her breath quickened as she spoke. Was it excitement? Fear? Or something else entirely?

Brody gave her a hard stare. The air between them crackled with tension. "Is that why your friends were following us in the dark sedan?" he asked, his voice low and dangerous.

Zara's eagerness faltered, her face paling visibly. She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again, looking like a deer caught in headlights.

The accusation hung in the air. I glanced between Brody and Zara, then at the others, gauging their reactions. Justice's hand had moved closer to his weapon while Lisa's fingers twitched, ready to cast a spell if needed.

"I...I don't know what you're talking about," Zara finally managed, but her voice lacked conviction.

Brody stepped closer. “I think you do,” he replied quietly. “And I think it’s time you come clean about what’s really going on here.”

The whispers of the grove seemed to grow louder around us as if feeding off the mounting tension. We were standing on the edge of a knife, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that whatever Zara said next would tip us one way or the other.

### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Panic flared in Zara's eyes, her gaze darting from face to face like a cornered animal. Her earlier confidence had evaporated, leaving behind a trembling facade.

"I'm...I'm part of this team," she insisted, her voice quivering. "The mirror chose me. It did!"

A breeze brushed over us, and I swore there was a whisper.

She's not part of the team. Give her to us.

Brody's eyes narrowed, his jaw set in a hard line as he stepped closer to Zara. "Did it? Or did you use some kind of spell that made the mirror choose you?"

Justice, still weak but alert, placed a steadying hand on Brody's shoulder. "Easy, man," he murmured, though his gaze remained fixed on Zara with disappointment and wariness.

Damon, ever ready with a quip, chimed in. "Well, isn't this a regular old episode of Witch Hunters: Grove Edition ? Gotta say, sweetheart, if you're playing us, you picked one hell of a creepy place for the big reveal."

Lisa remained silent, but her fingers twitched.

Zara's lips trembled as she struggled to form words. "I... I can explain," she began, but her voice trailed off, lost in the whispering winds of the Grove.

As I watched this drama unfold, I couldn't help but wonder. If Zara had indeed manipulated her way onto our team, what other secrets was she hiding? More importantly, how would her deception affect our mission in this treacherous Grove of Whispers?

Lisa scowled, her eyes flashing with indignation. She stepped forward, positioning herself slightly between Brody and Zara. "Why do you think Zara did anything, Brody?" she asked sharply. "Do you have a thing against witches?"

The air crackled with tension as Lisa's fingers twitched again. Her loyalty to her fellow witch was evident, but so was the conflict in her eyes. She wanted to believe Zara, but doubt had begun to creep in.

Brody's posture stiffened at Lisa's implication. "No," he replied, his voice low and controlled with an edge of steel. "I have a thing against anyone who sabotages this team." His gaze swept over us before settling back on Zara. "We're walking into unknown dangers here. If there's even a chance one of us isn't fully committed to this mission, to this team, we need to know. Now."

The Grove seemed to respond, the whispers growing louder, more insistent. Shadows danced at the corners of our vision as if feeding off our conflict.

I glanced at Zara, who stood frozen. Her gaze darted between Lisa and Brody, then to everyone else, as if searching for an ally, an escape.

The schism in our group grew more apparent by the second. Lisa standing firm in defense of her fellow witch. Brody unwavering in his suspicion. And the rest of us caught in between, unsure who to believe.

As the standoff continued, I wondered if this divide was exactly what the Grove wanted. Were we playing into the hands of whatever malevolent force resided here by



turning against each other?

I stepped between the men and the witches, my heart pounding. The whispers seemed to grow almost gleeful at our discord. “We need to stay a team,” I insisted, trying to keep my voice steady. “This forest wants to pull us apart. Can’t you feel it?”

Brody nodded, his posture relaxing slightly. “Agreed.” I noticed he didn’t apologize. His eyes remained fixed on Zara, suspicion still evident in his gaze. It was still a standoff, reminding me of movies where vampires and werewolves threw down, ready to rip each other apart at a moment’s notice.

Zara held her head up, but her lower lip trembled with the fear she was trying to hide. Lisa stood beside her, gripping her hand tightly in solidarity.

Justice swayed slightly beside me, a stark reminder of his weakened state and the urgency of our mission. Damon’s hand rested on his weapon, his usual smirk replaced by a wary frown.

I quickly pulled the compass from my backpack, the metal cool against my sweaty palms. “Come on,” I pleaded. “We need to find the Heartstone amulet, then figure out what the next task is. We have to do this together, remember?”

The compass needle spun wildly before settling on a direction deeper into the misty grove. I looked at my companions. “Whatever happened, whatever secrets we’re keeping, we can deal with them later. Right now, we need each other to survive this place. Agreed?”

A tense moment passed as everyone exchanged glances. The whispers seemed to hold their breath, waiting for our decision.

“Is that...is that a statue?” Lisa broke the silence. Her lips trembled as she pointed

with a shaking finger.

I followed her gaze, my heart rate quickening. There, in the shadows, stood a statue of a woman. Her hands were raised, frozen in time as if desperately trying to protect her face. The stone figure wore a cloak that seemed to ripple despite its solid form. Beneath it, I made out the familiar shapes of jeans and a sweatshirt. My mouth went dry as I took in the eerily lifelike details.

“Sawyer,” Damon called over his shoulder, not taking his eyes off the stone figure. “Looks like we’ve got ourselves a real-life game of supernatural freeze tag. Any lore on statues wearing Levis?”

A choked sob beside me made me turn. Tears streamed down Zara’s face, her eyes wide with recognition and horror. Her body shook as she stumbled forward, one hand outstretched toward the statue.

“Yes,” Zara managed to croak. She swallowed hard, struggling to speak through her tears. “That’s my sister, Mary Beth. She’s been here for over eight years. I was twenty when she was cursed.”

A chill settled over us as the implications sank in, leaving us rooted to the spot, staring at the stone figure that was once a living, breathing person. The air felt thick, almost oppressive as if the statue’s presence had altered the atmosphere around us.

Brody’s jaw clenched, his eyes narrowing as he turned to Zara. “Why was she here?” Suspicion hung from every word.

Zara’s hand trembled as she wiped the tears from her cheek, leaving a smear of dirt behind. Her breath hitched as she struggled to compose herself. “She was one of our most powerful witches,” she admitted. “The head of our coven sent her to retrieve the Heartstone amulet. We thought we could use it to find the Crown of Envy.”

Brody's posture stiffened, his hands curling into fists at his sides. "The black sedan?" he asked, each word deliberate and sharp. "They were witches from your coven?"

She sniffed, her shoulders hunching as if trying to make herself smaller. "Yes," Zara replied, her voice cracking.

Brody's nostrils flared as he inhaled deeply, clearly trying to control his rising anger. "So, you planned to steal it?"

Zara's eyes widened, a fresh wave of tears spilling down her cheeks. She shook her head vigorously. "No, we thought..." She paused, swallowing hard. "We thought the Heartstone would heal her." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "The people in the sedan were my other two sisters."

Suddenly, whispers echoed through the woods. It was as if invisible people surrounded us, their voices merging into a haunting chorus. The air grew thick and heavy, making it difficult to breathe.

The Heartstone is here, behind the statue.

The words slithered into our ears, tempting and insistent.

Damon's eyes glazed over, his body tensing as if pulled by an unseen force. He stepped toward the statue with jerky, unnatural movements.

My heart raced, pounding against my ribcage. Without thinking, I lunged and dug my fingers into Damon's sleeve. "No, Damon, stay on the path!" I hissed. My other hand clutched the compass, its solidness reassuring in my palm. "The compass isn't pointing in that direction. It's a trick."

Damon's muscles strained against my grip, his body still drawn toward the statue.

Sweat beaded on my forehead as I struggled to hold him back, my feet sliding slightly on the uneven ground.

The whispers grew louder, more insistent, pressing against us like a physical force. I gritted my teeth, fighting the urge to cover my ears, knowing I couldn't let go of Damon.

### CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Brody's hand shot out, gripping Damon's other arm with bruising force. "Snap out of it," he growled. He shook Damon hard, the motion jarring enough to make my brother's teeth clatter. "You're under a spell, man!"

Damon's eyes were glassy, unfocused, staring blankly at the statue. His body swayed as if he was caught in an invisible current. His lips moved silently, mimicking the whispers around us.

"Damon!" I shouted. "Fight it!"

For a heart-stopping moment, nothing happened. Then, like a rubber band snapping back into place, Damon blinked. His eyes cleared, focus returning as he shook his head vigorously as if trying to dislodge water from his ears.

"Whoa," he muttered roughly. He looked around, confusion etched on his face. Then, a lopsided grin spread across his features. "Well, that's one way to clear the cobwebs. Next time, maybe offer me a strong cup of coffee instead of the magical mind-whammy, huh?"

He rolled his shoulders, wincing slightly where Brody and I had gripped him. "Seriously, though, thanks for the save. I feel like I went ten rounds with a psychic octopus." Damon's gaze darted back to the statue, now wary and alert. "So, any bright ideas on how we avoid becoming garden ornaments while we look for this Heartstone?"

The tension eased slightly with Damon's quip, but the whispers still lingered at the edges of our consciousness, a constant reminder of the danger surrounding us.

"You have to be careful," Zara's voice trembled. She hugged herself tightly as if trying to hold herself together. "What happened to you, Damon, is what happened to my sister. She veered off the path, and...something attacked her."

Brody's head snapped up. His hand instinctively moved to the weapon at his side. "What?" he demanded.

Zara shrugged helplessly. "I don't know," she admitted. "When she was attacked, no one could see the creature. It had to be very powerful to overcome my sister's magic, though." Her eyes glistened with unshed tears as she gazed at the stone figure. "She was one of our strongest..."

A surge of frustration and fear washed over me. My hands clenched into fists as I struggled to keep my voice level. "Zara, you can't hide secrets like that from us," I chided, then drew a deep breath, trying to calm myself. "Damon could have gotten seriously hurt. We all could have."

Guilt flashed across Zara's face. She bit her lip, refusing to meet our eyes. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "I didn't want anyone else to get hurt, but I was afraid if you knew my true intentions, you wouldn't let me come." She looked up, her eyes pleading. "I need to save my sister. I need to make this right."

Damon, still looking shaken, ran a hand through his hair. "Great," he muttered. "So we're not only dealing with magic statues but invisible monsters, too? This keeps getting better and better."

Brody's jaw clenched as he surveyed our surroundings with renewed vigilance. "We need to be on high alert," he stated. "No one strays from the path, no matter what you

hear or see. Understood?”

We all nodded, the gravity of our situation sinking in. The whispers that had tempted Damon earlier seemed to grow louder as if sensing our newfound knowledge and fear. The statue of Zara’s sister loomed over us.

As we prepared to move on, I couldn’t shake the feeling we were being watched by something we couldn’t see. The forest suddenly seemed alive with hidden threats, and I wondered what other secrets Zara might be keeping—and whether those secrets might get us all killed.

The compass tugged us forward, its needle unwavering as it led us deeper into the forest. With each step, the air grew thicker, heavier, as if the atmosphere was trying to push us back. It felt like descending into the maw of some ancient, slumbering beast.

The whispers grew louder.

The amulet is here, under the tree.

Help me. I’m trapped.

This time, none of us fell for their soft voices.

The trees loomed over us, their gnarled branches reaching out like grasping fingers. I swore I saw them move slightly, closing in around us like a silent, patient army. What had started as a sunny day now felt like twilight, the thick canopy above us jealously hoarding any trace of sunlight. Shadows danced at the corners of my vision, always retreating when I tried to focus on them.

As we ventured farther, the gloom deepened, transforming the forest into murky

grays and inky blacks. The path beneath our feet narrowed, forcing us to walk in single file. The crunch of leaves and twigs under our boots seemed unnaturally loud in the oppressive silence.

“Guys,” Damon whispered. “Look over there.”

I followed his gaze, and my breath caught in my throat. Slightly off the path, partially obscured by a curtain of moss, stood another statue. This one was of a man, his face frozen in a scream of terror, arms outstretched as if trying to ward off an unseen attacker.

“There’s more,” Brody muttered, gesturing to our right.

He was right. Now that we knew what to look for, I saw them scattered throughout the forest. Some were barely visible, half-hidden behind trees or sunken into the ground. Others stood in small clearings like macabre garden ornaments. Men, women, even a few that looked disturbingly like children, all turned to stone in moments of fear or desperation.

Zara released a choked sob. “So many,” she whispered. “How long has this been happening?”

The statues seemed to watch us as we passed, their sightless eyes following our every move. Their gazes bore into us, a silent reminder of the fate that awaited us if we strayed from the path.

The compass continued to pull us forward, deeper into this gallery of stone victims. Around us, the forest seemed to pulse with malevolent energy. Whispers danced on the edge of hearing, tempting us to step off the path to join the statues’ silent vigil.

As we pressed on, I couldn’t help but wonder how many more victims were hidden in



the shadows of this cursed forest. Had they all been looking for the Heartstone amulet, and why? More chillingly, what force was powerful enough to create this army of stone?

The path suddenly veered, leading us toward the gaping maw of a pitch-black cave. My heart sank as memories of the Shadow Mine back in Colorado flooded my mind. The last thing I wanted was to step into another dark, potentially demon-infested hole in the ground. My palms grew sweaty as I imagined the horrors that could be lying in wait. Demons ready to ambush us, or worse, whatever ungodly creature had the power to turn living, breathing people into lifeless statues.

Damon groaned dramatically and threw his head back. “Oh, come on! Why do these things always lead to some dark, creepy cave?” He gestured at the cave entrance. “For once, I’d love to enter a cave that’s more Fraggles Rock and less Dracula’s summer home.”

He squinted into the darkness, then turned to us with a sardonic grin. “Ten bucks says there’s a welcoming committee of nasties in there. Any takers?” When no one responded, he shrugged. “No? Just me, then. Great.”

Damon pulled out his flashlight and rapidly flicked it on and off as if testing it. “Well, gang, looks like we’re headed into the belly of the beast. Again. Anyone bring snacks? No? Damn. I was hoping for some Scooby Snacks to fortify us against the forces of evil.”

I couldn’t help but smile at Damon. His humor was a welcome relief from the oppressive atmosphere.

Brody rolled his eyes but couldn’t completely hide his amusement. “If you’re done with the standup routine, we should get moving. Whatever’s in there isn’t going to wait for us to work up the courage.”

“Right you are, Captain Serious,” Damon replied with a mock salute. “Into the dark and spooky we go. And hey, if we run into any vampire bats, dibs on not being the first blood bag, okay?”

As we steeled ourselves to enter the cave, Damon’s voice dropped lower. “Seriously, though, everyone stay sharp in there. I’ve got a feeling this cave makes our statue garden look like Disneyland.”

After a collective deep breath, we stepped into the yawning darkness, the compass pulling us forward into the unknown. The beam of our flashlights seemed pitifully small against the overwhelming blackness, and I felt we were being watched by unseen eyes, waiting for us to make one fatal misstep.

### CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The beam of Damon's flashlight cut through the inky darkness like a knife, dancing across the jagged walls of the cave. Brody's light soon joined it, the beams crisscrossing in an erratic pattern as we cautiously made our way deeper into the cavern.

But something was...off.

I blinked hard, convinced my eyes were playing tricks on me. Wherever the light touched, I swear I saw shadows moving, always a fraction of a second ahead of the illumination. It was as if the darkness itself was alive, retreating from the light with an unnatural intelligence.

"Do you guys see that?" I whispered over the sound of water dripping somewhere in the distance.

Damon swung his flashlight in a wide arc, the beam catching on glittering mineral deposits before plunging back into darkness. "See what? The overwhelming amount of nothing, or the creepy rock formations that look like they want to eat us?"

Still, I saw his hand tighten on the flashlight, his knuckles white with tension. He'd noticed it, too.

Brody's light joined Damon's and focused on a particularly dark corner. For a split second, I could have sworn I saw something. A mass of writhing shadows, perhaps. Then, it vanished, leaving behind nothing but bare rock.

“It’s like the shadows are playing hide and seek,” Brody muttered, his voice gruff with unease. “Always one step ahead.”

The air in the cave felt thick, almost syrupy, making each breath a conscious effort. The temperature seemed to drop with every step we took.

Zara huddled closer to me. “In all my years of magic, I’ve never felt anything like this,” she whispered. “It’s as if the darkness is...hungry.”

A skittering sound echoed deep in the cave, making us all freeze. Damon and Brody’s lights swept the area frantically, but again, the shadows seemed to retreat ahead of the beams, always remaining tantalizingly out of sight.

“Well, I guess we know where all the evil shadow puppets hang out on their days off. Any chance we could, I don’t know, find a cave with a better Yelp review next time?” Damon’s voice lacked its usual bravado.

