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Opening extract from

As I Descended

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THE CHARM'S WOUND UP

The Ouija board was Lily's idea.

Maria warned her not to go through with it, but Lily didn't listen. She went onto eBay while Maria was at soccer practice and bought the prettiest board she could find. A "genuine antique," she called it.

Only when she showed it to Maria and Brandon that night she pronounced it "gen-you-wine," showing off the Southern drawl everyone teased her for. Soon after that they opened the bottle of cheap white wine left over from Delilah's eighteenth birthday party, and every five minutes either Brandon or Maria would utter the words "gen-you-wine an-TEEK!" and collapse into giggles.

Lily pretended to take offense the first few times, but by her last Styrofoam cup of Chardonnay Lily was adding an extra *I* to

every word she said. “Sit” became “See-it.” “Drink” was “dree-enk.” When she started calling Maria “Mariah,” like Mariah Carey, Brandon confiscated her cup.

Maria had been worried about Lily all day. She wasn’t normally this loud, or this giggly. And Lily never drank—she didn’t even like to take her painkillers. Normally she sat at the edge of the party sipping seltzer and watching their friends with her hawk eyes to make sure no one spilled anything on their plush dorm-room carpet.

Part of Maria wanted to declare the evening over, escort Lily back to their room, put her in bed, and keep an eye on her for the rest of the night to make sure she didn’t do anything else out of the ordinary.

But Maria couldn’t focus on Lily right now. Not with that Ouija board sitting next to her.

This board was the real deal. Maria could feel it. It wasn’t any of that plastic Milton Bradley crap. This board meant business.

It was after lights-out in the dorm, so the three of them kept their laughter to whispers. Everyone was supposed to be in their rooms tucked into bed by ten p.m. if they didn’t want to get written up by one of the dorm monitors who prowled the halls.

None of the staff ever checked the old dining hall, though. Most of the students never ventured here after dark. There were rumors about the room. Scary stories the younger kids whispered about at sleepovers.

Maria had seen enough to know those kinds of stories were

usually bullshit. The truth was a lot scarier than anything little kids could imagine.

But Lily had thought the old dining hall was the perfect place for their first séance, and Maria had given up arguing about it. Lily was smart—smarter than Maria; they'd both known that much from the beginning—but she didn't know the first thing about what that Ouija board could do. She'd begged, though, and begged some more, and she'd smiled sweetly and said pretty things, and finally, Maria had given in.

Maria probably should've put up a fight. It was just that she hated fighting with Lily more than almost anything. It was always better when she knew she could glance over at Lily and be certain her girlfriend would smile that warm, secret smile she saved just for Maria.

Besides, it might not work. It had been years since Maria had last tried to talk to the spirits. Maybe they'd forgotten her.

By the time they'd poured out the last of the wine, Lily and Brandon were giggling so much Maria wondered if they even remembered the board still sitting in its cardboard box. Maria could never forget something like that. Her eyes were on Brandon—he was telling them about the giant beetle he'd found in the flowers Mateo had given him for their two-week anniversary, and his epic screams that had brought the dorm monitors running, convinced he was having an epileptic fit—but through it all, the board kept humming to her. The longer it went on, the more Maria ached to know if the spirits really did remember.

So when Brandon wrapped up his story and Lily pulled the

candles out of her bag and said, "Shall we begin?" Maria didn't hesitate. She was ready.

Brandon shrugged and took another swallow from his cup. Maria lit the candles while Lily set up her phone's audio recorder.

Maria hadn't wanted to do this, but there was no going back now. Not while Lily was giving her that smile.

Not while the board was still humming to her.

Brandon covered his yawn as Maria lined up the candles, following instructions Lily had found on some website. Brandon was designated the note taker and given a pad and pencil. His job was to copy down whatever the planchette spelled out.

Brandon had played with Ouija boards enough as a kid to know it wasn't going to spell out anything more than a few fart jokes, so he didn't mind this job. Plus, as an added bonus, this way he got to keep drinking. At their usual parties, when all the popular seniors got together to drink and flirt in someone's room after lights-out, Brandon never got in more than a few swallows. The other guys were always grabbing his drink out of his hand and then pounding Brandon on the shoulder too hard, howling laughter as they thanked him and guzzled his beer.

