

Seconds Before Sunrise

Jessica

It was a humid night in August, and the river trickled past us as if most of the water had disintegrated during the previous months. It skimmed over the rocks, and I hesitated to add to the collection by tossing pebbles across the already waning surface. The darkness was enough.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Crystal leaned against my arm, and I nodded because it was.

The park was secluded, hanging onto the edge of Hayworth, but it seemed to stretch for miles, past Hayworth, past Kansas, and past wherever my thoughts could take me.

“I knew you’d like it, Jess,” Robb said, plopping down next to me. “Too bad we can’t come here all of the time.”

I wanted to ask why, but I already knew the answer.

Trespassing signs littered the sidewalks surrounding it. I understood the legal ramifications, but it seemed pointless to contain such a consoling place to a single family—the Welborns.

“I’m surprised more kids don’t break in,” I admitted.

“I’m not,” Crystal said, pointing her thumb over her shoulder. The forest was a cluster of shadows behind her. “That’s where she did it.”

“Where who did what?”

Crystal’s bottom lip fell open, but she didn’t speak. Robb straightened up, cleared his throat, and explained instead. “Welborn’s mom,” he said. “She killed herself in there.”

My eyes shot over Crystal’s bleached hair and focused on the looming trees. They were dark, but they weren’t eerie. They swayed just like any trees would do, but I felt as if I’d seen them before.

Goose bumps cascaded over my body, and I jumped to my feet, rubbing my arms. I stepped away from my friends, but I didn’t move forward. I should’ve wanted to run away, but I didn’t. I wanted to go toward it.

“Creepy, isn’t it?” Robb’s voice crawled over the back of my neck as I turned to him. When I met his eyes, he ran a hand through his hair. “We used to dare one another to spend the night in there,” he continued. “I did it once. It about killed me.”

Crystal sprung up and smacked his arm, waltzing past us. “You big baby,” she said, smirking as she caught my eye. “Zac and him didn’t even stay in there for an entire night. They ran out crying.”

“We were seven,” Robb argued.

Crystal giggled. “And afraid of the dark.”

He folded his arms across his plaid shirt. “I’m not afraid of the dark,” he grumbled as if he were stuck in his childhood. His eye contact was absent, and his confident demeanor had shattered.

Crystal ignored him as she stretched her palm out. “Give me the keys,” she ordered, and Robb, without question, gave up his Suburban’s keys. It was dark, and we had school in the morning. Summer vacation was over, and our parents would want us home.

“I’ll pull it up to the sidewalk,” Crystal said, walking along the river. “You guys better be ready in ten minutes,” she shouted, knowing the car was yards away. She disappeared around the corner before Robb spoke again.

“Here’s to the summer.” He chucked a rock at the river. It splashed, ripples waving against the riverbank, and I cringed. The water moved tiny twigs and shifted the dirt, covering patches of grass with brown dew. The ripples were more like tidal waves against the shore, violent and fast.

“Jess?” Robb’s thick, brown hair looked black in the night’s shadows. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I breathed, hesitating to pull my eyes away from him to stare at the river. My gut was contorting with nerves. I glanced to the forest, to the river, and back to the forest again. Everything looked familiar.

“We should probably start walking,” Robb said, heading toward the sidewalk, but I held him back.

“Are there any other rumors about the forest?” I asked. “Other than the suicide, I mean.”

Robb didn't move. “What's bothering you, Jess?”

I held my hands in front of me and dug my nails into my palms. “I've been here before,” I admitted.

He chuckled. “Come on, Jess.”

“I'm serious, Robb.” I waved my hands around. “It's too familiar.”

His laughter was replaced with a grimace. “Are you sure it wasn't a different park, somewhere you used to live?” he suggested.

I hugged myself. He could be right. It'd only been eight months since I moved to Hayworth, and it was impossible that I'd walked into the park by myself. Crystal, Robb, and I went everywhere together.

“You're probably right,” I sighed, and he started walking again. I followed him past the river and ignored my nostalgic feelings until we reached the river's guardrail.

I froze, gripping the cooling metal, and my blood turned into chilled water within my veins. I stared at my shivering hands and slowly brought my eyes up to the forest. The entrance was right in front of me, opening up to darkened brush and thickened ground. I only saw shadows, but I believed I could see more. A figure lingered in my memory, a vanishing outline in the darkness, even though no one was there. I fought the urge to shout at the trees.

Robb touched my shoulder, and I jumped. He stepped back, his eyes widened, and Crystal honked from the street.

“Jess?”

“I’m fine,” I repeated, brushing him off as I rushed past him. I didn’t want him to see my face. I felt like I was crumbling, and I didn’t want my friends, or anyone, to know it. My confusion was mine, even if it was bordering on insanity.

