

"Death's Warning"

The Glasgow crowd was electric tonight, their energy feeding mine as I finished "Better Without You." This was my safe place - on stage, losing myself in the music, letting the familiar rush of performing wash away everything else. No past, no pain, just pure connection with the audience. "This next song is my current single," I smiled, my voice carrying over the cheers. "It's a powerful song that means a lot to me, and I'm happy to share it with you all." The opening notes of "Afterlife" started, and I let myself sink into the emotion of it, into the story I was telling.

Then my world shattered.

Diamond was standing in the front row. Not a fan who looked like him, not a trick of the stage lights - my dead boyfriend was right there, looking exactly as he had that last night. Same leather jacket, same crooked smile, same eyes that had once held my whole world.

"You'll be joining me soon, Mia," his voice cut through the music, through my defenses, through everything I'd built to keep the past at bay.

I forced myself to keep singing, years of training taking over while my heart threatened to explode. My eyes were locked on him, unable to look away, terrified he'd disappear and equally terrified he wouldn't. Then I blinked, and he was gone. Just... gone. Like that night. Like everything I'd lost. The rest of the show passed in a blur of adrenaline and barely contained panic. I hit every note, made every mark - professional to my core even as my mind spiraled. What had I seen? What was happening?

Back in my dressing room, I tried to calm myself, staring into my makeup mirror as if it might hold answers. As if my reflection could tell me I wasn't losing my grip on reality.

"It's not over, Nemesis."

I whirled around, but the room was empty. The voice had been as clear as Diamond's, but different. Darker. Colder. Filled with something that made my skin crawl.

Was I losing my mind? Was someone messing with me? Or was something more sinister happening? Something connected to everything I'd been running from?

I knew who could help me figure it out, even though the thought of asking made me sick. Michelle wasn't my favorite person in the world, but thanks to Arissa, we were essentially family now. After everything that had happened between us...

It didn't matter. I needed answers before I completely lost my grip on reality.

It was time to go to Ireland.

Michelle

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The soft afternoon light filtered through Tomi's playroom windows as I sat cross-legged on the floor, watching my baby girl explore her world. These moments were precious - soon I'd be back on tour, then straight to Nashville for filming. The constant push-pull of my career versus motherhood never got easier, but both were essential parts of who I was.

Down the hall, I could hear Harley and Kora's excited voices analyzing the Panthers' Stanley Cup victory, while Arissa and Kira's discussion of the new Colourpop collection drifted from another room. The sound of my girls settling into their new Irish life, made easier by the Jordans moving here with us, warmed my heart.

Hunter was across the playroom, meticulously adjusting Tomi's toddler climbing wall. My husband had turned the space into his latest project - a miniature ninja training course for our one-year-old. Foam obstacles, tiny balance beams, and perfectly sized climbing grips, all arranged with the precise attention to safety that defined Hunter's approach to everything. Tomi babbled happily as she watched him work, already trying to pull herself up on the lower grips.

"Is the whole course really necessary right now?" I asked, watching our baby girl who seemed so impossibly small for all of this.

Hunter looked up from where he was securing a foam pad, his eyes serious. "Yes. Mich, Tomi is our daughter... the child of lightning and thunder. And she has already shown signs of coming into her powers at ONE. The sooner we start proper training, the better." His voice softened as he watched her. "Besides, she's gonna have fun. To her it will just be play. Won't it, baby girl?"

Tomi's happy babbling as she bounced on the balance beam seemed to prove his point.

"See, she loves it," Hunter smiled proudly.

I sighed, watching our daughter explore her tiny training ground. Hunter was right, but that didn't make it easier. The idea that my children were burdened with the same powers and obligations that we carried... it hurt my heart. I'd been trying to retire as a Ranger for years, but it never took. And being a Sailor Soldier wasn't just what I did - it was literally who I was. Being a Ranger might as well have been too.

The doorbell pulled me from my thoughts.

"Expecting someone?" Hunter asked, pausing his safety checks.

I shook my head as I scooped up Tomi. "Nope. Maybe Jeremy?" I headed to the front door.