Lily pulled the board out of its packaging. It was bigger than Brandon had expected. At least two feet wide. You could tell it was old from the cracks in the paint and the worn-smooth edges of the wood. But it was still nice-looking, with artsy paintings in the corners for the sun and moon and fancy calligraphy on all the letters and numbers. The words "YES" and "NO" were

carved into the corners in a fancy font. At the top was an elaborate drawing of a single eye, wide-open, with a deep black pupil, and at the bottom, the words "GOOD BYE" was drawn next to a closed eye.

Brandon didn't care one way or the other about Ouija boards, but those eyes were still creepy. No matter which way he leaned in his seat, it felt like that one at the top was watching him.

Lily slid the board onto the table and set the wooden planchette gently on top. It was flat and heart-shaped with another deep black eye carved into the wood, right below the hole that was cut to show which letter the planchette had chosen. Brandon took another sip of his drink and avoided its gaze.

Lily took out the poem she'd printed from the website and began to read. Her giggliness from before was long gone, and she was using a deep, serious voice, like something she must've seen in a horror movie. Before she'd finished the first line, Brandon had to bite his cheek to keep from laughing out loud.

"'Tis time, 'tis time.
Round about the talking board,
Candles burn, the charm's own chord.
Open, locks, whoever knocks.
We, the living, offer you vox.'"

Brandon stifled his laughter while the girls reached into the center of the table. Each of them laid two fingers on the planchette. Since he was the only one not absorbed in the utter

seriousness of the thing, Brandon was the only one to notice the dorm's two cats, Rhett and Scarlett, nosing their way into the room from the staff kitchen.

Brandon could've sworn he'd locked that door when he and the girls first came in. The main door that opened into the hallway, too.

Oh, well. He must've remembered wrong. He'd had kind of a lot of wine.

Brandon seemed to be the only one who'd noticed it was getting colder, too. Three candles grouped in front of him flickered, their flames turning blue, as though they felt the chill. Brandon shrugged on the Acheron Academy soccer team sweatshirt Mateo had left in his room the night before.

Neither of the girls looked up at the movement. They both had their eyes fixed on the board. Maria wasn't even blinking.

Several minutes passed without anything happening. Brandon yawned again. He should really be studying for the physics quiz tomorrow, but it had been so long since Maria had wanted to hang out with him alone. Well, alone plus Lily.

Brandon had always liked Lily. Or tried to, anyway, for Maria's sake, once he found out the two of them had taken the whole roommate thing to the next level. Lily was pretty. She was smart, too, and she was nice enough, if you were talking to her about things like homework or teachers or what she was going to major in, which were the only kinds of things Brandon ever talked to her about.

But there was something strange about Lily. Something he'd

never been able to put his finger on. Something that made him want to avoid getting stuck alone in a room with her.

Lily put up with him, but only for Maria's sake. So did most everyone in that crowd. Being best friends with Maria had lots of benefits. She was the second-most-popular girl in school. After Delilah, obviously.

Though to Brandon's surprise, in the past couple of weeks since he'd started hooking up with Mateo, things had been looking up for him on the popularity front. He'd been excited to finally have a boyfriend, of course—it still made him grin to think about it—but he hadn't realized it would make the others treat him differently, too. Brandon had always lived on the periphery of the popular crowd, but Mateo had set up a permanent residence right in the middle of it years ago.

But then, that was Acheron's social universe. When you were fat and gay and on financial aid and you spent your free nights alone in your room watching old *Battlestar Galactica* videos, most of the blond-haired, blue-eyed Old South plantation owners' great-great-great-great-great-grandkids didn't have much reason to bother with you. Unless you were hooking up with one of their own.

Of course, Brandon *was* a blond-haired, blue-eyed Old South plantation owner's great-great-great-great-great-grandkid, too. He'd just had the misfortune of being born several generations after the family money had withered away.

Meanwhile, Maria and Mateo both had the Spanish names, dark eyes, and brown skin that would've kept them off those Old South plantations—unless they'd come with a price tag.

The irony had never been lost on Brandon. But sometimes he actually found it preferable to think the reason he didn't fit in at Acheron was that he was poor, or that he was gay, or that he was fat. It was better than thinking the problem was the fact that he was . . . him.

Anyway, he liked hanging out with his friends. Some of the straight guys he'd gotten to know through his work-study job in the athletics office were cool to him, and as long as he had Maria, he could deal with the rest.