Despite his attempt at humor, the tension was like a suffocating wool blanket, stealing our breath, scratching our skin. We pressed on, huddling closer together, our eyes straining against the darkness. The compass continued to pull us forward, deeper into the heart of the cave. The shadows grew thicker, more substantial with each step.

I sensed we weren’t merely walking through darkness. We were being allowed to pass, observed and evaluated by something beyond our comprehension. And I feared the moment it decided we had gone far enough.

Our only consolation was that the compass glowed in the dark, its ethereal blue light casting an eerie glow on our faces. I clutched it tightly, my knuckles white, feeling the cool metal bite into my palm. The soft pulsing of its light seemed to match the frantic beating of my heart.

Unfortunately, the compass' unwavering needle kept leading us deeper. Each step felt like a battle against my instincts, every fiber of my being screaming to turn back.

Damon's breath emerged in visible puffs as he muttered, "Great. We're following a glow-in-the-dark Happy Meal toy into the bowels of hell. What could possibly go wrong?"

Brody shushed him sharply, his body tense as a coiled spring. He held his flashlight like a weapon, ready to strike. "Keep it down," he hissed. "We don't know what's down here."

The tunnel narrowed, forcing us to walk single-file. Zara's trembling hand clutched my shoulder, her fingers digging in almost painfully. The walls seemed to press in on us, the rough stone scraping against our arms as we shuffled forward.

A low rumble echoed through the cavern, and loose pebbles skittered across the ground. We all froze, barely daring to breathe. My mouth went dry, and I could taste the metallic tang of fear on my tongue.

"Please tell me that was someone's stomach," Damon whispered.

The compass tugged insistently, urging us onward. I swallowed hard, trying to dislodge the lump in my throat. "We need to keep moving," I managed to croak out.

As we pressed on, each breath felt like drawing in molasses, and a fine sheen of cold sweat broke out across my brow. The darkness seemed to press against our skin, an almost tangible presence.

The compass' glow pulsed stronger, its blue light intensifying with each throb. Writhing shadows danced on the cave walls, twisting into grotesque shapes that seemed to reach for us. My heart hammered as I tried to convince myself they were

tricks of the light. But deep down, a primal part of me knew better.

“Whatever’s waiting for us, it’s close,” Brody murmured. “Be ready for anything.”

I couldn’t hold the compass and use my bow, so I reluctantly holstered it and took out my blade. The others withdrew their swords with a series of metallic whispers that echoed ominously.

Suddenly, the compass jerked violently in my hand, nearly wrenching my wrist. Its glow flared blindingly bright, illuminating a sight that made my blood run cold.

“There!” Zara gasped.

Off the path, partially obscured by a jutting rock formation, stood another statue. But this one was different. Around its neck hung a heart-shaped green pendant that pulsed with an inner light matching the compass.

“The Heartstone. It has to be,” I whispered.

Damon took an involuntary step toward it, then caught himself. “Oh, no. Not falling for that again,” he muttered, shaking his head as if to clear it.

Brody’s grip on his sword tightened, his knuckles white. “It’s off the path,” he warned, his gaze darting between the statue and the writhing shadows that seemed to be closing around us.

“We can’t leave it,” Zara pleaded, her eyes wide with desperation. “My sister...”

The raw anguish in her voice tugged at my heart. But it wasn’t only Zara’s sister who needed the stone. Justice flashed into my mind, his brave face masking the pain and weakness consuming him. Maybe the Heartstone could make him stronger, give him

a fighting chance against whatever was slowly killing him.

The ironclad responsibility pressed down on me, as heavy as the oppressive air around us. Two lives, possibly more, hanging in the balance. The decision to risk everything for the Heartstone suddenly felt both impossibly difficult and absolutely necessary.

“Justice needs it, too,” I whispered. The others turned to look at me in surprise and understanding. “The Heartstone. It might be able to help him, make him stronger.”

Their expectant gazes were fixed on me, waiting for a decision. The compass pulled insistently toward the statue, its glow matching the pulse of the amulet. Every instinct screamed danger, but we had come too far to turn back now.

I tightened my grip on my blade. “We go together,” I decided, my voice steadier than I felt. “Watch each other’s backs. And no matter what happens, no one touches that statue except me.”

As we stepped off the path, the shadows seemed to retreat, slinking back into the darker recesses of the cave. The absence of their writhing presence was almost more unnerving than their visibility. My skin prickled with goosebumps, every nerve ending on high alert.

I couldn’t shake the feeling we were walking into a trap. My mind raced through the possibilities, each more terrifying than the last. Maci and her demons could be lurking in the darkness, waiting to spring an ambush. The thought of her cruel smile made me shiver.

Or more likely, I realized with a sinking feeling, we were about to come face-to-face with the creature that had turned all those people to stone, including Zara’s sister. Some kind of Medusa, perhaps? The mythological implications made my head spin.

Whatever it was, it had to be incredibly powerful to overcome Zara's coven.

As we inched closer to the statue and its precious cargo, the Heartstone's green glow intensified, casting long, distorted shadows behind us. The silence was oppressive, broken only by our shallow breathing and the occasional drip of water echoing from deep within the cave.

Damon's voice broke the tension. "Anyone else feel like we're starring in our own horror movie? Because I gotta say, I don't like our odds of being the final survivors."

Brody shot him a warning glance, but fear lurked behind his stern expression. We were all thinking the same thing. We were voluntarily walking into the lair of a monster, armed with little more than hope and desperation.

With each step, the feeling of being watched intensified. Whatever was waiting for us, whatever had lured us this far, was about to reveal itself.

Whispers vibrated off the cave walls, growing louder.

Come and take the stone. Soon, you'll be ours.

As I reached toward the Heartstone, fingers trembling, I couldn't help but wonder. Had we made the biggest mistake of our lives?



### CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The moment my fingers brushed the cool surface of the Heartstone, the cave erupted into chaos. The whispers suddenly crescendoed into a deafening roar, making us instinctively cover our ears.

The retreating shadows surged forward, coalescing into a nightmarish form. From the darkness emerged a creature that defied description, a horror that seemed composed of living shadow and stolen stone.

Its body was massive, easily twice the height of a man, with a torso that looked like roughly hewn granite. But this stone wasn't static. It shifted and flowed like liquid, revealing glimpses of faces trapped within, their expressions frozen in terror. I recognized some of them from the statues we'd seen earlier.

Where a head should have been was instead a writhing mass of shadow tentacles, each tipped with a glowing green eye that matched the Heartstone's color. The eyes swiveled independently, fixing on us with an alien intelligence.

The creature's arms were long and spindly, ending in hands with too many fingers, each digit tipped with a crystalline claw that glinted wickedly in the green light. Its lower body seemed to merge with the shadows on the cave floor, giving the impression it was rising out of the darkness.

As it fully materialized, an otherworldly energy that made my skin crawl charged the air. The creature's presence seemed to distort reality, the cave walls warping and bending in impossible ways.

A voice, not heard but felt, resonated within our minds. “You dare to trespass in my domain? To steal what is mine? Foolish mortals. You shall join my collection.”

Damon managed to rasp, “I take it back. This isn’t a horror movie. This is way, way worse.”

As the creature loomed over us, its countless eyes gleaming with malevolent intent, I realized we were hopelessly outmatched. The Heartstone pulsed in my grasp, its glow intensifying as if responding to its master’s presence.

We had definitely made a mistake, and now we were about to pay the price. My heart pounded so hard I could feel it in my throat, each beat a reminder of our perilous situation.

Suddenly, the words of the mirror flashed through my mind, cutting through the fog of fear. We had to do this together. This wasn’t an individual quest but a team one. I didn’t know if this would work, but I summoned every ounce of courage I had left. Swallowing hard, I held my head high, meeting the creature’s numerous eyes. “We’re the Chosen,” I declared, my voice stronger than I felt. “You can’t defeat us.”

The creature’s laughter echoed through the cave, a sound like grinding stones that set my teeth on edge. It reached for Lisa with a grotesque, many-fingered hand.

“Join hands!” I shouted, desperation lending volume to my voice.

My team stood motionless, their eyes glazed as if falling into a trance. Panic surged through me. Moving quickly, I snatched Justice’s hand with my left and my brother’s with my right, sandwiching the amulet between my palm and Justice’s. The contact seemed to jolt them awake. Their eyes cleared as they blinked rapidly.

“Grab Lisa’s hand!” I yelled at Damon, my voice cracking with urgency.

Damon lunged and snatched Lisa's wrist, yanking her away from the creature's grasp with such force that I heard her shoulder pop. He clasped her hand tightly, and awareness flooded back into her eyes.

Justice caught on and grabbed Brody's hand. Brody's body jerked as he came awake and seized Zara's hand in a white-knuckled grip.

The moment the circle was complete, power surged through us like an electric current. I gasped at the sensation, feeling like every nerve ending in my body was on fire. A bright white glow emanated from our joined hands, growing in intensity until it illuminated the cave.

The creature screeched, a sound so piercing it felt like needles in my eardrums. It retreated from the light, its body seeming to melt into the shadows. The whispering voices rose to a crescendo of screams before abruptly falling silent, leaving my ears ringing.

We stood there, panting and shaking, our hands locked together as if our lives depended on it. Which, I realized, they probably did. Slowly, carefully, we moved as one unit, shuffling awkwardly but determinedly toward the path.

With each step, I felt the oppressive atmosphere of the cave lessening. The air became easier to breathe, the darkness less menacing. Finally, after what felt like hours but was probably only minutes, we reached the safety of the path.

As we stepped onto it, the white glow faded, leaving us in the dim light of our flashlights once more. We released each other's hands, flexing our stiff fingers. The realization of what we'd survived hit us, and I saw relief, disbelief, and lingering fear on everyone's faces.

Predictably, Damon broke the silence. "Well," he announced. "I guess we really are

the Chosen. Either that or we crashed one hell of a shadow puppet party.”

Despite everything, I laughed, the sound tinged with hysteria and genuine relief. We had faced the impossible and survived. More importantly, we had done it together.

Justice and I maintained our grip, the Heartstone amulet pulsing warmly between our palms.

“Let’s get the hell out of this cave,” he mumbled, his voice raspy but noticeably stronger. The change in his tone sent a ripple of hope through me.

I wanted to see his face, to confirm if the Heartstone had worked. My heart raced with anticipation, and I held my breath, afraid to hope too much.

As if reading my mind, Damon swung his flashlight around, the beam cutting through the gloom. For a brief moment, the light flickered across Justice’s face. I blinked hard, not trusting my eyes. The grayness seemed to have diminished, his skin taking on a healthier hue.

I tightened my grip on his hand. Suddenly, a surge of energy coursed through me, making my skin tingle and my blood pump faster. It felt like liquid lightning in my veins, exhilarating and slightly terrifying.

Brody took point, his shoulders set with determination as he led us toward the cave’s exit. “Stay alert,” he warned. “We’re not out of danger yet.”

Damon brought up the rear, his usual quips absent as he scanned our surroundings. The beam of his flashlight danced nervously across the cave walls, creating shifting shadows that made me flinch.

The soft echo of our footsteps was the only sound. Then, my heart leaped into my

throat as I caught the whisper of footsteps that weren't ours following us from the darkness.

"Guys," I murmured, my voice trembling slightly. "I think we're being followed."

The whispering voices started again.

Don't leave.

Come back.

There's more treasure.

This time, desperation tinged their tone.

As they spoke, the tension in the group revved up. The others' breathing quickened, and their bodies tensed as they became aware of the unseen presence stalking us.

Justice squeezed my hand reassuringly, and a pulse of warmth from the Heartstone moved through my palm. Whatever was following us, whatever challenges lay ahead, at least we were facing them together. And perhaps we were now better equipped to handle them.

The minute we stepped out of the cave, I inhaled a deep breath of fresh air. I could practically feel the oppression leave me like a cast-off blanket.

Brody stepped forward, his posture straight and his voice steady despite the ordeal we'd been through. He scanned us with pride and concern.

"Good work, team," he praised. "What we faced in there...that was unlike anything we've encountered before. But we stood together, and that made all the difference."

He paused, placing a hand on Damon's shoulder. "And Damon, while I appreciate your ability to find humor in any situation, let's not lose sight of the gravity of what we've accomplished here."

Brody's gaze focused on me with respect and admiration. "Your quick thinking saved us all. You remembered the mirror's words when the rest of us were falling under that creature's influence. That's what being a leader is all about. Keeping a clear head in the face of danger and bringing out the best in your team."

He then addressed the group with a rallying tone. "What we did in there, linking hands, standing united? That's our strength. We're not merely individuals with special abilities. We're a team. And as a team, we can face whatever challenges lie ahead."

His gaze hardened slightly. "But let's not forget, we've only won a battle, not the war. That creature, whatever it was, is still out there. So is Maci. We need to stay vigilant, stay united, and keep pushing forward. The fate of many depends on us."

He looked at us, his expression softening slightly. "I'm proud of every one of you. Now, let's catch our breath, gather our wits, and figure out our next move. Together."

Brody gave a decisive nod as if affirming his words. His presence brought a sense of calm and purpose to our group, helping ground us after the chaos we'd experienced.

But this was only the first task. We had two more to go, the last being the most dangerous.

### CHAPTER NINETEEN

Dusk fell over us, the fading light casting long shadows across the forest floor. A chill ran down my spine as I realized we'd be engulfed in darkness soon. The thought of being here at night made my stomach churn.

I glanced at my watch, frowning in confusion. It didn't seem like we'd been in the cave that long, but the setting sun told a different story. A disorienting feeling washed over me as if we'd crossed into another dimension where time flowed differently. The air around us felt charged, heightening my already frayed nerves.

I turned to Justice and pressed my hand against his chest, feeling the steady thump of his heartbeat beneath my palm. It seemed stronger, more vital than before. Hope fluttered in my chest like a caged bird.

"How do you feel?" I whispered, afraid to break the fragile moment.

"Stronger," Justice murmured, his arms encircling me and pulling me close. The familiar warmth of his body was comforting in the growing chill of the evening. I searched his face, relieved to note that the haunted look in his eyes had diminished, replaced by a spark of life I hadn't seen in too long.

Before I could respond, Justice's lips met mine in a tender kiss. I melted into it, indulging in the sweetness, my senses overwhelmed by his touch, his scent, the taste of his lips. For a brief, blissful moment, the dangers around us faded away.

The sound of hurried footsteps abruptly interrupted us. Zara rushed toward us, her

eyes wide with hope and desperation. Her sudden appearance made me jump. My heart raced as I snapped back to our precarious reality.

“Please,” Zara pleaded, her voice cracking with emotion. She reached out with trembling hands. “Give me the amulet so I can save my sister.”

The urgency in her voice tugged at my conscience. I felt the weight of the Heartstone in my hand, warm and pulsing with energy. A wave of conflicting emotions washed over me. Sympathy for Zara’s plight, reluctance to part with the amulet that seemed to be helping Justice, and a nagging fear about what might happen if we used its power again so soon.

As the last rays of sunlight disappeared behind the trees, casting us into twilight, I knew a decision had to be made quickly. The forest came alive with shadows and unseen threats, reminding us of the dangers we still faced.

“Okay, folks, time to blow this popsicle stand.” Damon’s gaze darted around nervously. “I don’t know about you, but I’ve had my fill of Lovecraft’s eyeball monster for one day. Let’s hit the road before old thousand-eyes decides it’s time for round two.”

Brody straightened, scanning the darkening forest. “I concur with Damon’s assessment. We need to move out, and quickly.” He gestured back at the cave, his expression grave. “That creature we faced is unlike anything we’ve encountered before. My instincts tell me it draws strength from the darkness, and we can’t afford to give it that advantage.”

He clapped his hands, the sharp sound echoing in the tense silence. “C’mon, chop-chop! I’d rather not stick around to see if it’s got any uglier cousins lurking in the dark. And trust me, with our luck? It’s got a whole family reunion planned.”



“No, please,” Zara begged. Tears streamed down her cheeks, leaving glistening trails in the fading light. She gestured frantically toward Justice, her hands shaking. “The amulet has made Justice stronger. It can break my sister’s spell.”

I glanced at the other statues, their frozen faces etched with terror, and a chill ran down my spine. “Lisa, do you think it can bring the statues back to life?” I asked.

Lisa stepped closer, her gaze fixed on the green glow emanating from the Heartstone. “Perhaps,” she mused, brow furrowed in concentration. “I’m not sure, though. That creature possessed powerful dark magic.”

Zara stood at the edge of the path, her body rigid with tension as she stared at her petrified sister. I glanced between Damon and Justice, my heart clenching painfully. If I was in her shoes, I knew I’d do anything to save them.