But when I checked the peephole, I found Mia standing there, looking... wrong. Not her usual confident self at all. I opened the door, concern immediately overriding our usual snark. "Mia? Hey... wasn't expecting you."

"Wasn't expecting to be here," she said quietly. "But we need to talk." The look in her eyes sent a chill down my spine - Mia didn't get spooked. Ever.

I stepped aside, gesturing her in. "Come sit," I led her to the living room, settling on the sofa with Tomi in my lap. "Can I get you anything?"

She shook her head, hands twisting together. "No. Mich, something is wrong. Something is very wrong."

"What happened?" I kept my voice calm, though every instinct was on alert.

"I was on stage in Scotland, performing like I do every night, and suddenly I saw Diamond in the front row." Her voice shook slightly. "It wasn't someone who looked like him. It was him. He said I would be joining him soon, then vanished. After the show, alone in my dressing room, I heard another voice say 'Nemesis, this isn't over,' but no one was there." She looked up at me, genuine fear in her eyes. "Am I hallucinating? Is someone messing with me? Am I going insane or is there a new enemy?"

I considered for a moment, trying to lighten the mood. "Well, you are insane, but I'm not sure this is further proof of that."

The look she gave me clearly said 'Really?'

"Sorry, sorry," I shifted Tomi to reach for Mia's hand. "We'll figure this out. I promise."

"MAMA!" Harley's voice carried down the hall. "Kora and I are going to the store for snacks!"

"Take Riss and Kira!" I called back, not taking my eyes off Mia. The timing was perfect - I needed the girls out of the house for this conversation.

"Already on it!" Harley replied. Moments later, I heard the front door close behind them.

Hunter appeared in the doorway, his expression serious. He'd clearly overheard enough to know this wasn't a casual visit. "I'll take Tomi up to her room," he said quietly, coming to lift our daughter from my lap. "Let you two talk."

Once we were alone, I turned back to Mia. "Start from the beginning. Tell me everything - every detail, no matter how small. And Mia?" I waited until she met my eyes. "We've faced worse than ghost boyfriends and mysterious voices. Whatever this is, we'll handle it. Together."

The fact that she didn't immediately protest my use of 'we' told me just how rattled she really was.

"It was during 'Afterlife,'" Mia started, her voice unusually quiet. "Mid-song, he was just... there. Looking exactly like the last time I saw him alive. Same leather jacket, same smile..."

I watched her hands shake slightly as she described it. Mia was one of the strongest people I knew - seeing her this unsettled was setting off every alarm I had.

"And the voice in your dressing room," I pressed gently. "You said it called you Nemesis?"

She nodded. "It was different from Diamond's voice. Colder. Darker." She looked up at me. "You don't think..."

"That your dead boyfriend and a new enemy are somehow connected?" I finished. "In our world? Anything's possible. We'll figure this out. But first, I need to make some calls. My phone's in my office. I'll be right back."

I headed to my office, spotting my phone on the desk. But as I reached for it, a voice froze me in place.

"My Michelle..."

It sounded like Hunter, but... wrong. Darker. More possessive. I spun around, heart racing, but the room was empty. Those two words - the ones Hunter would never say, knowing how they triggered memories of Axl's song, of darker times...

I practically ran back to Mia, my hands shaking slightly. "Okay, if you're losing it, so am I. I just heard..." I took a breath. "It was Hunter's voice, but not Hunter. Darker, more aggressive. And it said 'my Michelle' - something the real Hunter would never say. He knows what those words mean to me."

Mia's eyes widened with understanding. We both knew what this meant - this wasn't just in her head. Something or someone was targeting us both, using our pasts against us.

"I'm going to find out who's behind this," I said, my voice hardening with determination. "And they're going to regret messing with both of us."

"First things first," I pulled out my phone, fingers already moving to my contacts. "We need to talk to Amara. If something supernatural is targeting Sailor Soldiers..."

"Others?" Mia tensed slightly. "Michelle, I don't want-"

"If something's powerful enough to manifest like this, Amara needs to know," I cut her off gently. "She might have sensed something we haven't. And if it's not supernatural..." I let that hang there. We both knew what other possibilities existed.