Maria was the best friend he'd ever had. The only one who'd really mattered. He could never have lasted at this place if it hadn't been for Maria, giggling with him at room parties and muttering jokes into his ear during pep rallies and sneaking into his room after lights-out to whisper under the covers while his roommate snored in the next bed.

Tonight had been a fun night. Up until the girls had gotten all serious about talking to ghosts or whatever.

The planchette on the table hadn't budged an inch. Lily was watching Maria from across the table, her eyebrows lifted. Brandon suspected she was getting bored too.

Maria had her eyes closed. She was sitting so still Brandon wondered if she'd fallen asleep.

Maria was awake. More awake, in fact, than she could ever remember being.

She should've done this a long time ago.

Lily and Brandon were the only two people Maria trusted in

the world, but she knew even they had never quite believed her when she'd told them about the things that happened when she was a kid.

That strange connection she used to feel. The shapes that used to flit in the corner of her eye. It had been years since Maria had felt that sensation.

She felt it now. Every cell in Maria's body was buzzing.

The feeling was warm. Potent. Almost arousing. But sharp, too, somehow.

It wasn't a pleasant feeling, but it wasn't painful either. It was—necessary. Vital.

Maria never wanted to stop feeling it.

She'd give up anything—anything but Lily—if only she could keep feeling this.

She was intensely aware of everything that was happening in the room. The cats watching them from the foot of the table, tails twitching. Lily's growing impatience on the other side of the planchette. Each tiny movement of Brandon's lips and throat as he slurped the remains of his wine.

She was aware that the room's temperature had dropped at least five degrees since Lily placed the planchette on the board.

And she was aware that they weren't alone anymore. If they ever had been.

Maria opened her eyes.

"What is your name?" she said.

Brandon giggled at the sound of Maria's slow, solemn voice. This wasn't how Brandon was used to hearing her.

Then, Brandon had only ever heard Maria speak to the living.

She closed her eyes again and put Brandon out of her mind. She blocked out everything but her questions for the spirit in the room with them.

Who are you?

What is your name?

What do you want from us?

The wooden planchette quivered under her hand. Maria opened her eyes.

Lily sat up straight in her seat. Her fingers were pressing down too hard on the planchette, but that shouldn't matter. If the spirit wanted to communicate, it wouldn't care about a little extra weight. In Maria's experience, spirits didn't care about much of anything the living did or didn't do.

The planchette slid toward the row of letters at the top of the board.

"Okay, which of you is doing that?" Brandon said.

Maria ignored him. The room was getting colder.

Something hissed in the corner. Maria didn't move, but Lily jumped and Brandon yelped. Then he let out a forced chuckle and said, "It was one of the cats. Don't mind me. I'm just quietly losing it over here."

The planchette settled over the *M*.

"*M*," Lily read. "Brandon, write down *M*."

"Shh," Maria said, as softly as she could. Lily should've known better than to talk while she was touching the planchette.

Maria couldn't let herself get distracted. It had been years

since she'd last tried to contact something, but she hadn't forgotten the basics.

"Please continue, spirit," Maria said out loud, ignoring Brandon's muffled laughter. "Your name begins with *M*. What comes next?"

The planchette didn't move. But the cats did.

They'd been watching the girls' hands on the board, but now, in an identical movement, their heads rose, arcing, their eyes fixed on a single point in the air Maria couldn't see. Neither cat made a sound, but their heads followed the same path over the table and across the room. Then they stopped, staring into the far corner of the ceiling.

The hair on the back of Maria's neck prickled. Lily and Brandon shivered. The air around them was frigid.

Maria followed the cats' gaze. The antique chandelier's illumination didn't reach that corner. The shadow on the ceiling wasn't shaped the way you'd expect a shadow to be, with clean edges that followed the path of the light. Instead, it was jagged on one side. As if something were perched in that corner, clinging to the wall, hunched up on knees and elbows.

Maria closed her eyes again and willed her heart to stop pounding. Showing fear was the surest way to anger a spirit.

Maria knew how to do this part.

She'd known ever since she first glanced into the old mirror that hung on her grandmother's back porch when she was five. Maria always liked to play on the porch when they went to visit her grandparents, even though no one else used it and it wasn't

kept up anymore. The wind blew fiercely back there, even on calm days. The half-wild garden that ran along that side of the house had grown over, and vines crept up onto the rotting wood floor. It didn't have much furniture anymore. Just an old swing that Maria's nanny, Altagracia, warned her never to play on in case the rusted chains gave way.