Damon’s eyes met mine in a sharp warning. “You’re not?—”

“We have to try,” I interrupted, squaring my shoulders despite the fear churning in my stomach. “If the amulet works on her, maybe it will work on the other poor souls trapped here.”

“How do you propose to do that?” Justice’s soft voice held a note of doubt that made my heart sink.

But I was determined, clenching my fists to stop my hands from trembling. “We go together. It’s the only way.”

Brody’s body tensed. “If we’re going to do this, we need to do it now,” he warned. “I can see something moving in that cave.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up at his words. I swallowed hard, trying to

moisten my suddenly dry mouth. “Hold hands,” I commanded, surprised by the steadiness in my voice.

Damon exhaled sharply in frustration, but he seized my hand, his grip almost painfully tight. “This might not work a second time,” he muttered.

My gut clenched. If he was right, one of us might end up like Zara’s sister. The thought made my knees weak, but I forced myself to stand tall.

I nodded solemnly, meeting everyone’s eyes in turn. The weight of my decision pressed down on me like a Mack truck. As we formed our circle, the Heartstone pulsing between our joined hands, I sent up a silent prayer that I wasn’t making a terrible mistake. I would never forgive myself if one of my teammates were turned into stone.

I maneuvered us toward Zara’s sister, my heart pounding. Suddenly, the whispering voices started again, slithering into our ears like icy tendrils.

You’ll never leave.

Run, before we catch you.

A shudder ran through our linked hands, the fear palpable among us.

“Stay where you are,” Brody barked. Sweat beaded on his forehead as he scanned the darkness. “They’re trying to get us to let go of each other so they can turn us to stone.”

Then, a bone-chilling screech echoed from the mouth of the cave. The dark creature burst from the darkness, its numerous eyes glowing with malevolent intent as it barreled directly toward us. My stomach lurched at the sight, and bile rose in my

throat.

“You will not set free one of my prisoners,” it hissed, the words reverberating in our minds rather than our ears.

Despite the terror gripping us, excitement flared in Zara’s eyes. Her grip on my hand tightened painfully. “That means the Heartstone will work,” she gasped. “My sister will soon be free.”

I silently prayed she was right as I released Justice’s hand, still holding Damon’s so we all stayed connected, and pressed the Heartstone against her sister’s statue. The stone’s warmth intensified, almost burning my palm. We all held our breath as the statue changed, its gray surface bleaching to a brilliant white.

But it didn’t move.

Zara tossed her head back and wailed. “No!”

The creature’s laughter boomed around us, a sound like grinding stones that set my teeth on edge. “The stone can’t free her,” it mocked, its words dripping with cruel amusement. “You’ll have to do better than that...Chosen ones. Which one of you wants to join my little garden?”

“We can’t leave my sister,” Zara pleaded through angry sobs.

Brody was on her other side. “We’ll find a way to save her, but if you break the circle, we’re all dead. This is your moment to prove you’re one of us.”

Zara blinked her tears back and drew a sobering breath. She nodded reluctantly but didn’t answer him.

My heart sank, a cold dread settling in my stomach. I met my companions' frightened gazes. The creature loomed over us, its many eyes gleaming with anticipation, and I realized with horror that we might have walked into a trap we couldn't escape.

A surge of determination coursed through me. This was my idea, and I'd be damned if I let my team die because of it. My heart raced as I gripped the Heartstone.

With a swift motion that surprised even me, I aimed the stone at the creature. The air crackled as the Heartstone's energy focused on our monstrous foe.

Suddenly, green light erupted from the stone, flickering and dancing across the creature's numerous eyes. The forest lit up in an eerie emerald glow, casting writhing shadows on the trees.

The creature recoiled, its body contorting in ways that made my stomach churn. It released a bone-chilling hiss that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I gritted my teeth, fighting the urge to cover my ears.

As I watched the creature's reaction, confusion mingled with my fear. Why was the stone affecting it? It had guarded the Heartstone, after all. The incongruity made my head spin, adding to the surreal nature of our predicament.

A nagging feeling tugged at the edges of my mind. My brow furrowed as I tried to make sense of what I was seeing. Something had to be at work here, something we didn't understand.

I glanced at my teammates, seeing my confusion mirrored in their wide eyes and tense postures. We were out of our depth here, facing forces beyond our comprehension.

As the green light continued to pulse from the Heartstone, bathing us in its

otherworldly glow, I suspected we'd stumbled upon a mystery far deeper and more dangerous than we'd ever imagined. My fingers tightened around the stone. Whatever was happening, whatever secrets this cave and its monstrous guardian held, I knew our lives depended on unraveling them—and fast.

We exchanged meaningful glances, our eyes wide with fear and determination. Brody gave a curt nod, tilting his head toward the path. Understanding flashed between us like an electric current.

As the creature veered off, momentarily disoriented by the stone's power, we seized our chance. Our feet pounded the forest floor, hearts racing in sync as we made a desperate dash for the path. The sound of our ragged breathing mixed with the creature's distant, angry hisses.

The moment we reached the relative safety of the path, a wave of exhaustion crashed over me. It felt like all my energy had been suddenly, violently drained away. My lungs burned with each shallow breath, and my legs trembled beneath me like jelly. The world around me spun, the edges blurring.

Justice's strong hand gripped my arm, his touch steadying and grounding. "What's wrong?" he asked. I heard the rapid beating of his heart, so close to mine.

I tried to focus on his face, but my vision swam. Beads of sweat trickled down my temples. "I don't know," I managed to gasp, each word an effort. "Maybe the stone." The Heartstone felt impossibly heavy now, its earlier warmth replaced by an icy chill that seeped into my bones.

Without hesitation, Justice scooped me into his arms. The sudden movement made my head spin even more, and I instinctively curled into his chest, seeking comfort in his familiar scent and warmth.

“Hold on,” he murmured, his breath tickling my ear. Then, with a burst of vampire speed that made the air rush past us in a dizzying blur, he sprinted toward the car. The forest became a smear of dark greens and browns, punctuated by flashes of moonlight breaking through the canopy.

As we raced away from the cave and its horrors, I clung to Justice, my fingers weakly gripping his shirt. The steady rhythm of his footfalls and the strong beat of his heart against my cheek were reassuring, anchoring me as I teetered on the edge of consciousness.

Damon sprinted to keep up with Justice’s supernatural speed. Despite his usual sarcastic demeanor, concern laced his voice.

“Hey, Twilight! Mind slowing down for those of us without super-speed?” he called, his breath coming in short gasps. “I know you’re trying to play hero, but that’s my sister you’re whisking away!”

He pushed himself harder. “Look, Fang Face, I appreciate the assist, but some of us would like to keep an eye on our family members. Especially when said family just went all magical glow stick on a multi-eyed freak show!”

Damon’s hand moved to his weapon. “And in case you forgot, we’ve still got man-eating trees and evil Medusa wannabes to worry about. So maybe cool it with the vampire track and field, huh?”

As he finally caught up, Damon’s eyes met mine. “You okay there, sis? Because I gotta say, being carried off into the sunset by a vampire wasn’t exactly in the family vacation brochure.”

“I don’t know what’s wrong.” My voice was barely audible.

I attempted to smile back at my brother, but the effort sent a wave of dizziness crashing over me. Damon's face swam, blurring and distorting like a photo viewed through water-warped glass. My head felt heavy, and a high-pitched ringing started in my ears, drowning out all other sounds.

Someone was saying something to me, their voice urgent but muffled. I tried to focus, to make out the words, but it was a losing battle. The world tilted precariously, darkness creeping in at the edges of my vision.

I felt my eyes roll back, my body suddenly boneless. The last thing I registered was Justice's arms tightening around me as I went limp and Damon's panicked shout before consciousness slipped away, plunging me into a void of nothingness.

### CHAPTER TWENTY

Darkness enveloped me, thick and oppressive. I was floating in a void, weightless yet somehow heavy with dread. Suddenly, pinpricks of light appeared, swirling around me like fireflies. They coalesced, forming a familiar shape. The Heartstone amulet.

As I reached for it, the amulet pulsed with an eerie green light. The light expanded, revealing a vast, shadowy landscape. I found myself standing on a desolate plain, the ground cracked and dry beneath my feet. In the distance, a mountain loomed, its peak shrouded in ominous storm clouds.

A low rumble shook the earth, and I watched in horror as the mountain began to move. It wasn't a mountain at all but a massive, coiled dragon. As it unfurled its wings, blotting out what little light remained, I recognized the unmistakable silhouette of Maci in her dragon form.

Her eyes fixed on me, glowing with malevolent intelligence. She shifted back into her human form, wearing a dark cloak. When she spoke, her voice was like grinding stone, echoing in my mind.

"Little Chosen One," Maci's voice dripped with cruel amusement. "You think you can stop me? You can barely control the Heartstone's power. My envy demons are already at work. Soon, it will be mine."

She tilted her head back and laughed.

I tried to run, but my feet were rooted to the spot. The shadow of Maci's dragon form



engulfed me, and a chill seeped into my bones...

I woke with a start, panting heavily. Where was I?

I soon realized I was in my bedroom at McDuff Manor. Maci was gone. Or was she? She was a shadow dragon and could be here without me even knowing it.

“You’re safe,” a soft voice beside my bed whispered.

A slight movement caught my attention, and I felt the bed dip as someone sat down. A pair of glowing red eyes materialized in the semi-darkness, sending a shiver down my spine that wasn’t entirely from fear.

That was when I realized a cool rag was across my forehead, the damp cloth a stark contrast to the heat radiating from my skin. The pungent scent of incense tickled my nostrils, making me wrinkle my nose slightly. I blinked repeatedly, my vision blurry and unfocused, as if looking through a foggy window.

“Sawyer?” Justice rasped, worry etched in every syllable. His voice wrapped around me like a warm blanket, comforting yet somehow suffocating at the same time.

I closed my eyes. “Justice.”

He gently took my hand in his, and I was struck by how cold my skin felt compared to his. Justice brought my hand to his lips, placing a soft kiss on my knuckles. The tender gesture made my heart flutter, a stark reminder of how alive I was despite feeling utterly drained.

I rubbed my forehead with my free hand, wincing at the dull ache that pulsed behind my eyes. “What happened?” I croaked, my throat dry and scratchy as if I’d swallowed sand.

Justice's thumb traced soothing circles on the back of my hand as he spoke. "Lisa says the Heartstone amulet drained your energy. You tried to use it three times, according to her. One, retrieving it. Two, healing me. Three, trying to revive Zara's sister."

As he recounted the events, flashes of memory surged through my mind. The cave, the creature, the desperate attempts to use the amulet's power. Each recollection sent a jolt through my body, making me tense.

Hope swelled inside me, a bubble of warmth expanding in my chest. "You're completely healed," I murmured, searching his face for confirmation.

Justice sighed, the sound weighing down the air between us. His red eyes dimmed slightly, and my hope flickered.

"You didn't think it would be that easy, did you?"

His words settled in my stomach like a cold, heavy stone. I swallowed hard, trying to push down the disappointment and fear that threatened to overwhelm me. The room suddenly felt too small, too crowded with unspoken worries and half-fulfilled hopes.

Soft snores filled the room, a familiar rhythm I instantly recognized. As my eyes adjusted to the dim light, I saw my brother slumped in a chair beside my bed, his body at an awkward angle that would surely result in a stiff neck. A pang of affection mixed with guilt washed over me at the sight of his worried frown, even in sleep.

At the foot of my bed, Lisa was curled up in another chair, her usual composed demeanor replaced by a vulnerability that tugged at my heart.

"Well, look who's awake," Damon announced, his tone tinged with relief and residual worry. He stretched his arms wide, his joints popping audibly. He flipped on

the lamp beside my bed, and the dark circles under his eyes betrayed his exhaustion. “You gave me quite a scare, Sawyer.”

I felt a pang of guilt at the concern etched on his face.

Lisa stirred at the end of the bed. She sat taller in her chair, her spine straightening as if shaking off sleep. Her eyes, usually sharp and alert, were clouded with fatigue. “Sawyer? How are you feeling?”

I shrugged, immediately regretting the movement as my muscles protested. “Tired,” I admitted, my voice still rough. A scowl creased my brow as a thought occurred to me, sending a jolt of anxiety through my body. “Where’s the Heartstone amulet?”

Damon’s expression hardened slightly, his jaw clenching. “Brody’s got it,” he replied, his tone clipped. “He didn’t trust Zara not to try to steal it so she could revive her sister.”

At the mention of Zara’s sister, guilt gripped me like a vise, making it hard to breathe. My chest tightened as I remembered my failed attempt. “I tried to save her,” I whispered.

Lisa rose from the chair, her movements careful and deliberate. She came around and sat beside Justice. Her presence seemed to fill the room with a calm energy, though her eyes betrayed her weariness.

“The Heartstone is powerful,” Lisa began. “But that dark magic was the strongest I’ve ever felt.” A shudder ran through her body, visible even in the dim light. “I think it will take the actual Crown of Envy to heal those poor souls.”

She bowed her head, her shoulders slumping as if under an invisible weight. “I tried to tell Zara, but she wouldn’t listen,” she murmured, regret coloring her words.

I licked my dry lips, wincing at their cracked texture. My tongue felt like sandpaper in my mouth. “How long have I been unconscious?” The words came out hoarse.

Justice dragged his fingers through his hair. His red eyes seemed dimmed with worry. “Two days,” he replied heavily. “You were moaning in your sleep, and we couldn’t wake you.”

A chill ran down my spine. Two days? It felt like I’d only closed my eyes moments ago. My stomach churned with hunger and nausea.

I bit my lip, the sharp pain grounding me as memories of my dream flooded back. My heart rate picked up, pounding in my ears. “I had a dream about Maci.” The words tumbled out, laced with fear.

Justice, Damon, and Lisa exchanged uneasy glances, their faces tightening with concern. The tension in the room seemed to thicken.

Justice’s thumb rubbed soothing circles over my shaking hand. I hadn’t even realized I was trembling until I felt the warmth of his touch. “Tell us about the dream,” he urged gently.

I inhaled, trying to steady myself. The dream images flashed through my mind, vivid and terrifying. My free hand clutched the bedsheets. “She said her envy demons were already at work, and the amulet would soon be hers.”

As I spoke, I could almost hear Maci’s bone-chilling voice again. I shuddered, and Justice’s hand tightened around mine in response.

“Do you think that’s true?” I asked, my voice small and uncertain.

The silence that followed was deafening. Damon shifted uncomfortably in his chair,

the wood creaking under his weight. Lisa's brow furrowed, and Justice's jaw clenched.

Anxiety coiled in my stomach like a cold, heavy snake. The possibility that Maci might already be steps ahead of us, that her demons could be closing in even now, sent a fresh wave of fear through me.

I swallowed hard, trying to push down the rising panic. But the dream lingered at the edges of my mind, a dark shadow threatening to engulf us all.

"Sounds like Brody was on the money," Damon remarked. He leaned forward in his chair, elbows resting on his knees, his face a mask of grim determination.

A knot formed in my stomach. "What do you mean by that?" I asked as a suspicion took root. "You don't mean Zara?"

"Yeah, I do." Damon's eyes, usually bright with mischief, were now hard and cold. "She's obsessed with the amulet."

Lisa's head snapped up. She glared at Damon, her body tensing as if ready to spring. "She wants to save her sister," she rejoined, her voice rising with emotion. "What would you do if Sawyer had been turned to stone?"

Damon's gaze flickered to me, a flash of fear crossing his face before he masked it. "Anything," he replied. The single word hung in the air, heavy with implication.

Lisa crossed her arms tightly. "See? So would Zara."

"That's the problem," Damon shot back. He stood abruptly, his chair scraping loudly against the floor. The sudden movement made me flinch. "You can trust her as much as you can a rattlesnake."

“Easy for you to say, Damon,” Lisa retorted. She gestured toward me, her movements quick and agitated. “Your sister’s mate benefited from the stone. Zara’s sister has been like that for years.”

My cheeks flared with heat, a warm flush spreading across my face and down my neck. I felt Justice’s intense, curious gaze, making my skin tingle.

Justice hadn’t claimed me, and the sudden reminder of our undefined relationship sent a jolt of nervous energy through my body. I squirmed under the covers, my fingers twisting in the sheets as unbidden thoughts flooded my mind.

What would it be like to feel Justice’s skin against mine? The idea shivered through me, a mix of anticipation and anxiety. I bit my lip, trying to push away the images that threatened to overwhelm me.

I risked a glance at Justice, only to find his red eyes fixed on me, dark with an emotion I couldn’t quite decipher. The air between us crackled with unspoken tension.

