

November 3, early afternoon

Her head hurt.

Sophie opened her eyes to Ms. DiCicco's empty classroom. *Almost empty classroom*: James was staring at her.

"Hm? Sorry, what did you say?"

He gave a tentative smile. "I was just saying, about your phone. It's in the front office."

She frowned. "How do you know that?"

"Will told me." His smile got bigger. "And he said to apologize."

She made a noise somewhere between a cough and a laugh. "Sure he did."

His face fell. "You don't think I'm telling the truth?"

"I don't think Will was telling the truth if he, um, *when* he told you to apologize." She hesitated. "You're friends with Will?"

James nodded but his eyes went to the floor. "Oh, yeah. We're...we're tight." He looked up. "Anyway, you better go before bio."

Sophie nodded. At the door, she looked back at him. James hadn't moved – he was sitting in the empty room, staring at the white board.

She came around the corridor and stopped at a wall of students. Kevin was standing on the outskirts, looking at his phone.

"What's going on?"

Kevin's gaze stayed on his phone. "I guess that autistic kid started a fight with two others and they messed him up. Not sure what he was thinking, maybe they stole his fidget spinner or something. 911 got called, and we're stuck here waiting for the dust to settle."

Sophie rubbed her temples. None of what Kevin just said was making sense. And freaking *Will* had been in her head. And Anna's body was...

I need my phone.

The crowd thinned and she strode to the office and approached the front desk. A police officer was walking out of the principal's office. He gave her a curt nod and stepped outside.

"Miss Sophie, what can I do you for?" the receptionist asked.

“Hm? Oh, I...” Sophie’s head was throbbing. *Is James friends with Will? Do they even talk? This is never going to work.* “I think someone turned in my phone?”

To her surprise, Sophie saw the receptionist nod and retrieved her phone from a drawer in a desk. Smiling, she put it on the counter. Then the announcement came: the rest of the day’s classes were canceled because of “an incident.”

Sophie followed a group of students out of the school, phone clutched in her right hand. *Maybe I’ll get home and then call and report it. That’ll give me some time to decide what I’m going to say, how I’m going to explain...*

She froze. Down the sidewalk, Genevieve and Sage were hugging. Will stood next to them, looking as doofy and awkward as always. The hug ended. Will put his hand on Sage’s arm and spoke to her; she wiped her face and nodded.

They all got into Will’s stupid car and drove off.

Sophie felt like a rock in the middle of a stream – her classmates parted around her and re-joined a moment later, talking animatedly about what had happened. Pieces of conversation pushed at her skull and fell away: ambulance, hospitalization, police cars, suspensions.

Sophie texted Genevieve: *Hey, do you know what’s going on with Sage?*

Three dots, then a reply: *No, still haven’t seen her.*

Then: *Maybe take a break from worrying about her? Try to focus on other things?*

Sophie re-read the messages multiple times. *Why is Genevieve lying to me?* she thought. *Why were she and Sage both with Will? What the heck was going on?*

Someone grabbed her shoulder. “Sophie, are you okay?” Kevin said.

A pair of sophomore girls side-eyed them as they walked past, then giggled. Kevin removed his hand from her shoulder.

“Me? Oh, yeah, I’m fine,” she said. “Hey, do you...do you know if anything happened to Sage? Like, did she somehow get hurt in the fight, or something?”

Kevin wrinkled his nose. “Sage?”

“Alejo. River’s sister.”

“Oh, *her*,” he said. “No, she didn’t get hurt, but her brother’s at the police station.”

“Wait, what? He was one of the ones that fought the...” Sophie fumbled for an inclusive label. “...the other one?”

He shook his head. “No, but he was there when it started. I’ve been texting with him, he went with them so that he could explain what he saw – witness, and all. Listen, if you want to talk sometime, maybe --”

They both jumped as a car blared its horn. “Anyway,” Kevin continued. “Um. See ya later, I guess.”

Kevin crossed through the parking lot and joined the line of cars waiting to exit on to Main Street. *Witness.*

Sophie made her way to her car. In the middle of the parking lot, a spike of pain shot through her skull, doubling her over. Someone’s thoughts were in her mind – not Will’s, but more distinct than the other voices usually were. “*The Devourer awakes. One month until it all ends.*”