"Fine," she conceded. "But not everyone. Not yet. Just... just the inner circle."

I nodded, understanding what she wasn't saying. This needed to stay within the Sailor community for now. "Just Amara. And Hunter needs to know - especially if something's using his voice."

As if summoned by his name, Hunter appeared in the doorway. One look at our faces and his expression shifted from concerned to battle-ready. "What's happening?"

"Something's targeting us," I explained, watching his eyes darken. "Using voices from our past. People who..." I hesitated, glancing at Mia.

"People who hurt us," she finished quietly.

Hunter's hand went to his communicator automatically. "Should I contact-"

"No," I shook my head. "Not the Rangers. Not yet. Let's talk to Amara first, figure out what we're dealing with. But maybe... maybe get the girls to sleep over at the Jordans' tonight? Just in case."

"If it's targeting Soldiers, it could be targeting Rangers too," Hunter pressed carefully. "Shouldn't we at least let Jason or Adam know? Or even Wes?"

"Not Wes," my voice went sharp. "No fucking way am I getting SPD involved in this." I softened slightly at his expression. "If it looks like any Rangers besides us are being targeted, I'll contact Jase and Adam. I promise."

Hunter sighed, but nodded. "Fine. I'll leave it as Sailor business for now."

"Thank you," Mia said quietly.

I pulled up Amara's number, hitting send before I could overthink it. She answered on the second ring.

"Hello?"

"Amara, it's Mich. Have you or Michele been hearing voices recently?" I kept my voice steady, professional.

The pause that followed was telling. "What do you mean?"

I explained what had happened to both Mia and me, watching Mia's face as I detailed our experiences.

"Whoa..." Amara's voice went serious. "Nothing like that here. Let me check with Michele." Another pause. "No, she says nothing's happened to her or Hotaru either. I'll check in with Trista."

"Let me know what you find out."

"Do you need the team?" The concern in her voice was clear.

"No, stay where you are for now. Mia and I can handle this," I assured her. "If we need backup, we'll let you know."

I hung up and turned back to Mia, who was watching me with a mix of concern and determination. "So it's just us?" she asked.

"For now," I nodded. "Though if Trista's getting any temporal disturbances..."

"Michelle..." Hunter's voice held that note of worry I knew too well. The one that meant he was fighting his protective instincts.

"I know, baby," I squeezed his hand. "But if something's targeting Soldiers specifically, we need to handle this carefully. Too many people involved could make it worse."

"Or make us more vulnerable," Mia added quietly.

Before I could respond, we heard the front door open, followed by the girls' voices carrying down the hall. Hunter gave me a questioning look.

"Take them to the Jordans'," I decided. "Tell them... tell them we're having a strategy meeting about my tour schedule."

"And Tomi?" he asked.

I hesitated. Our daughter was safer away from whatever this was, but the thought of being separated from her if something was targeting us...

"She stays," Mia said firmly, surprising us both. "If something's coming for us, you need to know she's protected."

Hunter nodded and went to handle the girls, his protective instincts clearly warring with his strategic mind.

Once we heard the front door close behind them, Mia turned to me with that look I knew too well. "It may be time to consider giving Harley and Arissa the Neo Sailor powers."

"No." My response was immediate, visceral. "Absolutely not. They aren't ready. And we don't even know what we're dealing with."

"Exactly," Mia's voice was gentle but firm. "They need to be able to protect themselves, and they are ready. They've been training with Hunter for years."

"They're twelve and thirteen," I protested, though my voice wavered slightly.

"Harley's almost thirteen too," Mia pressed carefully. "And that's not much younger than you were when you became a Ranger."

I gritted my teeth, hating that she was right. Hating that we were even having this conversation. Hating that my daughters might have to face the same choices I had.

"No," I said finally. "Not yet."

But we both heard what I wasn't saying: Not yet, but soon.

Before Mia could argue further, my phone buzzed. Amara.

"What did Trista say?" I answered immediately.

"She's sensing... something," Amara's voice was tense. "Temporal disturbances, but not like anything she's seen before. Like echoes of the past bleeding into the present."