Damon cleared his throat loudly, snapping me back to the present situation. I blinked, trying to focus on the argument and not on the confusing swirl of emotions Justice’s presence evoked.

The room felt suddenly too warm, too small, as if the walls were closing in. I drew a deep breath, attempting to calm my racing heart and cool my flushed skin. But Lisa’s words echoed in my mind, a reminder of the complicated web of relationships and loyalties we were all tangled in.

Damon and Lisa said something else to each other that I couldn’t decipher. The tension in the room was thick enough to cut with a knife.

Justice's hand tightened again, but even his touch couldn't calm the storm of emotions swirling inside me. Fear, doubt, and a creeping sense of betrayal battled for dominance.

I looked from Damon to Lisa, their faces set in stubborn lines. The divide between them was clear, and I felt caught in the middle, torn between understanding Zara's desperation and fearing what it might drive her to do. I closed my eyes briefly, trying to steady my breathing. When I opened them again, I saw concern etched on Justice's face.

We were fracturing from within when we needed to be united the most. And somewhere out there, Maci and her demons were waiting, ready to exploit any weakness we showed.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Frustration and fear wrapped around me like a constricting snake, tightening with each heated word exchanged between Lisa and Damon. My chest felt compressed. I looked between them, noting the anger flashing in Damon's eyes and the stubborn set of Lisa's jaw.

"This is what Maci wants," I blurted. The words seemed to hang in the air. "You need to stop."

Damon's eyebrow cocked upward in surprise and skepticism. He crossed his arms. "Meaning what?" he challenged.

I inhaled deeply, wincing at the effort it took. As I struggled to sit up straighter, Justice's hand steadied me, his touch both comforting and grounding.

"Her envy demons." My words came faster as the pieces fell into place in my mind. "Don't you get it? They were designed to split us up." I gestured toward the door, toward where I assumed Zara was. "Look what they're doing to Zara. The envy demons or even Maci may have been lurking in the Grove of Whispers, and we didn't even know it."

The room fell silent as my words sank in. Lisa's eyes widened with dawning comprehension while Damon's brow furrowed in thought. I could almost see the gears turning in their heads.

"Think about it." My voice grew stronger with conviction. "Zara's desperation to



save her sister, our arguments about trust and loyalty? It's all playing into Maci's hands. We're letting envy and suspicion drive us apart."

"I agree," Justice stated, his red eyes meeting mine with understanding. "If looks could kill, I'd have a stake in my heart."

As the words left Justice's mouth, a surge of anger swirled in my chest, hot and ugly. The mere thought of Zara looking at Justice with anything resembling ill intent made my blood boil. My fingers twitched, longing for the familiar grip of my blade. For a brief, intense moment, I imagined driving it between Zara's eyes if she so much as looked at Justice cross-eyed.

The violent thought shocked me, and a wave of shame washed over me. Wasn't I just preaching about unity and resisting Maci's influence? Yet here I was, succumbing to the emotions I'd warned against. The irony wasn't lost on me, and it left a bitter taste in my mouth.

I drew a deep breath, trying to quell the storm. My reaction was proof of how insidious Maci's influence could be, how easily envy and protectiveness could twist into something darker.

"We're all susceptible," I admitted. "Even me. Maybe especially me." I looked at Justice, then at Damon and Lisa. "We need to be vigilant, not only against external threats but against our own emotions."

The battle against Maci and her envy demons wasn't merely out there in the world. It was here, in this room, in our hearts and minds. And it was a battle we'd have to fight every day if we hoped to stay united and strong.

I looked at them, willing them to understand. My heart raced, pounding so hard I could feel it in my throat. "If we keep fighting amongst ourselves, we're doing

Maci's work for her. We're making ourselves vulnerable."

The tension in the room shifted, transforming from anger to a dawning sense of unease.

"We need to stand united, like the Mirror of Aethereal foretold," I insisted. "It's the only way we'll have a chance against Maci and her demons."

As my words trailed off, I slumped back against the pillows, exhausted by the outburst. But I saw the impact of my revelation rippling through the room. The atmosphere had changed, the angry energy replaced by a somber realization of the true battle we faced, not only against Maci but against the envy and discord she sought to sow among us.

"I keep telling you. It's not that easy." Lisa's voice was tight with frustration. She ran her fingers through her hair, tugging at the strands. "Zara's really torn up about this."

A twinge of guilt gripped my chest, but I pushed it aside. "I hate to say this, Lisa, but Damon's right. You can't trust her." The words felt heavy on my tongue, like I was betraying someone.

Lisa's eyes flashed with anger, her body tensing as if ready to spring. "You're only saying that because she's a witch," she spat, her words sharp enough to make me flinch. "Everyone on this team treats us like second-class citizens. Only vampires and hunters are valued."

My heart sank, and a cold feeling spread through my chest. I stretched my hand out and took her stiff one. Her skin felt cold and clammy against mine. "Lisa, that's not true," I murmured, trying to infuse my voice with sincerity. "You're the one who saved us more than once with your healing magic. You're the one who healed me, aren't you?"

Lisa gave me a troubled smile. “Yes, with my incense and spells.”

I squeezed her hand. “We’re determined to help you find your phoenix and your dog. You’re part of our team. That’s why the mirror chose you.”

Lisa’s brows furrowed, creating a crease between them. Her gaze darted back and forth as if she was trying to process what I was saying. Conflicting emotions played across her face.

Fatigue washed over me in a sudden wave, making my eyelids heavy. I lowered my voice to a whisper. “Your statements sound envious, don’t you think?”

Lisa’s hand jerked in mine as if she’d been physically struck. The room seemed to hold its breath.

I swallowed hard, hoping my words would break through the fog of envy that seemed to be clouding Lisa’s judgment rather than push her further away.

Lisa’s face cycled through a range of emotions. Shock, anger, denial, and finally, a flicker of understanding. Her body tensed as if preparing to flee, but then she seemed to deflate, her shoulders sagging.

“I...” she started, her voice barely audible. She cleared her throat and tried again. “I didn’t realize... Is that really how I sound?”

Tears welled in her eyes, and she blinked rapidly, trying to hold them back. Her hand trembled in mine, and I gave it a gentle squeeze.

“It’s not your fault, Lisa,” I insisted with relief and concern. “Maci’s influence is subtle. It creeps in when we’re vulnerable.”

Lisa nodded slowly, her gaze unfocused as if looking inward. “I’ve been so worried about my phoenix, about being left behind...” Her voice cracked. “I didn’t even notice how it was affecting me.”

Damon leaned forward, his expression softening. “We’ve all been affected, Lisa. It’s not just you.”

Justice nodded in agreement. “The important thing is that we recognize it and fight against it. Together.”

Lisa drew a deep, shuddering breath. “You’re right. I’m sorry, all of you. I... I need some time to think.” She stood, her movements slow and deliberate. “I won’t go far, I promise. I only need to clear my head.”

As she walked to the door, she paused and looked back at us. “Thank you, Sawyer, for making me see. We’ll talk more when I get back, okay?”

I nodded as Lisa left the room. The door closed behind her with a soft click, leaving us in contemplative silence.

“Do you think she’ll be okay?” I asked, looking between Damon and Justice.

Damon ran a hand through his hair. “I hope so. At least she’s aware of it now. That’s the first step.”

Justice squeezed my shoulder gently. “We’ll keep an eye on her, on all of us. We’re stronger when we’re honest with each other.”

I leaned back against the pillows, exhaustion washing over me.

As my eyelids started to droop, urgent footsteps echoed in the hallway. My eyes

snapped open, adrenaline instantly cutting through the fog of fatigue.

The door swung open with a bang, and I flinched. Brody burst into the room, his usually composed demeanor shattered. His face was pale, a sheen of sweat glistening on his forehead.

“We’ve got trouble,” he announced.

Damon was on his feet in an instant, chair scraping against the floor. “What happened?”

Brody’s eyes darted to each of us before settling on me. “It’s Maci. Grady and Scott returned with intel that she’s on the move. And she’s not alone.”

My heart plummeted, dread seeping into my bones like icy water. Justice’s hand found mine, squeezing tightly, his touch a lifeline in the emotions threatening to overwhelm me.

“What do you mean, not alone?” I managed to ask.

Brody’s jaw clenched. “Reports suggest she’s amassed an army of envy demons. They’re heading this way.”

The room fell into a stunned silence, the shock of Brody’s words hanging like a physical presence. My earlier exhaustion evaporated, replaced by fear and determination churning in my gut.

I scrubbed my face roughly as if I could wipe away the dire news. “She’s coming for the Heartstone,” I realized.

Brody crossed his arms. “Someone must have told her we had it,” he growled.

“How long do we have?” Justice’s voice was steady despite the dire news, a calm counterpoint to the panic threatening to engulf us.

Brody shook his head grimly. “Not long. We need to move. Now.”

I scowled, frustration and weariness bubbling up inside me. “To do what?” The words came out sharper than I intended, edged with fear.

“I know you’re weakened, Sawyer, but we must start the next task.” Brody’s tone softened slightly, acknowledging my condition. He strode across the room and grabbed my backpack from the floor. The familiar thud of it landing on the bed beside me was oddly comforting.

“You need to ask the Mirror of Aethereal what our next task is.” His voice left no room for argument.

I swallowed hard, my hand instinctively moving to the backpack where the mirror waited. Its cool surface seemed to pulse against my fingers, even through the fabric, as if it sensed the urgency of our situation.

Responsibility twisted around my insides like a boa constrictor, squeezing tighter and tighter. Despite my weakened state, I knew I had to push through. With Maci and her army of envy demons bearing down on us, we were out of time and options.

I inhaled, steeling myself for whatever the mirror might reveal. “All right,” I agreed, my voice stronger than I felt. “Let’s see what our next move is.”

### CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

My team watched me like a hawk. I held my breath as I grabbed the Mirror of Aethereal's handle.

"Please show us our next task." I couldn't hide the weariness in my voice.

Damon and Justice glanced at each other as if to say I wasn't up to the task. But they were wrong. I had to go on this challenge. Only all six of the Chosen could accomplish it. Even though I wanted to sleep for a week, I was going. I'd find the strength somehow.

The mirror rippled again, and Edinburgh Castle appeared. My mother's voice spoke again. "Deep in the castle, in the last cell in the dungeon, you'll find a stone with a marking on it. It requires the Chosen's blood to open. Inside, you'll find this."

A shimmering, jeweled dagger appeared, then disappeared just as quickly.

I flicked the covers off and slid to a sitting position.

Justice flicked his gaze over me. "You're not well enough to travel."

I held my chin high. "Neither were you on the last task. If I don't come with you, you'll fail, and Maci will win. Is that what you want?"

Brody's brow furrowed, his gaze sharp with determination. "We've got a situation on our hands," he announced. "Intelligence suggests the lower levels of the dungeon are

off-limits to the public. It's a complication but not insurmountable."

He straightened his posture, shoulders squared as he continued. "We'll need to adapt our strategy. This isn't only about sneaking in. It's about upholding our mission while respecting civilian boundaries. I know it's not an easy task, but I have faith in this team. We've overcome worse odds."

His gaze swept the room. "We'll need to be smart, be vigilant, and above all, work together. Every one of you has unique skills that will be crucial for this operation. Who has a plan to get us into the dungeon?"

I rubbed my forehead. "Lisa will have to conjure a spell to hide us as we slip in. It's the only way."

He nodded. "I'll find her and Zara. We need to move immediately before Maci attacks. Brady, Scott, and Garrick are fortifying the Manor. I'll ask Lisa and Zara if they have protective spells to keep Maci and the demons from penetrating here."

I nodded, weariness seeping into my bones. He quietly left.

"You're not up to this," Justice reminded me again.

Damon snorted, his gaze fixed on me with worry and exasperation. "You're about as strong as a dandelion in a hurricane right now, sis."

I didn't want to admit he was right, but fate had dealt the cards, and there was no way around it. "I'm going, so stop trying to talk me out of it. Both of you."

Damon ran a hand through his hair, a habit I recognized as a sign of frustration. "Look, I get it. You want to be Super Girl and save the day, but you can barely keep your eyes open. You try to fight like this, and you'll be demon chow before you can



say ‘exorcism.’”

I scowled, a surge of frustration burning through my exhaustion. My jaw clenched so tight that a headache built at my temples. “Damon, I’m done with this conversation,” I snapped. I turned to Justice, my gaze challenging. “Justice was beat up when we went to the Grove of Whispers?—”

“But I’m a vampire,” Justice blurted. He leaned forward, his cool hand grasping mine. “I’m stronger than a human.”

The touch of his skin sent a shiver down my spine, but I steeled myself against the distraction. My free hand clenched into a fist, nails digging into my palm.

“Done,” I repeated, the word coming out a growl. I drew a deep breath, trying to steady my racing heart. “I’m going, and that’s final.”

With a burst of energy I didn’t know I had, I sat up straighter. My muscles protested, a dull ache spreading through my body, but I ignored it. I lifted my arm, pointing toward my bedroom door with a finger that trembled slightly with the effort.

“I need both of you out of here so I can get dressed,” I declared.

Damon opened his mouth as if to protest, then snapped it shut. His jaw worked, a muscle twitching in his cheek as he swallowed whatever retort he’d been about to make.

Justice’s hand lingered on mine, his touch a silent plea. I met his gaze, seeing the worry in the lines around his eyes. With a barely audible sigh, he finally released me and stood.

As they approached the door, I felt their reluctance in every step. The door closed

behind them, and I released a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding.

Alone at last, I slumped against the pillows, allowing myself a moment of vulnerability. My body felt like lead, every movement an effort. But as I closed my eyes, gathering strength for what lay ahead, I knew I had no choice. Ready or not, I had to face whatever came next.

With a groan that seemed to come from my bones, I forced myself to move. My joints creaked and popped as I swung my legs over the side of the bed, ignoring the sharp pains that shot through my body. The room tilted alarmingly as I stood, and I had to grip the bedpost to steady myself.

I stumbled toward the bathroom, my feet feeling encased in concrete. The cool tile under my bare feet sent a shock through my system, helping to clear some of the fog from my mind. I gripped the edges of the sink, my arms trembling as I leaned in close to the mirror.

The face that stared back at me was pale and drawn, with dark circles under my eyes that looked like bruises. I splashed cold water on my face, the shock of it making me gasp. After drinking some from my cupped hands, I scrubbed as if I could wash away the exhaustion along with the grime.

After several deep breaths that made my chest ache, I straightened, water dripping from my chin. My reflection looked marginally more alive but still far from ready for battle.

Back in the bedroom, I reached for my leathers, their familiar texture oddly comforting. As I put them on, each movement was deliberate, almost ritualistic. The leather softly creaked as it settled against my skin like armor preparing for war.

I reached for my quiver, gritting my teeth as I swung it over my shoulder. The strap

dug into my already aching muscles, eliciting a sharp hiss of pain I couldn't quite suppress. Ignoring my body's protest, I adjusted the quiver, reassured by the sensation of the arrows against my back.

My hand dove into my pocket, fingers closing around the cool metal of the compass. I pulled it out, the familiar feel comforting in my palm.

Then, with trembling hands, I reached for my dagger. It slid into its sheath with a satisfying click that sent a small shiver of readiness through me. My fingers curled around the grip of my bow, the wood's texture rough and grounding against my sweaty palm. I tightened my hand, drawing strength from the weapon that had seen me through so many battles.

As I stood there, fully equipped and feeling anything but ready, I took one last deep breath. The air filled my lungs, bringing a surge of determination that pushed back against the exhaustion.

I opened the door, and Justice leaned against the wall, waiting for me. "Since you're determined to do this, you need to stay close to me. Understood?"

I thought about arguing with him, but why bother? We both knew I needed help, and I wouldn't turn down assistance from a badass vampire.

Then, Damon appeared on the other side of the door. His eyebrows shot up as he took in my battle-ready appearance. He whistled.

"Well, well. Look who decided to cosplay as Katniss Everdeen," Damon quipped, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "You know, when I said you looked like a dandelion, I didn't mean for you to go full Hunger Games on us."

He stepped closer, scanning me critically. "You sure you're up for this, sis? Because

right now, you look about as steady as a drunk trying to ride a unicycle.”

Justice gave him a cold stare. “Trust me, I can protect her.”

Damon’s gaze flicked to Justice, and he smirked. “And you’ve got Count Dracula here as your bodyguard? Great. It’s like the start of a bad joke. A half-dead hunter, a wounded vampire, and a magic mirror walk into a bar...”

I sighed from deep within my chest. My shoulders sagged under Damon’s concern, adding to the already heavy burden of my exhaustion. I tried to give my brother a brave smile, but I felt it wavering at the edges, more grimace than grin.