And the mirror. An old cracked glass hanging from a nail that jutted out of the brick. The mirror needed a good polishing, but it never seemed to swing on its perch, no matter how bad the wind got. Maria didn't know why her grandmother kept the mirror out on the porch, but it was always there. Even in winter, when the glass frosted over.

Whenever Maria played out back, sooner or later she'd glance toward the mirror. Every time, she felt it. It started on the back of her neck, then slid down her spine and along her arms and legs, giving her goose bumps regardless of the weather. Every time, she'd go over to the mirror and stare into it.

She never saw anything except her own reflection, but it felt like something was tugging at her. Pulling her forward. Before she got old enough to know better, Maria used to think something was trying to pull her *into* the mirror itself.

Once she looked into the mirror, she never moved. She only stood there, gazing at her own face until Altagracia called her to come inside.

Maria drew in a deep breath and forced herself to shake the memory. The mirror on the porch was a long time ago.

She couldn't forget where she was right now. She couldn't lose focus.

She couldn't risk getting lost in the mirror again.

"If you're here," Maria said, her gaze locked on the planchette in front of her, "if you have anything you'd like to tell us, please do. We'd like to listen."

Above them, something knocked three times.

Loudly. The sound thundered in their ears and lingered, echoing.

"What the hell was that?" Brandon said.

"Probably a sophomore playing some dumb game," Lily said.

"It didn't sound like any sophomore," Brandon said. "It sounded like somebody knocking at the gates of hell."

The planchette quivered.

Lily and Brandon were both sitting forward. Brandon had his pad ready, a big *M* scrawled in the middle of it. The planchette moved faster than it had before, coming to a stop over the *A*.

"*M*, *A*," Brandon read. "Bet it's the ghost of Marie Antoinette. Ask her if she can get me the answers for the history test next week."

No one laughed.

Brandon kept talking anyway, his voice pitched higher than usual. "By the way, does anyone else smell something baking?"

The planchette was still moving.

The next three letters were *R*, *I*, *A*. Then the planchette stopped.

"That's not funny, Ree," Lily said. "I thought we said we were going to take this seriously."

Maria took her hand off the planchette. She was sweating despite the chill.

"I didn't do that," Maria said.

Lily sat back in her chair, her wide-set blue eyes narrowed, her forehead creased. "Then is this something that happens sometimes? Is your ghost coming back from the future to mess with us or something?"

"Couldn't it be someone else named Maria?" Brandon interrupted. "Why don't we ask its last name?"

Lily rolled her eyes, but from the look on his face Maria knew Brandon wasn't joking. She wondered if he'd seen the cats too.

Maria wished she could be alone so she could do this right, but that was the thing about Acheron: solitude didn't exist inside these old white walls.

Maria didn't want to touch the planchette again. Her desperate need to connect with the spirits had evaporated the moment the board finished spelling out her name.

Plus, she could smell baking, too. It smelled like empanadas. The kind Altagracia used to make on Sunday afternoons.

Maria used to like that smell. Tonight it made her nervous.

But it was dangerous to leave a Ouija session unfinished. She remembered that much from the "games" she'd played as a kid. Once you'd opened a link to the spirit world, you had to close it. If you didn't, the spirits would be free to roam as they pleased.

Maria put a fingertip back on the planchette. Lily did the

same. The dusty chandelier over their heads swayed gently and soundlessly.

Except—even with all the windows wide-open, there was no breeze. Not tonight. The air in the room was heavy and still. Heavy, still, and cold.

The old dining hall was on the first floor of their dorm, right next to Maria and Lily's room, but it wasn't used anymore. A massive cafeteria had been built in the new student life center on the other side of the hill years before any of them had come to Acheron. This room was much too small for actual dining anyway. It was the size of a small classroom, with just one long wooden table and a straight row of stiff-backed chairs on either side.

Until tonight Maria had only ever been in this room for a minute at a time, cutting through it on her way to the staff kitchen to rinse her coffee mug or avoid one of her so-called friends. But for all the years Maria had lived in this dorm, every time she'd been in this room—and sometimes when she'd only passed by the door in the hall—she'd felt it. The tingly sensation she remembered from staring into that mirror on the porch.