Jessica

“Run.”

The sudden voice was barely audible. My heart was racing as fast as my legs were. I leapt over torn up brush and twisted past trees at speeds I couldn’t comprehend. The darkness blended together.

The ground was rigid beneath my feet, and I stumbled as I looked over my shoulder. They were after us. I could feel them, their heat and their strength. The suffocating air was filled with electricity, and it burned against my exposed flesh. As suddenly as it had touched me, it was around my neck.

Her black eyes were boundless, and I lost myself in them before she tossed my body. I flew over her shoulder, easily and helplessly, and collided with wet leaves. My limbs flayed, and I clawed at the ground, attempting to stop my momentum – but it was too late.

My head cracked against a rock, and the sound shuddered through my body. Light consumed my vision before it was replaced with blackness, and then I was awake again.

I saw his eyes first, crystal-blue but clouded with concern. When he met my gaze, he dropped the cold rag he had brushed across my face. The condensation awoke my consciousness.

I gasped, trying to sit up, but his hand pressed my shoulders down. My body reacted to his touch, and his fingers lingered as if he couldn't let go.

He spoke, but I didn't hear him, and time blurred like the night had moments before. He moved too quickly, and I couldn't follow him. He was by the window, and my legs burned as if I'd stood moments before. But I was still in bed, and he spoke by the window.

I couldn't hear him, but I knew what was happening. He was leaving, and he wouldn't be back. He disappeared in a cloud of smoke, and I screamed.

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My shout echoed against my bedroom walls as I sat up, clutching my blanket. My chest was pounding, but it felt like my entire body. I gasped, surveying my empty bedroom, and shuddered when my eyes flew over my window. No one stood in front of me.

It was only a dream.

I climbed out of my bed and walked over to the glass. I moved the blinds over and gazed across our front yard. It was nighttime, but the road glistened from the streetlamps. I pressed my heated forehead against it and breathed. Despite the dream, my head felt as if it had smacked into the rock, and it wasn't the only part of my body that hurt.

Everything did. My arms, my legs, my chest. It burned and shook, but my unscathed skin proved the lack of reality. I was perfectly fine.

"It was just a nightmare, Jess," I whispered to myself, turning away. I snatched up my blanket, wrapped it around my shoulders, and walked downstairs. I needed to get out of my room, even if it were only for a minute.

I walked past my parent's room and went downstairs. The house was quiet, and lingering nighttime comforted my sudden fears. I'd always been a night person, but it felt more essential to my wellbeing tonight than any other night I could recall. The shadows felt right.

I twisted through the kitchen, the living room, and into my father's study. The computer buzzed, revealing my father's late night of work, and I turned it off. It shut down, and the only light I had dissipated.

Breathing was easier now, and the nightmare was beginning to make sense. It'd only been hours since I'd been in the forest with Robb and Crystal. Even if it were just a cluster of trees with a dark history, I'd dreamt I was almost killed in it.

"Jessie?"

I spun around, facing the high-pitched voice that broke through my train of thought. My mother, dressed in a pink robe, fiddled with her blond ponytail.

"Mom," I exhaled, praying my adrenaline would calm down. "What are you doing up?" Unlike me, she was a morning person.

She smirked as she sat down in the computer chair, rotating it to face me. "I could ask you the same thing," she said. "You have school in the morning."

"I know," I said, tightening my blanket's embrace. "I'll go back to bed soon."

Her round face tilted. "Are you alright, sweetie?"

"I'm fine." The words were beginning to feel repetitively empty. "I had a nightmare," I elaborated, knowing she would ask more questions.

She crossed her legs and placed her hands in her lap. "What was it about?" she asked.

I pressed my toes against the wooden floor. “I don’t really know,” I admitted, hoping to forget the scene as quickly as it came, but it echoed through me, refusing to leave. “It’s just a dream.”

“If it was, you would’ve stayed in bed.” She raised her thin eyebrows. “You used to have really bad nightmares as a child.”

“I did?” I couldn’t remember.

“All the time, but you grew out of them.” Her face tilted to the other side, and her ponytail waved over her shoulder. “They were really confusing for you.”

“Why?”

She bobbed her foot up and down. “You thought they were real.”

I couldn’t breathe.

“I thought it was entirely probable they were caused from trauma—”

She stopped because she didn’t have to explain.

“They were fleeing, you know,” I said, recalling the newspaper article about my parents’ untimely death.

“I wish you wouldn’t take Crystal so seriously, Jessie,” she dropped her tone into a scorn. We had the conversation numerous times during the summer, but she wasn’t budging. “She doesn’t know any more than the police do.”