“Damon,” I started. I had to clear my throat before continuing. “I know you’re worried, but I can do this.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “Look, I get it. You’re stubborn as hell and about as easy to stop as a runaway freight train. But if we’re doing this, we’re doing it smart.”

My fingers tightened around my bow. I stood straighter, ignoring the protest of my aching muscles. “If I don’t go, you won’t be able to retrieve the dagger.”

“I get that.” Damon’s expression softened, concern breaking through his tough exterior. “Just don’t go playing hero, all right? We need you in one piece. I’m not explaining to Dad why I let you get turned into demon chow.”

When he said Dad, I felt a strange hollowness. I tried, as I had countless times before, to conjure up an image of what my father looked like or even a hint of how I felt about him. But there was nothing. Only a vast, empty space where those memories should have been.

Damon had told me stories, painting a picture of a man I supposedly regarded as a

hero, someone I looked up to with admiration and love. Yet, try as I might, all I could retrieve was a blank slate. A void where a lifetime of memories should have resided.

I wasn't even sure how I felt about this absence. Should I feel grief for the loss of these memories? Anger at their theft? Or perhaps fear at the thought of what else might be missing from my mind? Instead, I felt a confusing mix of emotions. A vague sense of loss for something I couldn't remember, frustration at my inability to recall, and a strange detachment, as if I were mourning for someone else's father rather than my own.

The disconnect between what I knew intellectually and what I felt emotionally was jarring. It was like trying to solve a puzzle with half the pieces missing, leaving me with an incomplete picture I couldn't quite make sense of.

I glanced at Damon, wondering if he noticed the conflict playing out behind my eyes. Did he realize how strange it was for me to hear about a version of myself I couldn't remember? A version that loved and looked up to a father who was now nothing more than a concept, a story told by others?

The void of these missing memories hung over me, a constant reminder of the parts of myself that had been taken away. Yet, in the face of our current dangers, even this profound loss felt somewhat distant, another problem to be dealt with later. If we survived what was coming.

Damon's eyes, so like my own, were clouded with frustration and fear. A muscle in his jaw worked as he clenched and unclenched it.

My free hand reached out of its own accord to rest on Damon's arm. I felt the tension in his muscles, coiled tight like a spring ready to snap. "I know it's risky," I admitted, my voice stronger now, fueled by determination. "But we're out of options and out of time."

A wave of dizziness washed over me, making the room spin. I blinked hard, fighting to maintain my composure. My grip on Damon's arm tightened as much to steady myself as to reassure him.

"I need you to trust me. We have the compass. It led us out of the Grove of Whispers, and it will do it again," I told him, each word deliberate and heavy with meaning. "I need you to have my back like you always do."

I inhaled deeply, the air filling my lungs and bringing a renewed sense of purpose. Despite the exhaustion that weighed on me like a physical presence, despite the fear churning in my gut, I knew this was our only path forward.

"We're in this together," I insisted. "All of us."

### CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Damon swore softly under his breath, the words hissing through clenched teeth. “Well, if we’re going to do this, let’s go. The rest of the team is already in the Batmobile.”

Justice moved swiftly, his arm snaking around my waist. The coolness of his touch seeped through my clothes, a stark contrast to the warmth of adrenaline coursing through my veins. He maneuvered me out of the hallway, his grip firm but gentle, supporting more of my weight than I cared to admit.

As we stepped onto the patio, the crisp night air hit me like a slap, helping to clear some of the fog from my mind. Grady and Scott stood like sentinels, their postures rigid, constantly scanning the perimeter.

But what made my breath catch in my throat was Maggie. She had shifted into her dire wolf form, a sight that never failed to amaze me. She was massive, easily twice the size of any normal wolf, her fur a mix of midnight black and steel gray. Her golden eyes met mine, burning with intensity. There was no doubt she was ready for battle.

Garrick stood beside her, his sword drawn and gleaming in the moonlight. The sight of the blade made my heart rate spike.

“The witches warded this place with a protective spell,” Garrick noted. The muscles in his jaw worked as he spoke. “But I’m not sure how long it will last. You’d better get going.”

He shifted his weight, his gaze darting between us and the shadows beyond. “Brody’s got the Heartstone amulet. As soon as Maci discovers we don’t have it, they’ll be after you.”

I swallowed and glanced at Justice, then at Damon, seeing my fear and determination mirrored in their eyes. With a deep breath that made my ribs ache, I nodded. It was time to move.

As we approached the vehicle, I saw Lisa already in the back, her face a mask of tension. She shifted over, making room for Justice and me.

Brody and Zara were in the front, their silhouettes rigid with anticipation. When Damon slammed the door shut, the air inside the car seemed to thicken with nervous energy.

Brody revved the engine, the sudden roar making me flinch. The vibrations traveled through the seat and into my bones, amplifying the trembling I was trying to control. We peeled out of the driveway, heading toward Edinburgh Castle, less than an hour away from McDuff Manor.

I pressed my forehead against the cool window glass, the chill a welcome relief against my feverish skin. My eyes strained in the gloom, desperately scanning the horizon for any sign of Maci or her envy demon horde. But the sky was a uniform gray, a thick blanket of clouds stretching as far as I could see.

A cold tendril of fear snaked through my gut as a thought occurred to me. Had Maci conjured the clouds for this occasion? The perfect cover for an aerial attack. My fingers tightened on the armrest, knuckles white with the pressure.

I tried to remind myself this was Scotland, after all. Rainy weather was as common here as kilts and bagpipes. But the nagging doubt remained, coiling in my stomach



like a serpent.

The rhythmic swish of the windshield wipers cut through the silence in the car. Each swipe seemed to count down the minutes until our confrontation, ratcheting up my anxiety with every pass.

I caught Justice's reflection in the window, his gaze fixed on me with concern. I tried to give him a reassuring smile, but it felt more like a grimace.

As we sped through Edinburgh, heading for the castle, I couldn't shake the feeling that we were driving directly into the mouth of the beast. And I wasn't sure we were ready for what we'd find when we got there.

The castle, perched on the rugged crags of Castle Rock, exuded an imposing presence. Its towering battlements and turrets were silhouetted against the gray sky, contrasting with the lush green landscape below. When we reached it and parked, everyone piled out of the car and grouped around Brody, who squared his shoulders. "We can't bring our weapons into the castle," he explained. "Still, we need to be prepared for anything. We're not tourists here—we're on a mission."

I reached for the compass with a trembling hand, my muscles protesting even this simple movement. As I pulled it out, a wave of dizziness washed over me. I blinked hard, trying to focus my bleary vision on the compass face.

After a moment, the needle steadied, pointing decisively toward the castle. I exhaled shakily. "The dagger is definitely in the castle."

Damon scoffed, rolling his eyes dramatically. "Oh great, so we're going into the creepy old castle unarmed? Might as well hang a 'demon bait' sign around our necks."

Lisa stepped forward, her brow furrowed in concentration. “I have an idea,” she murmured. “I can cast a concealment spell to make our weapons invisible and undetectable.”

Damon’s eyebrows shot up. “Well, well, Hermione. Looks like you’ve got a trick up your sleeve. All right, magic lady, do your Harry Potter thing.”

As we unloaded the vehicle and heaped our weapons together, Lisa began preparing for the spell, and Brody addressed the team. “Listen up. What we’re about to do isn’t only about us. It’s about protecting innocent lives from forces they can’t even comprehend. Stay alert, watch each other’s backs, and remember we’re stronger together.”

Lisa knelt beside our pile of weapons, her hands trembling as she sprinkled herbs over them. She began her incantation, the words seeming to vibrate around us. As the spell took effect, a silvery glow enveloped our weapons before fading away.

Damon whistled, impressed despite himself. “Gotta hand it to you, Sabrina. That’s one hell of a party trick.”

Brody nodded approvingly. “Excellent work, Lisa. Your skills are invaluable to this team.” He faced the looming castle walls, his jaw set with determination. “All right, folks. Eyes open, guards up. We’re walking into unknown territory here.”

We retrieved our weapons and kept going. As we approached the gates, my steps became increasingly sluggish. Each movement felt like wading through thick mud, my legs heavy and uncooperative. I felt like eyes were boring into my back, but my exhaustion had dulled even my sense of fear. The hairs on my neck stood on end, and I suppressed a shudder.

I blinked hard. The world around me swam in and out of focus, the castle gates before

us blurring into indistinct shapes. I stumbled, catching myself at the last moment, my breath coming in short, ragged gasps.

“Just give me a second,” I mumbled, my words slurring. I leaned heavily against the cool stone wall, grateful for its solid presence as my knees threatened to buckle beneath me.

Despite my best efforts to appear strong, I sensed concerned glances from my teammates. The exhaustion was bone-deep, making the simple act of standing arduous, but we had come too far to turn back now. I gritted my teeth and pushed myself off the wall, swaying as I forced my leaden feet to move forward.

The gates loomed before us. As we prepared to enter, I silently prayed for the strength to see this through as my body screamed for rest.

Damon nudged me with his elbow. “You feeling it too, Katniss? Place gives me the creeps. Like we’re walking into friggin’ Mordor or something.”

I nodded, grateful for his attempt at levity.

As we passed through the gates, the stone archway seemed to whisper tales of centuries past. The cobblestone paths echoed with the footsteps of history. Guards patrolled the perimeter, but thanks to Lisa’s spell, we passed unnoticed, our concealed weapons hidden from prying eyes.

The inner courtyard was a vast expanse surrounded by high stone walls adorned with flags bearing the emblem of Scotland. The Great Hall stood to our right, its grand entrance flanked by statues of knights in shining armor. To our left, the Royal Palace loomed, its windows dark and foreboding.

Brody led with purpose, scanning the surroundings. I held the compass in my hands,

its needle quivering before settling in a specific direction. “The compass is pointing this way, toward the Royal Palace,” I told them. “It should lead us to the entrance of the dungeons.”

We moved as swiftly as possible, our footsteps blending with the ambient sounds of the castle. The atmosphere was thick with history and the faint scent of damp stone. Following the compass’s guidance, we descended a narrow staircase, the air growing colder and more oppressive with each step.

The entrance to the dungeons was hidden behind a heavy wooden door reinforced with iron bands. The compass needle pointed directly at it. Damon leaned in, his ear against the door, listening intently. “No guards on the other side. Let’s move.”

Brody pushed the door open, and we stepped into the dimly lit corridor of the dungeons. Ancient stone lined the walls, and the flickering torchlight cast eerie shadows that danced and shifted as we moved deeper into the bowels of the castle. I kept my eyes on the compass, its needle unwavering as it guided us through the maze-like passages.

The sound of dripping water echoed through the passageways, adding to the sense of foreboding. Each cell we passed told a silent story of the souls who had once been imprisoned here.

Damon took point, his eyes sharp and alert. “Keep your eyes peeled for any traps. A place like this is bound to have a few surprises.”

We ventured farther into the dungeons. Suddenly, we came across a heavy iron gate blocking our path. A sign hung from it, reading Restricted Area. No Public Access . The compass needle pointed insistently beyond the gate.

Brody frowned, his brow furrowing. “This must be where the cells we’re looking for

are located. The ones not open to the public.”

I examined the gate closely, noticing a modern electronic keypad next to it. “Looks like they’ve upgraded security down here. Any ideas on how to get past this?”

Lisa stepped forward, her eyes narrowed in concentration. “I might be able to short-circuit the lock with a spell, but it could trigger an alarm.”

Justice tensed beside me. “And if it does, we’ll have guards down here in minutes.”

Brody nodded grimly. “We need to find another way in. There must be maintenance access or an old passage they’ve overlooked.”

As we debated our options, I noticed a faint draft coming from behind one of the old tapestries lining the wall. The compass needle swung slightly toward it. “Wait,” I whispered, moving toward it. “I think there might be a hidden passage here. The compass is reacting to it.”

After carefully pushing aside the heavy fabric, we revealed a dark, narrow corridor carved into the rock.

Damon grinned, a glint of excitement in his eyes. “Now we’re talking. Secret passages, ancient dungeons. It’s like we’re in our own Indiana Jones movie.”

Brody held up a hand. “This could be our way in, but stay alert. If this passage has been forgotten, there’s no telling what dangers might be waiting for us.”

One by one, we slipped into the hidden corridor, the darkness enveloping us as we ventured deeper into the unknown depths of the castle. The compass glowed faintly in the darkness, its needle our only guide as we pressed on toward the dagger.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The air was heavy with moisture, clinging to my skin and seeping into my clothes. A bone-deep chill crept through my sore body, sending involuntary shivers down my spine.

The damp, musty scent of centuries-old stone and stagnant air filled my nostrils. Each breath felt like inhaling cold soup, the air so dense it seemed to resist entering my lungs.

“At least we have the compass.” I blinked, trying to adjust to the darkness. The soft glow barely illuminated my hand in front of my face. Panic bubbled up, my heart rate quickening as the walls seemed to close in around me.

“A compass? Oh sure, because that’s so much better than a flashlight,” Damon’s sarcastic voice cut through the darkness. “I bet it makes a great nightlight for all the creepy-crawlies down here.”

“All right, that’s enough,” Brody’s steady voice remarked. “We’ve faced worse odds before, and we’ll get through this. The compass is our guide, and we’ll use it to navigate.”

Cool fingers wrapped around my free hand. I flinched before I recognized Justice’s touch. His grip was firm and reassuring, anchoring me in the sea of darkness.

“I can lead the team,” Justice offered. “I can see in the dark, and with Sawyer’s compass, we’ll find our way. Stay close to each other.”

I squeezed his hand, feeling some of the tension leave my weary body as I absorbed his strength.

Justice pulled me close. “Are you feeling okay?”

“I’m fine.” I refused to tell them my body still ached. It didn’t matter. There was no choice for me but to keep going.

“All right, team, listen up,” Brody announced. “We’re going to move in formation. Justice and Sawyer with the compass, you take point. Lisa and Zara, you’re in the middle. Damon and I will cover the rear.”

I moved slowly, each step careful and measured, my body continually protesting. The exhaustion from our earlier ordeal still clung to me, making each step a conscious effort. A dull ache pulsed through my muscles, reminding me how close I’d come to total collapse. Luckily, my team didn’t push me, their patience a silent acknowledgment of my struggle.

Our footfalls seemed unnaturally loud in the confined space, echoing off the damp stone walls. I held my breath, partly to strain my ears for any sign of danger lurking in the darkness ahead and partly to suppress the groans of discomfort that threatened to escape with each step.

Despite my weariness, I kept a firm grip on the compass. The needle remained steady, an unwavering guide pulling us deeper into the unknown. I focused on it, using its constancy to distract myself from the pain and fatigue.

Justice continued to walk close beside me, holding my hand, his presence a comforting anchor. I sensed his concern in the way he occasionally steadied me with a gentle touch, helping me navigate the uneven floor without drawing attention to my weakness.

As we ventured deeper, the sheer mass of the castle above us became a tangible presence. The darkness was almost a physical entity pushing against us, testing our resolve with each cautious step.

Suddenly, Justice's hand tightened around mine. "Listen," he whispered, his breath tickling my ear and sending a shiver through me that had nothing to do with the cold.

I almost stumbled at the abrupt halt. Justice's arm snaked around my waist, steadying me with supernatural quickness.

Then I heard it. Pat. Pat. Pat. Pat.

The sound echoed in the darkness, a chilling, rhythmic tapping. My muscles coiled instinctively, ready to fight or flee. I strained my ears, trying to pinpoint the source of the noise in the oppressive blackness. The compass needle quivered as if responding to an unseen presence.

"I don't see anyone," Justice whispered. "It has to be Maci." The name hung in the air like a curse.

My stomach lurched at the implication. As we stood frozen in the oppressive silence, I sensed we were being watched, evaluated. The darkness pulsed with malevolent energy, making my skin crawl. If Maci was here, invisible and silent in the darkness, what was she waiting for?

Then it hit me. She wasn't alone. Her army of envy demons was here, too.

I shuddered violently. I could almost feel their presence now, countless unseen eyes boring into us from every direction. The compass needle spun erratically as if confused by the multiple presences.



Any minute now, they could ambush us. The narrow tunnel suddenly felt like a death trap with no room to maneuver, no way to escape. We were sitting ducks, blind in the darkness, while our enemies could see and surround us.

I gripped Justice's hand tighter, my fingers trembling. My other hand clenched the compass, its soft glow our only beacon in this sea of darkness. Every muscle in my body coiled, ready to spring into action at the slightest provocation.

We were trapped in a deadly game of cat and mouse, and we were the mice. The question wasn't if the attack would come, but when—and whether we would be ready when it did.