That was why Lily had suggested this room for their first session with the board. That, and because the old dining hall had never been renovated.

The Acheron campus was a converted old plantation, one of the oldest in Virginia. Most of the school buildings were new, but their dorm, where all the high school students lived, had been the plantation's big house, where the master and his

wife and children lived. It was huge and ostentatious—a typical plantation house—and it had been remodeled and expanded over the years, with new technology put in and more rooms added to the wings. This part of the house, though, was original. For all any of them knew, the table they were sitting at was the same one where Acheron's original owners, the Siward family, had been served dinner by their slaves. The room had high ceilings, a huge fireplace, dusty landscape paintings in moldy frames, and a diamond-patterned wood floor that had probably been beautiful before it was scraped raw by generations of chairs. In the far corner was a rocking chair too rickety for anyone to sit in. The lower-school students liked to spook each other, saying they'd walked by the old dining hall late at night and seen the chair rocking with no one in it.

The nicest artifact in the room, though, was the ancient chandelier over their heads. It had surprised them all by lighting up when Brandon climbed onto the table and pulled the cord, shaking up enough dust they were still sneezing an hour later.

The shadow in the corner of the ceiling was ten feet from the chandelier. It wasn't moving, but Maria could still see those bent knees and elbows. Crouched. Waiting.

Waiting for what?

The planchette started moving again before Maria could ask the spirit another question.

"What's it doing?" Brandon said.

Maria didn't know. She'd never seen this happen before.

The planchette slid into the top right corner of the board.

That didn't make sense. There weren't any letters or pictures there.

It slid to the bottom left corner. Then the top left. Then the bottom right.

"What does that mean?" Lily said.

A faint hum buzzed in Maria's ear. It didn't sound like it was coming from the board this time. It was as if someone was humming a tune.

"Who are you?" Maria whispered. She kept her voice low. No one but the spirit needed to hear. "What happened to you?"

The planchette slid toward the dead center of the board. Then it moved fast, so fast Maria and Lily had to sit up in their chairs to keep up with it. It slid out in an arc, then down, then over, in a figure eight. Then another figure eight. The same pattern, three times, four, without stopping.

"How the hell are you *doing* that?"

Brandon really couldn't tell. The girls were both biting their lips, leaning over the board as if they were trying to keep up with the planchette's movements instead of the other way around. Brandon watched their arms but he couldn't see their muscles flexing, the way you'd think would happen if you were trying to swoop a chunk of wood in an enormous figure eight.

Then the planchette moved back to the alphabet at the top of the board. It slid from letter to letter, moving so fast Brandon had to lean all the way over the board to see where it paused. It started at *F*, then moved to *I*, then *R*, then *E*.

"Fire," Brandon whispered. He shivered.

"Is there something you'd like to tell us?" Maria murmured into the still-swerving planchette. "Do you have a message for the living?"

The planchette started moving even faster as soon as the words had left Maria's lips. Brandon did his best to scribble down all the letters.

MARIA MARIA MARIA
USTED CONSEGUIRÁ LO QUE MÁS DESEA
MARIA

"Usted," Lily whispered, her eyes flashing as she followed the planchette's movement. "That looks Spanish. What does it mean, Ree? What's it saying?"

Brandon expected Maria to flinch, the way she always did when someone brought up the fact that she knew Spanish. Maria liked to pretend she was just as pasty white as Brandon and Lily, even though anyone who looked at her knew better.

Except—Maria had her eyes closed. It didn't look like she'd heard Lily at all.

How was Maria moving the planchette with her eyes closed?

"What's going on?" Brandon whispered to Lily.

Lily shook her head. Her eyes never left the board. Her long blond hair was falling out of its neat French braid. Brandon would've thought she'd whip out her bobby pins and fix it back up—Lily hated for anything to be out of place—but this was a different Lily from the one Brandon knew. This Lily was bending forward over the board, sweat clinging to her temples. Her eyes

were fixed on the planchette, waiting for it to move again.

The pointer swung to the *C*.

"C," Brandon read, scribbling it down and looking back toward the board to make sure he didn't miss any more letters. But it was moving slower this time, looping around the board, until it finally spelled out:

CAWDOR KINGSLEY

"Whoa," Brandon muttered. "This thing must think it's talking to Delilah."

As soon as he'd said it, Brandon wished he could take it back. Maria's mouth was set in a straight, tight line. He'd hurt her feelings.