I bit my lip and looked away. The lack of information had been the most aggravating part of my adoption. Even with months of researching, I couldn’t find extended family. It was as if my parents had only existed to bring my life into the world, nothing more. I couldn’t even find people who remembered them, and residents rarely left Hayworth. It seemed impossible, but it was the truth, and I didn’t like it.

“Is that what you’re dreaming about?” my mother guessed. “The car wreck?”

“No,” I said, fighting the flashing forest as it burned into my mind like a memory.

She ignored my answer. “What’s done is done, Jessie,” she said. “There’s no worth in losing sleep over it.”

“They were my parents,” I argued quietly.

“And they still are,” she agreed. “But death doesn’t mean they aren’t around you.”

I groaned. “You sound like a Disney movie.”

“I’m old. I’m allowed to,” she said, standing up to approach me. She opened up her arms, and I fell into her embrace, closing my eyes. She smelt like lavender. “Get some sleep. You have school in the morning,” she whispered.

I stepped away. “Thanks for the reminder.”

“Goodnight,” she said. “I love you.”

“Love you, too, Mom,” I said.

She left the room, her robe dragging behind, and disappeared around the corner. I collapsed in her chair, unable to settle down. While some of her words had been comforting, the others disturbed me. As a child, I thought my dreams were real, and despite the illogical notion, I saw the truth in it.

My dream had felt more like living than my current life did. Every part of me wanted it as a memory instead of a nightmare.

Eric

I shoved my head into my locker and breathed hoarsely. It was the first day of school and sitting next to Jessica was already killing me. I wanted to talk to her, hold her,

be with her – anything really – but I couldn't. If the Light realized who or what we were, she'd be killed, and there was nothing I could do except stay away.

“You okay?” Jonathon asked, his voice squeaking through the slits of my locker.

I leaned back to stare at the blind artist. I wouldn't believe he was Pierce, a powerful shade, if I hadn't known his identities myself.

“I'm dealing,” I grumbled, unable to keep eye contact as Jessica passed us.

She flipped her brunette curls as she playfully hit Robb McLain's arm. Robb McLain with his sparkling teeth, gelled hair, and playboy personality was the perfect jerk.

Robb slipped his arm over Jessica's petite shoulders, and I gripped my locker.

“I am this close to killing him.”

Jonathon chuckled. “I'd like to see that.”

“This isn't funny.”

Jonathon's hands struck straight up. “No. No. Of course not.” He tried to smother his laughter. “Not funny at all.”

I ignored his humor and uncurled my hand from the locker. “This is a lot harder than I thought it'd be,” I said.

Jonathon gestured to the bent door I'd practically destroyed. “I can tell.”

I pushed it back into place, cringing at the sharp noise.

“You have other things you should fix, too,” he said, pointing to my face.

I knew what had happened. My eyes were ice blue, not green.

I rubbed the partial transformation away. “Great,” I muttered. I couldn't even control myself during the day.

“Why don’t you go home already?” Jonathon knew my schedule better than most. Homeroom was over and so was my day at school, but I hadn’t gone straight to my car. I was too aggravated to drive.

“Are they dating?” I asked Jonathon, pointing my thumb over my shoulder. I knew Jessica and Robb hadn’t moved. I could still hear her giggles, and I knew Jonathon was more in tune with gossip than I’d ever be.

“Would it matter?”

I glared. “Are they, Jonathon?”

“No.”

“Good,” I said. “I’d have to kill him twice if that were the case.”

Jonathon sighed. “Jessica warned you this might happen,” he said, attempting to be the angel on my shoulder. “You can’t expect a seventeen-year-old girl to be single for long.”

“Thanks for that,” I snarled, swinging my bag over my shoulder. “I’m going home,” I said, snapping my headphones on before he could speak again. I brushed past him, but his voice telepathically pushed through the tunes.

Take some of that anger out in training, he said. You only have four months.

I didn’t respond. Instead, I waved my hand over my shoulder and shut our telepathic line. He couldn’t continue the conversation even if he wanted to. I was done, and I wanted everyone else to be, too.

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The doorbell rang, and I knew it was Camille before I heard her voice.

“Hello, sir,” Teresa – my guard, Camille, in her human form – said, and my father’s grumble drowned her out. She’d started using the front door ever since I hadn’t bothered to hide my strange comings and goings. I’d be in my room one minute, and then I’d transform to leave. I never used the front door, and my stepfamily was starting to notice.

“They aren’t here,” my father dismissed Teresa’s concerns. “But they’ll be back soon.”

“Is Eric—”

“In his room,” he answered.

Teresa tapped her foot against the wood floor. “He’s not taking this very well.” She didn’t bother dropping her voice since she knew I was listening.