As the tension mounted, I suddenly realized the attack wouldn't come until we retrieved the dagger. That was when all hell would break loose. Maci and her demons were waiting, letting us do the hard work of finding the artifact before they pounced.

We didn't have a choice. We had to press on despite the danger. I drew a deep breath to steady my nerves and decided to try something. I addressed the magical object in my hand.

“Compass, show us the way.”

For a moment, nothing happened. Then, as if responding to my command, the needle spun rapidly before locking firmly in the direction we'd been going. The certainty of its movement was both reassuring and terrifying. I knew where to go, but what awaited us at the end of this path?

“There's a door up ahead,” Justice pointed out.

I held up the compass, its faint glow illuminating the ancient stonework around us. “The needle is pointing directly at it,” I whispered.

Justice found the heavy iron handle. With a grunt of effort, he pulled the door open, its hinges groaning in protest after years of disuse.

As it swung wide, the musty scent of centuries past washed over us. We stood at the entrance of a long, vaulted corridor lined with cells on either side. Shifting light flickered from guttering torches above each cell as if some force had lit them in anticipation of our arrival. The walls were rough-hewn stone, slick with moisture, and covered in patches of dark moss. Rusty iron bars separated the cells from the central passageway, their once-formidable strength now pitted and weakened by time.

The air was thick and heavy, filled with the echoes of long-forgotten prisoners and the soft drip of water from unseen sources. Some cells still contained remnants of their former occupants. Rotting wooden benches, rusted chains bolted to the walls, and in one, a skeleton huddled in the corner, a grim reminder of the dungeon's dark history.

The compass pulled us forward as we ventured deeper into this underground labyrinth of suffering and forgotten souls.

"Stay alert," Brody warned. He'd drawn his sword. "We don't know what kind of traps or guardians might still be active down here."

My hand trembled as I drew my dagger, the familiar presence of the weapon providing little comfort in the oppressive darkness. Every movement sent waves of pain through my still-aching body, but I gritted my teeth, refusing to show weakness. "I'm fine," I muttered, more to convince myself than the others.

We inched forward, our footsteps echoing ominously off the damp stone walls. Each step was a battle against my protesting muscles, but I pushed through, driven by sheer determination. The air grew thicker, more suffocating with each step as if the dungeon was trying to repel us.

Finally, we reached the end of the corridor and came to the last cell. Unlike the others, this one was eerily empty. Not even a chair marred its bare floor. The emptiness felt wrong, unnatural. I swallowed hard, trying to moisten my dry throat.

With shaking hands, I raised the compass, ignoring the twinge of pain in my arm. Its needle swung decisively toward a nondescript stone in the wall. My voice came out as a hoarse whisper. “This is it. I believe the dagger we seek is behind this rock.”

The words had barely left my lips when a familiar, chilling sound echoed through the corridor. Pat. Pat. Pat. Pat. My muscles tensed instinctively, adrenaline surging through my veins, momentarily dulling the persistent ache in my body.

More footsteps approached from behind, the sound growing louder and more menacing with each passing second. I whirled, my dagger at the ready. Every nerve in my body screamed danger as I fought the overwhelming exhaustion.

Brody stepped from the cell, his sword gleaming dully in the torchlight. He scanned the seemingly empty corridor. “I don’t see anyone, but I know they’re here. I can hear them breathing.”

The hair on the back of my neck stood on end as I strained my ears. Beneath the sound of our own ragged breathing, I could hear it. Soft, almost imperceptible inhaleds and exhaleds coming from all around us. My grip on my dagger tightened, knuckles turning white with effort, sending spikes of pain up my arm that I stubbornly ignored.

We were surrounded by unseen presences, trapped in this underground tomb with enemies we couldn’t fight. Fear clawed at my insides. The dagger we sought was tantalizingly close, yet it felt like bait in an elaborate trap.

As we stood frozen, I wondered if we’d just walked willingly into our own demise. Despite my exhaustion and pain, I steeled myself for whatever was coming.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The torchlights cast eerie shadows that danced across the ancient stone walls. A chill ran down my spine, and I broke out in goosebumps, my skin prickling with anticipation and dread.

I reached out, hovering before making contact with the cold stone the compass had pointed out. The instant my fingers touched the rough surface, strange sensations surged up my arm. It wasn't the pain and weariness I'd grown accustomed to. Instead, a wave of strength washed over me, revitalizing my tired body.

I shivered, but this time, it wasn't from exhaustion. Was it the dagger? The amulet had helped strengthen Justice. Maybe the dagger was doing the same for me.

Damon's eyes narrowed as he watched me, his posture tense. "Okay, Spidey, what's with the magic touch moment? Did you feel something, or are you really into old, moldy rocks?" His tone was light, but I heard the underlying concern.

I hesitated, not wanting to voice my suspicions in case I was wrong. "It's in there," I finally murmured. "I can feel it, but..." I trailed off, remembering what the mirror said. "The only way to dislodge the stone is blood. Our blood."

Damon's posture stiffened, his hand instinctively moving to the weapon at his side. "You know, when I signed up for this gig, I was thinking more Indiana Jones, less 'The Shining' meets 'Dungeons and Dragons.' So, what's the plan, sis? We all gonna play 'pin the blood on the creepy rock' and hope for the best? Or is this more of a chosen-one situation where you get all the fun?"

The strength flowing through me seemed to pulse in time with my heartbeat, urging me forward. Whatever came next, I knew we were standing on the precipice of something big, something that would change everything.

I drew my blade, its cold metal glinting in the dim light. Taking a deep breath, I pressed the edge against my palm. A sharp sting, then warmth as blood welled up. I bit back a hiss of pain and smeared my blood across the stone. The surface dimmed as if absorbing the offering.

Justice's eyes met mine. Without hesitation, he raised his wrist to his mouth. His fangs punctured the skin with a sickening pop. Dark, rich blood dripped onto the floor, the metallic scent filling the air. He pressed his bleeding wrist to the stone.

Damon stepped forward, his face a mask of grim resolve. "Do it," he insisted, holding out his palm. I swallowed hard, then quickly sliced across his skin. He didn't flinch, only wiped his blood on the stone with a determined set to his shoulders.

Lisa and Zara followed, their faces pale but resolute. Each smeared their blood on the stone, leaving crimson streaks that seemed to shimmer in the low light. The stone rippled, its solid surface moving like water.

"Brody." Damon moved to stand beside him. He tilted his head, a silent challenge in his eyes. "Your turn."

Brody's gaze hardened, scanning the room warily. "They'll attack," he warned.

"I know," Damon replied. "But we need you."

With a curt nod, Brody backed into the cell. "Spread out," he ordered, his voice tight. "They're coming." In one fluid motion, he drew his sword and sliced his palm. Blood welled as he pressed it against the stone.

A blinding light erupted, forcing us to shield our eyes. When it faded, the stone had dissolved, revealing a jeweled blade. My heart raced as I reached for it and wrapped my fingers around the hilt. Power surged through me, electric and intoxicating, making my hair stand on end.

The air shimmered like heat waves on a scorching summer day, and Maci materialized in the doorway. Her presence hit us like a physical force, an oppressive aura that seemed to suck the oxygen from the room. My chest tightened, each breath becoming a struggle. Her cold, calculating eyes locked onto the dagger, and I could almost feel the heat of her gaze.

“Give the blade to me,” she demanded, each word sharp enough to cut. “Or you’ll all die.”

As if summoned by her threat, a horde of demons appeared behind her. My stomach churned at the sight. Unlike the demons we’d encountered before, these were grotesquely disfigured. Empty eye sockets gaped at us, black voids that somehow still managed to convey a terrible hunger. Their mouths, filled with rows of razor-sharp teeth, gnashed and slavered. Their bodies, red and bumpy like hardened lava, seemed to pulse with an unholy energy.

I forced myself to focus on Maci and her demonic army, fighting the primal urge to run. My palm stretched out behind me, fingers splayed. “Brody,” I stated, my voice steadier than I felt. “Give me the amulet.”

“Now,” Maci hissed, her composure briefly cracking. I caught it immediately. The slight tremor in her voice, the flash of fear in her eyes. She had made a mistake, revealing her uncertainty.

The cool metal of the amulet pressed into my palm as Brody handed it over. The contact sent a jolt of energy up my arm, mingling with the power of the blade.

Maci's face contorted with rage. "Attack!" she screamed.

The demons surged forward, their screeches filling the air with a cacophony that made my ears ring. The stench of sulfur and decay hit us in a wave.

Damon sprang into action beside me, his sword singing through the air. It connected with the nearest demon, the blade slicing through its grotesque form with a sickening squelch. The creature collapsed into a pile of viscous goo, which hissed and bubbled as it sank into the stone floor.

The area erupted into chaos, the clash of weapons and inhuman shrieks creating a nightmarish symphony. I gripped the blade and amulet tighter, their combined power thrumming through me.

Suddenly, it was as if something alien took control of my body. My muscles tensed involuntarily, my back arching so sharply I feared my spine might snap. A surge of hot, electric energy raced through my veins, setting every nerve ending alight. My vision blurred, the world around me fading into a haze of white.

Without warning, a blinding light erupted from within me, exploding outward in a dazzling nova. It was brighter than the sun, searing my retinas. An otherworldly radiance bathed the area.

The demons' reaction was instantaneous and horrifying. Their screeches rose to a deafening crescendo. The piercing sound felt like needles driving into my eardrums. White flames engulfed their grotesque forms. The stench of burning sulfur and rotting flesh filled the air, making my stomach heave.

Through the chaos, I caught sight of Maci. Her face contorted with rage and disbelief as she raced toward me, her hands outstretched like claws. Before she reached me, an invisible force slammed into her like a giant, unseen hand swatting her away. She

flew back, her body twisting like a rag doll before crashing into the far wall with a sickening thud.

For a moment, she lay there, dazed. Then, with a grace that belied her recent impact, she rose to her feet. Her eyes burned with hatred and something that looked unsettlingly like fear. Then, she stepped back, melting into the shadows beyond the light's edge.

The light faded, leaving us in a sudden, oppressive darkness. My ears rang in the abrupt silence, my body trembling from the aftermath of whatever power had surged through me. I blinked rapidly, trying to adjust my vision, every shadow a potential hiding place for our adversary.

“Where is she?” I whispered.

No one answered immediately. Maci could have fled, or she could be watching us from the shadows.

Damon whistled, scanning the shadows warily. “Well, that was one hell of a magic light show. Remind me to bring sunglasses next time we decide to go all Close Encounters on demon-ville.”

He took a few cautious steps forward, his weapon still at the ready, and poked at the shadows. “As for our friendly neighborhood psycho-dragon? My money's on her pulling a Houdini. She's probably licking her wounds and plotting revenge as we speak.”

His voice dropped, taking on a more serious tone. “But let's not kid ourselves, folks. Evil Queen Barbie doesn't strike me as the ‘quit while you're ahead’ type. She could be anywhere, watching us, waiting for round two.”



He turned to the group, a grim smile on his face. “So, what do you say we blow this creepy popsicle stand before she decides to bring more of her friends to the party? I don’t know about you, but I’ve had my fill of demonic ugly for one day.”

“I think that’s the best idea I’ve heard all day,” I murmured. My chest heaved as I struggled to catch my breath. The surge of power had left me as quickly as it had come, leaving me drained and weak-kneed. Still, a flicker of relief rushed through me. This exhaustion, while intense, wasn’t as debilitating as what I’d experienced at the Grove of Whispers. It was more how I felt after a five-mile run.

My hands trembled as I grasped the vibrating blade. Without hesitation, driven by an instinct I couldn’t quite name, I placed it in Justice’s hand.

Justice’s head snapped back, his spine arching at an unnatural angle. His body shook violently, and muscles spasmed beneath his skin. A strangled sound escaped his throat, somewhere between a growl and a moan.

“Oh, shit!” Panic surged through me. My heart leaped into my throat as I jerked the blade away from him, my movements frantic and uncoordinated. The metal scorched my palm, but I barely registered the pain.

As soon as the blade left his grasp, Justice’s convulsions ceased. He slumped forward, his chest heaving. For a moment that stretched like an eternity, he remained still, and my stomach twisted with fear.

Then, slowly, he raised his head. My breath caught in my throat as our eyes met. The change was striking. His skin, which had been pale and sickly, now had a healthy flush. His eyes, previously dulled by exhaustion and illness, now shone with an intensity that made my heart skip a beat.

“I’m getting stronger.” Wonder and relief filled his voice. He flexed his hands,

staring at them as if seeing them for the first time. “It’s working.”

A bundle of conflicting emotions bubbled over me like a pot threatening to boil over. My legs wobbled treacherously, and I had to lean against the cold stone wall to keep from collapsing. The rough surface bit into me, a stark contrast to the blade that pulsed warmly in my other hand, almost as if it had a heartbeat of its own.

I stared at the weapon, mesmerized by its gleaming surface and the power thrumming through it. “I can see why Maci wants this,” I muttered.

The thought of her ruthlessness, combined with the raw power of these artifacts, painted a terrifying picture of what she could be plotting.

She wasn’t the only one who was desperate. I would do anything to protect the people I loved, even if it was a fight to the death.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

My hands trembled as I slid the dagger into my sheath, the heaviness a constant reminder of its power. I carefully placed the other one with my quiver of arrows, the metal clinking softly against the arrowheads.

Brody's eyes narrowed as he surveyed the dark, hidden tunnel beyond the cells, the way we'd come down here. "That tunnel could be harboring unseen threats. We can't risk endangering the team or our mission." He gestured toward the dimly lit, off-limits corridors branching out from our position. "We need to navigate the guarded sections of the dungeon. It may be a maze, but it's our safest bet for getting out of here without incident."

His gaze swept the team. "Stay alert, keep formation, and watch each other's backs. Remember, we move as one unit. If anyone spots anything suspicious, speak up immediately. Our strength is in our unity and our wits. Let's move out."

As we hurried through the dimly lit corridors, the musty air clung to my skin, and every shadow seemed to hold a potential threat. My heart raced as we approached the tourist area and spotted guards posted at strategic points.

"I've got this," Lisa insisted, calm and determined. Her eyes gleamed with a mixture of excitement and concentration.

Damon raised an eyebrow, his trademark skepticism evident. "All right, magic lady, do your thing." His fingers drummed nervously against his thigh. "Just make sure it's something that'll keep those guards off our backs."

Lisa nodded as she pulled out spell components. A glittering powder caught the dim light, sparkling ominously. A silver feather seemed to pulse with an otherworldly energy.

As Lisa began her chant, the air around us thickened, charged with magical potential. Goosebumps raised on my arms, and a tingling sensation spread across my skin. The glittering powder swirled in the air, defying gravity, while the silver feather gleamed with an inner light.

The magic coalesced around us, a shimmering mist that blurred my vision. I fought a wave of dizziness as our forms began to fade. The sensation of becoming invisible was disconcerting, like being submerged in cool water.

Brody cut through the disorientation, steady and reassuring. “Everyone, stay close and move quietly. We’ll be out of here in no time.”

We moved as one, our footsteps eerily silent on the stone floor. My breath came in short, controlled gasps as we navigated past the oblivious guards. The castle’s grandeur seemed almost mocking now, its beauty contrasting with the danger we faced.

“Great, we’re playing ‘Ghosts of the Castle: Extreme Edition,’” Damon whispered. “Anyone else feel like we’re extras in some B-grade supernatural heist movie? ‘Cause I gotta say, the special effects department really outdid themselves with this invisibility gig.”

I had to bite my lip to stifle a nervous laugh, the adrenaline making his quip seem funnier than it was. Leave it to Damon to find humor in a life-or-death situation.

As we neared the exit, I felt the spell weakening. The sunlight seemed to burn through the magical mist, and my hand started to reappear. Panic surged through me,

and I quickened my pace, my hand instinctively covering the sheath to protect our hard-won prize.

We burst through the gates as the spell dissipated. The sudden brightness made me squint, and the rush of fresh air was almost overwhelming after the stale atmosphere of the castle.

Brody tensed as he counted heads. “We’re all out, and there doesn’t seem to be any sign of Maci and her envy demons.”

Damon clapped Lisa on the back, the sound echoing loudly in the open space and making me flinch. “Hot damn, Sabrina! You went full-on Hogwarts on their asses.” He grinned. “Remind me to never piss you off. I like my junk hex-free.”

Lisa gave him a sly smile. “See? Witches aren’t all bad.”

“You keep proving that to me every day,” he conceded.

As we moved away from the castle, I couldn’t shake the feeling of being watched. There were still shadows out here, and Maci could be in them. Every passing car, every pedestrian seemed a potential threat.

Brody approached the car with purposeful strides, scanning our surroundings for potential threats. “All right, let’s move out. Stay alert until we’re clear of the area.”