Then her arms jerked to the left so fast Brandon was worried she'd get hurt for real.

Lily moved too. It looked like the board was dragging her.

The planchette was pointing to the word "NO" in the far corner of the board. Then it moved back toward the center, only to jerk back again to the "NO." It moved there two more times. Then three.

NO. NO. NO. NO. NO.

"All right, we get it," Brandon said. "You said 'no,' right?"

The planchette was still moving. Back to the alphabet this time. More Spanish.

LO QUE ES SUYO ES TUYO

Brandon rubbed his forehead, trying to figure out what that could mean. He'd taken a year of Spanish in middle school before he transferred to Acheron and started French. The first

sentence, the one with *"usted"* in it, had meant something like *You will have what you most desire.* And *"lo que es suyo es tuyo"* meant something like *That which is his is yours.* Well, it could be either "his" or "hers."

The planchette was still moving.

LO QUE ES SEGUNDO SERA PRIMERO

That was a little easier to translate—*That which is second will be first*—but it still didn't mean anything to Brandon.

"All righty, then," he muttered. "Thanks, spirits, for your ever-so-clear words of wisdom."

He waited for one of the girls to shush him, but neither seemed to have heard. Lily's eyes were fixed on the planchette, but they looked empty, vacant. Across from her, Maria's entire body trembled except for her hand. Her hand, resting on the planchette, was perfectly still.

This was all getting a little too intense for Brandon.

"Hey," he said, leaning over the board. The planchette started to move again, slowly this time, in plodding figure eights. "Hey, ghostie, hey, Casper, buddy, what about me? Why does Maria get all the love? I'm doing all this work writing down your fancy foreign poetry. Don't I get a fortune cookie of my own?"

The girls didn't bother to chastise Brandon this time either. He wondered if they could speak at all.

That idea scared him. He was about to suggest they stop playing when he heard a strange sound from above.

Brandon looked up.

He was the only one. The girls were both bent over the

planchette. It had come to a sudden stop in the center of the board.

The cats were still staring at something in the corner of the ceiling that Brandon couldn't see.

What he did see was the chandelier. Swinging on its cord, hard, as though someone invisible were pushing it. Or riding on it, pumping their legs, like a swing.

The planchette swerved so fast it almost skidded off the table. Brandon leaned over the board again. He didn't bother trying to write anything down this time. He couldn't possibly keep up. The board went to *H*, then *A*.

Lily and Maria both had their eyes closed now. The chandelier was rocking harder.

HABRA TRES PRESAGIOS

There will be three . . . something. Brandon had never seen that last word, *"presagios,"* before.

There wasn't time to dwell on it. The planchette was still flying over the letters. He didn't realize it had switched to English until it had already spelled out the same set of words twice.

THIS IS HOW IT ENDS
THIS IS HOW IT ENDS

"How *what* ends?" Brandon whispered.

The planchette jerked in the girls' hands and shifted back to the middle of the alphabet. Moving just as fast as before, it spelled out:

MEMENTO MORI

Brandon rubbed his forehead again. That wasn't Spanish, but he knew that phrase. He'd seen it before. It was Latin. He tried to

remember what it meant. Something about—

A jagged piece of glass flew past Brandon's face, missing his eye by an inch. A split second later the chandelier crashed down onto the table, smashing the Ouija board into shards.

Brandon screamed. Pieces of glass whizzed around him and tinkled onto the floor by the hundreds, the thousands, smashing against the wood and shattering into jagged slivers.

Brandon waited to feel the first one slice into his skin. He burrowed his head into his arms to protect his face.

Then it was over.

The room was pitch-dark and silent. Brandon shook so hard he could barely breathe.

It took him half a minute to realize he wasn't hurt. The glass crunched thick under the soles of his sneakers when he dropped his feet to the floor.

Then he remembered the girls.

"Maria?" Brandon peered into the dark. A blurry shape was huddled in the chair where Maria had been. "Ree? Lily? Are you all right?"

One of the girls made a sound like a whimper.

"Hey." Brandon crept toward Maria, trying to avoid the biggest chunks of glass, afraid of what he'd find if he got too close. One of the cats brushed against his leg, its back arched, hissing. Somewhere far away, footsteps pounded down the hall. His vision was adjusting to the darkness. "Talk to me, Ree. Say something."