“Did you bring him home?”

“He drove.”

I turned over, staring at my car keys on my desk. I hadn’t bothered hanging them up. I hadn’t bothered doing much. My room was a mess, and two of the light bulbs were broken. My room, aside from the nightlight beneath my desk, was dark, and I liked it that way.

“I should’ve figured,” my father sighed. “He hasn’t left his bedroom since he got home.”

“He saw Jessica today,” she said. The house creaked, and the couch squeaked as someone fell into it. I could practically see what they were doing.

“I shouldn’t have told him about Jess, Camille,” he said, using her Dark name. Apparently, the confusion with double identities was genetic. My father couldn’t stand using human names any more than I could. “We should’ve kept it from both of them.”

I knew what he was talking about. My life was destined for a successful battle by killing another, and Jessica was my only weakness. I was in love with her, and she was in love with me, but our relationship – our identities – would kill us both if the Light figured out whom she was and used her against me. She could be absorbed, whatever that meant, and my battle’s outcome would flip. I would lose, and everyone in the Dark would lose their powers. I couldn’t see her, and I hadn’t since Independence Day. Not until I saw her at school.

“With all due respect, sir,” Camille began, quiet enough that even I, with my heightened hearing, could barely listen. “They found out on their own.”

“Not about the destiny.”

“Yet it happened,” she said, and her nails tapped against the stairwell. “Do you know how Jess is?”

His jacket rustled, signaling a shrug. “I followed her around yesterday with her guard-to-be. She seemed normal enough.”

I sat up. Jessica getting a guard was news to me.

“I’m going to speak with him,” Camille said, but my father didn’t respond.

I listened as Camille walked upstairs. She passed the kitchen, turning into the hallway, and soon her hand was on my doorknob. It twisted, clinking against the lock, and she breathed against the wood.

“I know you heard me,” she said, but I didn’t move. I listened to the metal lock release, and she opened the door. Her eyes were black, a sign of her power, and then they flickered back to blue.

“Why didn’t I know about the guard?” I asked.

She stepped inside, supporting herself against the doorframe. Her pixie cut had grown to her shoulders. “Maybe if you talked to someone, you would’ve been told.”

I flinched. “I don’t feel like it.”

“Quit the bullshit, Shoman.” She threw her hands into the air. “It’s incredibly frustrating, and it isn’t helping anyone.”

“I wasn’t trying to help anyone,” I said, standing up from my bed. I wasn’t trying to be bitter. I was only trying to stay away. I knew my duties, and I didn’t need everyone in my face about it. I’d get it done, especially if it meant Jessica’s life.

“So, what now?” Camille asked quietly, rocking from foot to foot. I knew what she was thinking. I only had four months before it was done. Darthon or I would be dead, and talking about it didn’t change the circumstances.

“I train,” I said, but she shook her head. Apparently, I didn’t know what she was talking about. I was too caught up my own worries to think straight.

“Let’s go out,” she said. “Go for a flight—”

“No.”

Air seethed through her teeth. “Why not?”

I didn’t answer.

“Eric.” Her rant came without a breath. “Do you know how much your stress is affecting everyone? They think you’re worried. They think you won’t succeed—”

I was in her face before she knew it. I was a shade, transformed by anger, and I'd transported inches away from her. "Do you think this is easy, Camille? Is that it?" I was glaring, and my body was heated with darkness. "Because it isn't. And it was never meant to be."

The nightlight beneath my desk exploded, and Camille stepped back, paling. I had never raised my voice to her.

"What's going on?" my father asked, rushing upstairs.

I gripped the doorway to keep myself from yelling at him, too. "Just losing my shit again," I grumbled.

Camille bit her lip, reminding me of Jessica. She always did that. I closed my eyes.

"It's entirely possible that you're reacting to Jessica's absence," my father said.

I forced myself to face him. "Meaning?"

He cleared his throat, pulling at the ends of his suit jacket. He was surely meeting the elders later. "Meaning, your energies already mixed," he said, refusing to say the truth. Just by kissing, we'd already been physically attached. My Dark side – Shoman – was adjusted to her existence. "Without her ability to transform, her energy doesn't exist," he continued. "It could cause a haywire in your control."

This was why she was my weakness. She affected me, even when she was absent. My hands threaded through my hair as I started to sizzle back into my human form. I could feel my hair curling. "That's good news," I murmured, but no one responded, and I kicked off the wall. "I'm going to the shelter."

“You should relax,” my father called after me. “Urte is planning a rigorous day for you tomorrow.”

“I don’t have time to relax,” I said, disappearing before they tempted me to forget my responsibilities for a single night.

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