We filed into the car. The familiar leather creaked under our weight, a small comfort after the tension of our mission. I sank into my seat, my muscles aching from the strain of the day’s events. The jeweled dagger seemed to pulse with faint warmth, a constant reminder of what we’d accomplished and the challenges still ahead.

Brody slid into the driver’s seat, his movements smooth and controlled. He gripped

the steering wheel, his white knuckles betraying the tension he was trying to hide from the team. The engine roared to life, and we pulled out of the parking lot without incident, blending seamlessly with the flow of tourist traffic.

As we left the castle behind, Brody's shoulders relaxed, but his eyes remained vigilant, flicking regularly to the rearview mirror. His jaw set in a determined line as he navigated the streets of Edinburgh.

"I hope McDuff Manor is in one piece," he murmured. Then, louder, he addressed the team with a reassuring tone. "We've completed our objective, but our mission isn't over. When we get back, we'll need to secure the artifacts and plan our next move. Every one of you performed admirably today. We faced extraordinary challenges, and we overcame them together."

He glanced in the rearview mirror. "I'm proud of this team. Whatever comes next, I know we'll face it with the same courage and unity we showed today. Stay sharp, folks. We're not out of the woods yet."

The car fell into a tense silence as we drove, each of us lost in thought about what we'd experienced and what might be waiting for us at McDuff Manor. The adrenaline of our escape was beginning to wear off, leaving me drained but wary. Maci and her forces weren't done with us yet. As the Scottish countryside rolled by outside the window, I both dreaded and anticipated the challenges ahead.

Zara's gaze flickered toward me with hope and hesitation. "Since we have both the Heartstone amulet and the dagger, maybe we can go back to the Grove of Whispers. Working together, they could free my sister."

A pang of sympathy stirred inside me, mixed with growing unease. Before I could respond, Brody's authoritative voice cut in.

“That’s not our mission, Zara,” he interrupted. “We must obtain the Crown of Envy before Maci does.”

Zara’s body stiffened, her arms crossing tightly. Her next words came out sharp and bitter, cutting through the air like a knife. “Sure, you’ll do everything to save a vampire, but not a witch.”

I could almost taste the resentment radiating from Zara.

Lisa gently patted her thigh in a gesture of comfort. “I’m not sure the blade and the stone would be enough to save your sister,” she explained softly. “The dark magic is too strong. I believe only the Crown of Envy has the power to break the spell.”

Zara’s head snapped toward Lisa, her eyes flashing with anger and desperation. “You don’t know that,” she spat. “Justice is getting stronger.”

Lisa flinched at Zara’s tone but held her ground. “He wasn’t turned to stone, though,” she pointed out. “The stone and the blade are eliminating some of the poison, but he’s not completely cured. Only the Crown of Envy can do that.”

My stomach clenched. The reminder that Justice could still die from the envy demon’s poison chilled me. But what truly unsettled me was Zara’s insistence, the raw desperation in her voice.

I watched her from the corner of my eye, noting the tight set of her shoulders, the way her fingers twitched restlessly in her lap. Her resentment was dangerous, growing stronger with each passing moment. A knot of worry formed as I contemplated how far she might go to save her sister.

The dagger pulsed as if responding to the rising tensions. I placed my hand over it instinctively, seeking comfort in its power. As we drove in uneasy silence, I couldn’t

shake the feeling Zara's desperation was a powder keg waiting to explode.

If I didn't find a way to defuse it, one of us could be severely injured or even killed.



### CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

As Brody eased the SUV to a stop in front of McDuff Manor, the tension in my shoulders relaxed. I exhaled a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding, taking in the familiar sight of the grand old building. It stood exactly as we'd left it, seemingly untouched by the chaos we'd endured.

On the porch, Garrick, Grady, and Scott stood at attention. Maggie had shifted back into her human form, her long black hair dancing in the light breeze. Their presence was a welcome sight, a small piece of normalcy in our increasingly abnormal lives.

Damon peered through the windshield with exaggerated scrutiny. "Well, would you look at that," he drawled. "Casa Creepy is still standing. Gotta say, I half expected to come back to a smoking crater or some kind of demon block party."

He slouched back in his seat, a lopsided grin on his face. "Hey, maybe our luck's changing. I mean, we made it through Hogwarts' dungeon of doom, and now the home base is intact. Who knows? Maybe we'll find out they've stocked the fridge with beer and pie while we were gone."

His gaze flicked to the rearview mirror, meeting mine with humor and underlying tension. "Though knowing our luck, they've probably adopted a hellhound as a new house pet. Anyone else voting we check for hex bags before we start the victory dance?"

We piled out of the car, and Damon stretched dramatically, his joints popping. "Home sweet home, kids. Let's hope the welcome wagon doesn't include any

surprise guests of the fanged or clawed variety, huh?"

As we approached the manor, I couldn't help but share Damon's wariness. In our line of work, moments of peace were often the calm before the storm.

Garrick descended the porch steps, his movements cautious and measured. He scanned our group for any signs of trouble. "Good. You all survived," he commented with relief. "No one was tainted with dark magic?"

The question turned my insides into knots. I instinctively touched the dagger, its warmth a reassuring presence.

Brody shook his head. "No, why?" His hand moved to his weapon, a reflexive action born from years of facing the unexpected. "Did the Manor come under attack?"

Garrick's expression tightened. "Maci tried, but the wards Lisa and Zara set prevented her or the envy demons from entering." He constantly scanned the perimeter of the property as if expecting another attack at any moment. "The strange thing was she didn't stay long."

Brody frowned, his brow furrowing deeply. "Meaning what?"

Garrick rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I got the feeling she knew right away the Heartstone wasn't here."

My breath caught in my throat. "Maybe she could sense it," I whispered. The implications of this possibility sent a wave of nausea through me.

"Perhaps," Garrick drawled.

My heart rate increased as a cold sweat broke out across my forehead. The others

shifted uneasily, exchanging worried glances.

Justice moved closer to me, his cool presence a comfort against the rising tide of anxiety. I leaned into him, drawing strength from his proximity.

Damon's hand twitched toward his weapon. "Great," he muttered under his breath. "So not only is she powerful, she's got some kind of magical GPS. That's just peachy."

This new piece of the puzzle cast long shadows over our previous sense of accomplishment, transforming our victory into something far more fragile. I suspected we were missing something crucial. The dagger at my side seemed to pulse in agreement.

Brody placed a hand on my shoulder, his grip firm and reassuring. "We know one thing for certain. Maci will be waiting for us to complete our third task." He paused, allowing his words to sink in. "She'll probably lie in wait for us in the catacombs when we face the Aegis serpent. But remember, team, forewarned is forearmed."

I sighed. "I need to rest and eat before I can think about going on our third task."

"We need to know what it is," he pressed. "We're all exhausted, but we don't have much time. Maci isn't slowing down."

The reminder of our enemy sent a jolt of adrenaline through me, momentarily cutting through the fog of fatigue. My stomach clenched with fear and determination.

I nodded grimly, my head feeling heavy with the motion. A wave of resignation washed over me as my body protested the decision my mind had made. It wasn't what I wanted to do, but Brody wasn't wrong. If Maci suspected we were too exhausted to fight, it would play perfectly into her hands.

“You’re right,” I conceded. “I’ll go check with the mirror.”

Justice put his arm around my shoulder, his touch comforting and supporting. I leaned into him, and we walked past the rest of the team, then Grady and Scott. Their concerned gazes followed us, weighing heavily on my already burdened shoulders.

Back in my room, Justice wrapped his arms around me and held me close. His familiar scent enveloped me, a small comfort in our chaotic world. His steady heartbeat was mesmerizing, the rhythm almost hypnotic. My eyelids grew heavy, the temptation to curl up next to him and fall asleep nearly overwhelming. My muscles ached for rest.

He kissed the top of my head. “We’ll get through this. I promise,” he murmured, his voice a low rumble.

I looked up at him, my neck protesting the movement. His dark eyes met mine, and I wanted to lose myself in that gaze, to forget all my responsibilities.

“I hope so,” I whispered back, my voice cracking slightly. The words hung between us, heavy with unspoken fears and tentative hope.

As we stood there, wrapped in each other’s arms, the pull of exhaustion warred with the urgency of our mission. The mirror awaited, holding secrets that could determine our fate. With a deep breath, I drew strength from Justice’s embrace and the knowledge that, no matter what, we were in this together.

Reluctantly, I untangled myself from Justice. The loss of his warmth left me feeling vulnerable, but I steeled myself for what lay ahead. With heavy steps, I headed to the dresser where the Mirror of Aethereal rested.

My fingers touched its cool surface, and the mirror vibrated in my hand as if

awakening to my touch. I drew a deep breath and spoke the words that would set our next challenge in motion. “Please, show me our third task.”

The mirror’s surface swirled, reminiscent of ripples spreading across a pond. From its depths, my mother’s familiar voice emerged. The sound of it sent a pang through my heart, a mixture of comfort and longing.

“You have done well,” the voice soothed, its tone both proud and cautionary. “The last task brings you closer to your goal, but it will test you in ways you’ve yet to face.”

I listened intently as the mirror continued, each word etching itself into my mind.

“This task takes you deep within the catacombs, where you must navigate the Labyrinth of Reflection. Look for a specific door marked with the symbol of balance. The magical maze begins in the chamber beyond. It will force each of you to confront distorted versions of yourselves, each consumed by envy. To succeed, you must resist temptation and find the true path to your heart.”

The mirror’s surface shimmered, reflecting my worried expression back at me as it delivered the final piece of information.

“After you have completed this task, the Scales of Balance will materialize. This ancient artifact has the power to weigh the purity of your intentions against your envious thoughts.”

As the mirror fell silent, I stood there, absorbing the magnitude of what lay ahead. The Labyrinth of Reflection sounded like our most challenging task yet, not only physically but emotionally and mentally. I turned to Justice and saw my concern reflected in his eyes.

“We need to tell the others,” My voice was stronger now, fueled by determination.  
“This task will test us all in ways we might not be prepared for.”

### CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I gathered the team in the dining room, my feet dragging with every step. Our next task hung heavy on my shoulders, but the gnawing emptiness in my stomach reminded me we were all running on fumes. There was no reason to face this news on empty stomachs.

As we filed into the room, the rich aroma of lamb stew wafted through the air, making my mouth water instantly. Sean McDuff had outdone himself once again. A large pot of stew steamed in the center of the table, chunks of tender meat and colorful vegetables visible in the savory broth. Beside it was a loaf of freshly baked bread, its golden-brown crust practically begging to be torn apart. A bowl of crisp salad added a pop of color to the spread.

I sank into my chair, my muscles sighing in relief at finally being able to rest. Around me, the same exhaustion was etched on every face. Dark circles under Damon's eyes replaced his usual smirk. Lisa's hands trembled as she reached for her napkin. Even Brody's typically ramrod-straight posture had a noticeable slump.

Sean moved around the table, placing a tankard of dark ale in front of each of us. The rich, malty scent of the brew mingled with the food aromas, creating an almost intoxicating mix. I wrapped my hands around the cool metal tankard, grateful for something solid to hold onto.

"Eat first," I insisted, my voice hoarse from fatigue. "Then we'll talk about what's next."

There was a collective sigh of relief as everyone dug in. The clinking of spoons against bowls filled the air. I took a spoonful of the stew, the warm, hearty flavors exploding on my tongue. It was comfort in a bowl, a brief respite from the struggles ahead.

As I ate, I couldn't help but study my teammates. Each bite seemed to bring a touch of color back to their cheeks, a spark of life returning to their eyes. Yet beneath the momentary contentment, I noticed the tension, the wariness. They knew, as I did, that our hardest task was yet to come.

I swigged the ale, its bitter taste grounding me in the present. The news of the Labyrinth of Reflection could wait a few more minutes. For now, we needed this. A moment of normalcy, of shared comfort, before plunging back into the unknown.

For the next hour, bowls were scraped clean, and tankards were drained.

As we finished our meal, I cleared my throat, drawing everyone's attention. "The Mirror of Aethereal has shown me our next task," I began, my fingers tracing the condensation on my tankard. "We need to navigate the Labyrinth of Reflection."

Brody leaned forward, his brow furrowed. "Where exactly is this labyrinth?"

I drew a deep breath. "The entrance to the Labyrinth is hidden deep within the catacombs. According to the mirror, we have to find a door with a scale carved on it. This leads to a specific chamber where the magical maze begins."

Damon groaned, running a hand through his hair. "Great. Because regular catacombs weren't creepy enough. Now we get to add a magical funhouse of horrors to the mix."

Lisa's eyes widened with recognition. "I've read those catacombs are said to be a



nexus of supernatural energy. It makes sense that a magical labyrinth would be anchored there.”

Justice squeezed my hand under the table. “At least we know where to start. That’s more than we’ve had for some of our other tasks.”

I nodded, grateful for his support. “The catacombs are only the beginning. After we enter the Labyrinth itself, we’ll each face our own challenges, but at least we’ll be facing them together.” I explained what the mirror had told me. “After that, we will confront the Aegis serpent.”

Brody sat back in his chair. “Our path has been chosen, team,” he stated with authority and encouragement. “This labyrinth will test us, not only physically but mentally and emotionally as well. We need to face it at our best.”

He leaned forward, placing his hands on the table. “Tonight, we rest and recharge. A good night’s sleep isn’t just a luxury—it’s a tactical necessity. Tomorrow, we’ll proceed to the catacombs with clear minds and strong hearts.”

He stood. “Get some rest, everyone. Tomorrow, we find that door and take on whatever lies beyond it. I have faith in each one of you. Together, we can overcome any challenge.”

Damon smirked and raised his tankard in a mock toast. “Well, isn’t that inspiring? I’m all tingly inside,” he drawled. “Nothing says ‘sweet dreams’ like knowing we’re about to play Alice in Wonderland in the world’s creepiest basement.”

He gulped a long swig of ale before continuing. “But hey, who needs sleep when we’ve got pep talks and the promise of facing our deepest, darkest envies? I bet there’s a greeting card for that somewhere.” He stood and stretched dramatically. “All right, Team Free Will, let’s hit the hay. I’ll be sure to dream about rainbows and

unicorns instead of whatever nightmare fuel is waiting for us in those catacombs.”

As he headed toward the door, he turned back, his expression softening. “Seriously, folks, watch each other’s backs down there. I’ve got a feeling this funhouse of horrors isn’t going to be handing out participation trophies.”

The rest of the Chosen team slowly departed, their footsteps heavy with exhaustion. The scraping of chairs and muffled yawns filled the air as they filed out of the room.

Garrick, Maggie, Grady, and Scott remained, their hushed voices discussing how to protect the manor. Their words blurred together in my fatigue-addled mind, becoming a distant hum I was too tired to decipher.

Justice’s hand gently wrapped around my arm, pulling me up from my chair. My muscles protested the movement, aching from the day’s exertions. “I think it’s time for you to go to bed,” he murmured.

He escorted me to my room, his arm around my waist bearing more of my burden than I cared to admit. At my door, he paused, brushing my hair out of my eyes with a tender gesture. “How are you feeling?” he asked.

I shrugged, the simple movement feeling like a monumental effort. “Tired,” I admitted. “I’m better than I was at the Grove of Whispers but still exhausted.” My words were slightly slurred, fatigue weighing heavily on my tongue.

“Then I’ll let you get some rest,” Justice murmured. Suddenly, he pressed me up against the door. His lips met mine in a tender and possessive kiss, sending a jolt of electricity through my body. When he pulled away, I was left breathless and wanting more, my exhaustion momentarily forgotten.

As Justice disappeared down the hallway, I stumbled into my room, my legs wobbly

from fatigue and his kiss' lingering effects. I shed my clothes clumsily, barely managing to pull on my pajamas before collapsing into bed. Sleep claimed me almost instantly.

In my dreams, I saw Maci walking through the misty streets of Edinburgh, her figure a dark silhouette against the gray backdrop. She approached a hooded figure lurking in a shadowy alley. Try as I might, I couldn't make out the figure's identity. Maci extended her hand, a silver ring glinting ominously in her palm. "Wear this, and I will find you," she purred. "Then I will give you your greatest desire."

I woke with a start, my heart pounding so hard I felt it in my throat. Cold sweat clung to my skin, my pajamas twisted around me from tossing and turning. The dream clung to me like a shroud.

Someone was going to betray us.

As the fog of sleep cleared, a face swam into focus in my mind. My stomach dropped as the realization hit me.

Zara. It had to be Zara.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

After my dream about Zara betraying us, sleep became an elusive luxury. I tossed and turned, my mind a whirlwind of anxious thoughts. The weight of the knowledge pressed down on me. I wanted to warn my team, but the futility of the situation gnawed at me. Even if I did, there was nothing we could do. The Mirror of Aethereal had chosen Zara. Without her, we couldn't complete our last task or obtain the Crown of Envy.