I put the phone on speaker so Mia could hear. "Echoes? Like ghosts?"

"Not exactly," Amara hesitated. "More like... memories becoming real. But twisted. Darker."

Mia and I exchanged looks. Diamond. Hunter's voice. Our pasts being used against us.

"Any idea what's causing it?" I asked, though I already knew the answer.

"Not yet. But Michelle..." Amara's voice went serious. "If something's powerful enough to manipulate time like this, to make memories manifest..."

"I know," I cut her off. "We'll be careful. Keep us updated if Trista senses anything else."

After I hung up, Mia's expression was grim. "This is bigger than we thought, isn't it?"

"Yeah," I agreed quietly. "But something doesn't add up. Diamond appearing to you, that dark version of Hunter's voice to me... it feels targeted. Personal."

"You think someone's using our pasts against us?" Mia asked, but I could see her mind working, trying to make connections she wasn't ready to voice yet.

"Maybe. Or..." I hesitated, not wanting to say what we were both thinking. That this felt like revenge. That whatever was happening, it wasn't random. That somehow, our histories were connected in ways we hadn't fully understood.

"We need to figure out what links these manifestations," I said finally. "Why these specific... memories."

The way Mia avoided my eyes told me she might have theories. But she wasn't ready to share them yet.

"Does Kaya have any thoughts about this?" I asked.

Mia shifted uncomfortably. "She's... investigating. Though she's not thrilled about having to potentially work with Thara."

"Thara's not even a guardian," I rolled my eyes. "She's just a cat who happens to be mine. Kaya's superiority complex is ridiculous."

"Says the woman whose cat wears diamond collars," Mia managed a small smile, though it didn't reach her eyes. "But no, Kaya hasn't sensed anything specific. Just... darkness. Something familiar but wrong."

The way she said 'familiar' made me pause. There was something in her voice, something she wasn't saying. But before I could press further, we heard Hunter returning from dropping off the girls.

"We need to figure this out," I said quietly. "Before whatever it is decides to do more than just speak to us."

Hunter came in and sat down, holding Tomi in his arms. His expression was pure Thunder Ninja - focused, determined. "OK, look, you may not want Ranger help, but you have mine. This involves Mich so it involves me. What do we know?"

I shared a look with Mia. Hunter was right - he deserved to know what we were facing, especially if something was using his voice. And his strategic mind might see patterns we were missing.

"Diamond appeared to Mia during her show," I started carefully. "Not just a vision - a full manifestation. Then a voice in her dressing room called her Nemesis."



"And something using your voice spoke to Michelle," Mia added. "But darker. Wrong. He said 'my Michelle'."

Hunter's eyes narrowed. "Words the real me would never say."

"Exactly," I reached for Tomi, needing to hold our daughter. "Whatever this is, it knows us. Knows our histories, our triggers..."

"Knows things it shouldn't," Mia finished quietly.

"The timing feels deliberate too," Hunter said, his tactical mind working. "During Mia's show, when she was vulnerable on stage. And Michelle alone in her office..."

"Testing our defenses," Mia nodded. "Seeing how we'd react."

I held Tomi closer, feeling her drift off to sleep against my chest. "But why now? Why us specifically?"

"It has to be connected," Hunter pressed. "Diamond appearing to Mia, that twisted version of my voice to you... there's a pattern we're not seeing."

I caught the way Mia tensed at Hunter's words, subtle but noticeable. She was holding something back - something about the connection between these manifestations. But the fear in her eyes stopped me from pushing.

"Whatever it is," I said instead, "we need to be ready. No one goes anywhere alone. And we need to set up some kind of warning system, something to alert us if these... manifestations happen again."

"I'll contact Cam," Hunter suggested. "Not about everything, just about setting up some energy detection equipment. If something's powerful enough to manifest like this..."

"It's powerful enough to do worse," Mia finished grimly.

"But Cam? No, please not Cam. Let me reach out to Billy, please," I begged. The last thing we needed was Cam's particular brand of curiosity about this situation.

Hunter caught my tone, understanding immediately. "Yeah, you're right. Billy's better for this. More... discrete."