Maria was still sitting in her chair. Her eyes were closed. Brandon's heart leaped in his chest.

"Maria!" He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her.

"What?" Maria blinked.

Brandon exhaled. He wanted to slap her for scaring him so badly.

Maria's eyes were empty, but she could sit up, so she must be all right. Brandon went to the other side of the table to check on Lily.

It was a miracle the table hadn't collapsed. The chandelier looked like it weighed about a thousand pounds.

Lily was on the floor, but she was sitting up too, rubbing at the dust in her eyes. "Did it work?" she said when Brandon reached her.

"I don't know what the hell it did," Brandon said. "But we are never, ever playing that game again."

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Brandon's heart sped back up. Then he realized this sound was *normal*, not whatever that bizarre knocking had been before. This time, someone—a human someone—was pounding on the door to the staff kitchen.

"Open up!" It was Ross, the first-floor dorm monitor. "Guys, open this door right now or this will be a lot worse for you!"

Wait. Wasn't that door unlocked? Didn't the cats come through it earlier? How did—

Never mind that. Brandon had bigger problems.

He stepped gingerly over the broken glass, cracked the door, and peeked through the gap. Ross pushed past him, slamming the door open wide and flicking on the overhead switch. Brandon blinked against the sudden light.

The shadows that had clung to the corners of the room were gone. All he could see were dust and cobwebs and some revolting fungus creeping along the edges of the rug.

This was it for Brandon. He'd been caught out after lights-out once already this year. Tonight would be strike two. And the empty wine bottle would mean an automatic phone call to their parents, which meant he could count on being grounded all summer long.

But Ross didn't care about any of that. He hadn't even noticed Brandon yet. His eyes were locked on Lily.

All the Acheron staff, even the twentysomething dorm monitors like Ross, who just worked here for the free housing, were obsessed with Lily. If the disabled girl got hurt on their watch, there'd be hell to pay.

Ross texted for backup and helped Lily to her feet. Brandon gathered up her crutches from where they'd fallen and passed them to Ross. Lily glared at both of them.

"See who all's out there and get rid of them, will you?" Ross told Brandon, gesturing toward the main door. He picked up the wine bottle from where it had rolled under the table and shook his head.

Brandon wondered how much this would cost to clean up. Not to mention the priceless antique that had been destroyed. *Antiques,* if you counted the Ouija board.

He tiptoed over the glass shards and pulled on the knob of the main door. It was unlocked, but now it seemed to be jammed. He had to throw his shoulder into the door to crack it open.

On the other side, a group of pajama-clad freshmen were gathered in the hallway. Felicia was at the very front. She was his friend Austin's kid sister, but lately Brandon had realized he liked Felicia a lot better than he liked her brother. Felicia brushed her tangled hair back from her face and smiled at Brandon, but she looked worried. That crash must've echoed through the whole building.

"Jeez, are you okay?" Felicia asked.

"Just an accident, guys," Brandon told her and the others. "Ross is here. He said for you all to go back to bed."

Felicia pouted. Brandon shrugged and whispered, "Sorry, Fee," trying to make sure she knew it wasn't personal. She gave him another small smile and left, pulling her friends with her. Brandon closed the door again—it moved easily this time—and turned back to the room. Maria was standing up, still blinking slowly.

"All right," Ross said. "It's a miracle none of you got hurt with all that glass flying, but since nobody needs to go to the health center you should just go back to your rooms. I'll call maintenance and write up the incident report tomorrow, and the dean will call your parents. How the heck did you pull the chandelier down, anyway?"

"We didn't pull it," Brandon said. "It fell."

"Uh-huh." Ross ran a hand through his thick brown hair and sighed. "Just go. Watch out for the broken glass. Lily, do you need help getting back?"

"Like I said, I'm *fine*," Lily snapped.

* * *

Maria could hear the others talking, but they were far away. It felt like she was alone at the bottom of a cave, listening to the faint echo of distant voices on the surface. By the end of the session, that was all she'd wanted. She'd pleaded silently, over and over, for the board, for everything, to go away, to leave her alone.

Now she'd gotten her wish. The thing in the corner was gone. The room was empty.

But the shards of the Ouija board on the table—something was nagging at her. Something important.

It wouldn't be until hours later, when she was struggling to fall asleep, that Maria would remember what it was.

The board had been destroyed before she could tell it goodbye.