As dawn broke, I dragged myself out of bed, my body protesting every movement. I couldn't bear this burden alone. With trembling hands and a racing heart, I pulled Damon and Justice aside after breakfast. The words tumbled out of me in a whispered rush as I recounted my dream of Zara's alliance with Maci.

Justice's face darkened, his body tensing beside me. But it was Damon's reaction that caught my attention.

Damon's jaw clenched so hard I could almost hear his molars grinding. He ran a hand roughly through his hair, a humorless laugh escaping him. "Well, isn't that fan-friggin-tastic," he growled. "We've got our very own Judas in the ranks. Because this magical mystery tour wasn't already enough of a crapshoot."

He paced, his movements sharp and agitated. "So, what's the plan, huh? We waltz into this funhouse of horrors with Benedict Arnold in tow, hoping she doesn't decide to cash in her betrayal chips at the worst possible moment?" He stopped abruptly, his eyes burning with anger and determination. "I say we confront her. Air out this dirty laundry before it suffocates us."

He jabbed a finger for emphasis. “And if Miss Congeniality decides to go full dark side on us, well...” He patted the weapon at his side, smiling grimly. “Let’s say I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve for dealing with turncoats.”

The intensity of Damon’s reaction sent a shiver down my spine.

Justice laid a hand on his arm. “She has to come. The mirror chose her.”

Damon’s body tensed under Justice’s touch, his fists clenching and unclenching. He opened his mouth, ready to argue, then shut it with an audible click of his teeth. His nostrils flared as he inhaled sharply, trying to rein in his anger. “Fine,” he growled. “I’ll keep the secret, but as soon as we get the Crown, that witch is going to burn before she turns it over to Maci.”

As we headed to the SUV, my backpack felt heavier than usual. The strap of my quiver dug into my shoulder, and the familiar weight of my bow in my hand was oddly comforting. The jeweled dagger at my hip pulsed as if aware of the impending danger. I clutched the compass tightly, its cool metal surface grounding me amid the swirling anxiety in my mind.

I casually glanced at Zara’s right hand but didn’t see a silver ring. It could be on her left one.

I climbed into the SUV, my muscles protesting after the restless night, and settled between Lisa and Justice. Justice’s body beside me was a comfort, while Lisa’s proximity made me acutely aware of the secret I was keeping. I almost wanted to tell her about my suspicions, but the words caught in my throat. Lisa continued to be Zara’s champion, and I didn’t think she would believe me.

Brody drove us to the South Bridge, the compass in my hand pointing steadily in the direction we were heading. As we approached the entrance to the catacombs, a chill

enveloped me that had nothing to do with the cool Scottish air. The gaping maw of darkness seemed to swallow all light. The stone archway was weathered and ancient, covered in a thin sheen of moisture that glistened ominously.

We descended the worn stone stairs, the air growing colder and damper with each step. The catacomb walls were rough-hewn rock. Our flashlights cast eerie shadows that danced and flickered, playing tricks on our eyes.

The passageways twisted and turned, a labyrinthine network designed to confuse and disorient. The air was thick with the musty scent of age and decay, making each breath feel heavy. Water dripped in the distance, the sound echoing off the stone walls in an unsettling rhythm.

As we ventured deeper, we passed numerous alcoves and chambers. Some held ancient stone coffins. Others were filled with piles of bones, silent witnesses to centuries of Edinburgh's history. I shuddered, my mind racing with morbid curiosity. How had they died? Were they victims of the plague or perhaps accused of witchcraft? The unanswered questions gnawed at me.

The compass continued to guide us through the underground maze until we came to a sudden halt. Before us stood a massive, ornately carved door with the image of a scale, the symbol of balance and judgment. I glanced over my shoulder at my team's weary faces. My gaze skipped over Zara, the sharpness of my suspicions making it hard to even look at her.

"This is it," I announced. My gut tightened with dread.

With a trembling hand, I touched the door. The stone was cool beneath my fingers, but the instant I made contact, a surge of energy pulsed through me. The door swung open with an ominous creak, revealing not the expected darkness but a passageway lit by flickering torches in ornate sconces.

As we stepped over the threshold, the air shifted dramatically. It became crisp and clear, tinged with an otherworldly scent I couldn't quite place. The labyrinth walls seemed to shimmer as if not quite solid.

"Stay close," Brody warned. "Remember, we'll each face our own challenges here."

No sooner had the words left his mouth than the labyrinth came to life around us. The walls shifted and changed, creating new passages and dead ends. I felt a tugging sensation as if an invisible force was trying to pull me away from the group.

"It's separating us!" Lisa cried.

I tried to grab Justice or Damon, but my hands passed through empty air. The world around me blurred and twisted, and suddenly, I was alone in a corridor that hadn't been there a moment before.

My heart raced as I spun, trying to get my bearings. The walls here were like mirrors, but instead of my reflection, I saw distorted versions of myself, each consumed by a different shade of envy.

One reflection showed me glaring at Justice with jealousy over his strength and near-immortality. Another depicted me coveting Lisa's magical abilities. Each image struck a chord, revealing desires and resentments I had tried to bury.

"This isn't real," I muttered, trying to steady my nerves. "It's the labyrinth playing tricks."

Yet, as I started forward, the reflections seemed to come alive, their whispers echoing in my mind. Each step became a battle against my darker impulses, the labyrinth forcing me to confront the envy lurking in the depths of my heart.

I clutched the compass tighter, its solid presence a reminder of my purpose. Somewhere in this maze of mirrors and illusions, my team was facing their own battles. Beyond that, the Scales of Balance awaited. If we could overcome our own reflections to reach it.

An image shimmered into existence before me, as tangible as a mirage in the desert. A man materialized, his hair the same shade as Damon's, his features eerily familiar yet frustratingly out of reach in my memory. My heart clenched as I watched the scene unfold.

Damon appeared beside the man, and their laughter echoed off the mirrored walls of the labyrinth. I watched, transfixed, as they sparred together, their movements in perfect sync. The man's eyes gleamed with pride as he clapped Damon on the back.

The image shifted, kaleidoscoping through holidays and birthdays. Warmth and joy radiated from their interactions, a stark contrast to the cold emptiness I felt. In every scene, I stood in the background, a ghostly figure barely visible. The man never once turned his gaze toward me, his attention solely fixed on Damon.

My throat constricted. Tears burned my eyes as I struggled to remember. Was this my father? I couldn't recall a single moment with him. The void in my memory yawned wide, a chasm of loss I couldn't bridge.

Hot, bitter envy surged through me like poison. My hands clenched into fists, nails digging painfully into my palms. I wanted that relationship desperately. The easy camaraderie, the shared laughter, the proud glances. The unfairness of it all made my chest ache, a physical pain that threatened to overwhelm me.

"It's not real," I whispered, hoarse and unconvincing. But the emotions—the longing, the jealousy, the sense of abandonment—those were all too real.



I stumbled forward, reaching out to touch the image of the man who might be my father. My fingers passed through the illusion, leaving me grasping at empty air. A sob tore from my throat, raw and primal.

“Why can’t I remember?” I screamed at the mirrored walls, my reflection fractured and distorted, showing a thousand versions of my anguished face. “Why him and not me?”

The envy coiled tighter around my heart, threatening to suffocate me. It whispered seductive promises. If only I could remember, if only I could have what Damon had, everything would be better.

Yet, as the thought formed, I knew it was a lie. This was the labyrinth’s test. Using my stolen memories against me, twisting my love for my brother into something ugly and corrosive.

With a herculean effort, I forced myself to take a deep breath. “No,” I demanded, my voice gaining strength. “I won’t let this define me. My worth isn’t determined by memories I can’t recall or relationships I might have missed.”

I squared my shoulders, facing my fractured reflections. “I choose to let this go. I choose to be happy for Damon, not envious. I choose to forge my own path, with or without these memories.”

As I spoke the words, something shifted within me. The envy didn’t disappear entirely, but its hold on me weakened. The images faded, the laughter becoming distant echoes.

I took a step forward, then another, moving past the fading illusions. The test wasn’t over, but I had passed this challenge. Whatever lay ahead, I would face it with a clearer heart and a stronger sense of self.

### CHAPTER THIRTY

Suddenly, I felt a cool touch on my arm. I whirled, my heart pounding, only to find Justice standing there. Relief washed over me like a wave, and I sagged against him as he pulled me into his arms. His familiar scent enveloped me, anchoring me back to reality.

“Sawyer, it’s over,” Justice murmured. “Look.” He pointed over my shoulder, his body tense with anticipation.

I turned, following his gaze. My breath caught in my throat as I saw a stone shifting, grinding against its neighbors with an otherworldly rumble. It revealed a golden scale, its surface gleaming in the flickering torchlight. The sight of it sent a jolt of adrenaline through my system, banishing the last vestiges of my envy-induced stupor.

Without thinking, I broke free from Justice’s embrace and rushed toward the scale. My legs felt wobbly, like I was running through water, but fear propelled me forward. The image of Zara’s betrayal flashed in my mind, spurring me on. I couldn’t let her get to it first.

My fingers closed around the cool metal of the scale. When I touched it, a low rumble reverberated through the chamber. Another door materialized in the wall, swinging open to reveal a torch-lit passage beyond.

The sound of stumbling footsteps drew my attention. Damon, Brody, Zara, and Lisa were approaching us, each looking as shaken as I felt. Damon’s usually cocky demeanor was subdued, his face pale and drawn. Brody’s jaw was set in a grim line.

Lisa seemed to be trembling slightly, while Zara... I quickly averted my gaze from her, not trusting myself to maintain a neutral expression.

Questions burned on the tip of my tongue. What had they faced? What visions had the labyrinth shown them? As I opened my mouth to ask, I caught sight of the open passage behind me. The flickering torchlight seemed to beckon us forward, a reminder of our urgent mission.

“There’s no time,” I rasped. “We need to keep moving.”

I clutched the scale tighter, its weight a tangible reminder of what we’d accomplished and what still lay ahead. The passage loomed before us, dark and foreboding despite the torches. Something told me our greatest challenge was yet to come.

“The Aegis serpent,” Brody murmured, voicing the thought we all shared.

With a collective deep breath, we stepped into the passage, the promise of the Crown of Envy and the threat of the Aegis serpent pulling us forward into the unknown.

I handed the scale to Justice and walked in first. The compass pointed down the passageway. I expected it to go on forever, like the Grove of Whispers or the dungeons of Edinburgh, but I was wrong.

As I turned a corner, my breath caught in my throat. There, mere steps away, stood an altar. Atop it, gleaming in the torchlight, was the Crown of Envy.

My eyes widened as I took in the sight of the Aegis serpent, a massive snake, the largest I had ever seen. Its emerald scales shimmered as it slithered over the crown. The snake’s glowing green eyes locked with mine. I sensed its pulsing power, drawing me toward it. A chill ran down my spine, and I instinctively knew I was the one who had to face it.

Brody's hand on my shoulder made me flinch. "Stay back, Sawyer," he insisted, his voice tight with concern. "I'll face it."

I placed my hand on his arm, feeling the tension in his muscles. "No, Brody. This is my destiny. Yours is to guard my back. Can you do that?"

His scowl deepened as he scanned the chamber. "Maci is coming?"

I nodded, my stomach clenching with dread.

"We were betrayed," he growled.

"Yes, unfortunately." My gaze fell on Zara, who was whispering urgently with Lisa. The sight of them made my skin crawl with suspicion.

Brody's grip on my shoulder tightened. "Be careful," he warned.

"I will," I promised, trying to inject more confidence into my voice than I felt.

As Justice stepped toward me, I pressed my finger to his lips. "I need to do this alone," I murmured. "You know it's true. I must reveal my darkest secret. Something I haven't been able to think about for years."

His frown deepened, concern etching lines around his eyes. "What?"

I glanced at Damon, my heart heavy. "I'm the reason my mom died."

Damon paled, his eyes widening in disbelief. "No, that's not possible," he choked out.

Justice's hand clamped onto my arm, his grip almost painful. "I won't stand by and watch you die," he growled.

“I know,” I whispered, slowly backing away. Each step toward the altar felt like I was moving through quicksand, my legs trembling beneath me.

As I faced the hissing serpent, its eyes bored into me, seeming to pierce my soul. My legs shook, threatening to give way beneath me as I opened the memory I had tried to bury for so long.

Tears welled in my eyes, blurring my vision. “When I was seven,” I began, my voice quivering, “I met a man—a vampire. I didn’t know what he was. He was so charming and kind, and I... I told him about our home, about Mom.”

Damon’s sharp intake of breath cut through the silence. He stepped closer. “What are you saying, Sawyer?”

I swallowed hard, the bitterness of the truth coating my tongue. “That vampire used the information I gave him to find us. He came to our house because of me. I led him right to our doorstep. I didn’t know, I was just a kid, but...it’s my fault Mom died.”

The cave fell silent in the significance of my confession. I felt Damon’s eyes on me, anger and sorrow radiating from him in waves. The silence stretched on, each second feeling like an eternity as I waited, my heart pounding so hard I thought it might burst from my chest.

I braced myself, not for the serpent’s reaction, but for my brother’s. The truth I had carried for so long was finally out, and I felt both lighter and more vulnerable than ever before. Whatever came next, the serpent’s judgment or my brother’s response, nothing would ever be the same again.

“But you weren’t there when Mom died,” Damon stated behind me, his voice thick with confusion. “I was the one who found her.”

I turned to face him, my body trembling under the burden of my confession. “I saw

the man leave the house,” I choked out, the words burning my throat. “He had blood running down his chin. He laughed at me, thanking me for allowing him to kill the hunter who murdered his mate.” I bowed my head, unable to meet Damon’s gaze. “I’m sorry, Damon. It’s my fault.”

Suddenly, Damon’s arms were around me, pulling me close. I collapsed against his chest, sobs wracking my body. His shirt grew damp with my tears as he held me tightly.

“It’s not, Sawyer,” he rumbled. “You weren’t responsible. I forgive you.”

A loud hiss cut through the emotional moment, making me flinch. “You are worthy,” a slippery voice echoed in my mind. “You have earned the crown.”

My heart clenched. The snake was using telepathy to communicate.

I pulled away from Damon, wiping my tears with shaking hands. The serpent’s eyes seemed sincere, but wariness kept me on edge. “Thank you, Damon,” I murmured, slowly backing away from him.

He clasped my wrist, his grip desperate. “Sawyer, no. Don’t do it.”

I gently pried his fingers away, my heart breaking at the fear in his eyes. “It’s my destiny, Damon. Whatever happens, it was meant to be.”

With leaden feet, I approached the serpent. It revealed its fangs, and I froze, my muscles tensing for an attack. However, its gaze wasn’t on me. I glanced over my shoulder, following its line of sight to Zara and Lisa.

I drew a deep breath that did little to calm my racing heart and reached for the Crown of Envy. The serpent rolled through it, coiling up on the altar, its hiss raising goosebumps on my arms.

I won't kill you. Its voice slithered through my mind.

Relief flooded me, quickly followed by a new wave of dread. If not me, who?

The serpent's gaze remained fixed behind me. Instinct took over, and I lunged for the Crown, my fingers closing around the cool metal.

"She has it. Come forth, Maci."

The words hit me like a physical blow. That wasn't Zara's voice. It was Lisa's.

Justice's panicked yell cut through my shock. "Sawyer, look out. Behind you!"

I whirled, my heart leaping into my throat as I found myself nose-to-nose with Maci. Her eyes gleamed with triumph as she snatched the crown from my grasp. Before I could react, she shoved me hard. The world spun as I flew back, and pain exploded through my body as I smashed into the altar.

Through blurred vision, I saw the serpent lunging toward Lisa. Maci grabbed her hand, and before the snake's fangs could connect, Lisa's gaze met mine. Sorrow and desperation swam in her eyes.

"She promised to take me to my phoenix," Lisa rushed out. "I had no choice."

In a blink, they vanished, leaving us alone with the enraged Aegis serpent. The reality of what happened crashed over me like a tidal wave. We had lost the Crown of Envy, betrayed by someone we thought was a friend.

The chamber filled with the serpent's furious hisses and our own shocked gasps. As I struggled to my feet, pain lanced my body, the magnitude of our failure threatening to overwhelm me. We had come so far, faced so much, only to have victory snatched away at the last moment.

The bitter taste of betrayal mixed with the metallic tang of blood in my mouth. We had lost the Crown of Envy. Betrayed by a friend.

As I regarded my team's stunned faces, one thought echoed in my mind.

What do we do now?