"And less likely to dig into things we don't want dug into," Mia added quietly.

I shifted Tomi gently as she slept, grateful for her warm weight against me. "I'll call him tomorrow. For now..." I looked at Mia. "You're staying here tonight. Whatever this is, we stick together."

"I'll set up the guest room," Hunter stood, but paused. "And Michelle? We should probably warn Adam, at least. If something's powerful enough to manifest like this...Mina could be in danger too."

"Tomorrow," I promised. "Let's get through tonight first. Figure out what we're actually dealing with before we bring in more people."

But we all knew what I wasn't saying - that bringing in more Rangers meant explaining things none of us were ready to explain.

Mia

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Kaya curled up next to me on the guest room pillow, her tail twitching with obvious displeasure., I could feel her agitation at being under the same roof as Thara.

"I can't believe we're staying here," she muttered. "In the same house as that prissy house cat."

"I know you don't like it," I kept my voice low, aware of how sound carried in this house. "But we're safest here. And whatever this is seems to be targeting Michelle and me specifically. Working with her is never my first choice, but it's our best option right now." I turned to face my guardian. "Did you find anything out?"

Kaya's ears flattened slightly. "Nothing concrete. Dark energy, certainly... death. But not like your energy as the Soldier of Death. This is darker, more sinister. It feels otherworldly, but I can't get a lock on it. It's like trying to grab smoke."

"Which is exactly why we need to stay here," I pressed. "Safety in numbers. And like it or not, Michelle and I are on the same team now."

"You're right," Kaya sighed dramatically. "I just can't stand her spoiled brat of a cat. Did you see that amethyst collar?"

"Kaya," I couldn't help but laugh. "She's just a regular house cat. Ignore her."

"She's impossible to ignore," Kaya muttered, but settled more comfortably against me.

I shook my head and turned off the light, though I knew sleep wouldn't come easily. Not with Diamond's voice still echoing in my mind.

Sleep finally came, but it brought no peace. Instead, I found myself in a room bathed in dark crimson light, the air thick with the scent of copper and roses. Diamond stood before me, but wrong somehow - his usual warmth replaced by something cold, empty.

"You let me die, Mia." His voice cut through me like ice.

"Diamond, no!" My heart cracked all over again. "I would give anything to have you back..."

"Then join me." His smile was cruel, nothing like the one I remembered. "You let Aria take my life. It's time to take your own."

"You don't mean that," I whispered, but dread was already pooling in my stomach. This wasn't my Diamond.

"You're the Soldier of Death," he sneered, drawing a blade that gleamed with malevolent purpose. "So meet death."

The sword came at me with lethal intent. My Scythe materialized in my hands purely on instinct, blocking the strike that would have taken my head.

"Diamond, stop!" Tears burned as I parried another blow. "Please! I love you!"

"You don't know the meaning of love!" His scream echoed unnaturally.

Light flared, blinding and wrong, and suddenly it wasn't Diamond anymore. The Emperor stood before me - Hunter, but not our Hunter. This was the monster I'd faced before, but different now. Darker. Wrong.

"Time to die, Nemesis!" He attacked with renewed fury.

"You're dead," I growled, blocking strikes that felt too real for a dream.

"I was," his laugh sent ice down my spine. "Now I've been reborn as the Death Ranger, and you're going to pay for what you did to me... what you took from me."

His next strike sent me stumbling backward, the force vibrating through my Scythe. The crimson light pulsed around us like a heartbeat, making shadows dance across his face - Hunter's face, but twisted with hatred I'd only seen once before, in another universe.

"You thought you could just kill me and walk away?" He advanced, power rolling off him in waves that felt like death itself. "That there wouldn't be consequences?"

"You were a monster," I spat, though my voice shook. "Your own Michelle even saw that-"

"DON'T SPEAK OF HER!" His roar shook the room. "You took everything from me. But if I can't have my Michelle..." His eyes gleamed with dangerous intent. "This world's version will do. And this time, no one will take her from me."

Fresh horror washed over me. Of course - that's why he'd used Hunter's voice, why he'd said those specific words to her. He didn't just want revenge on me. He wanted to replace what he'd lost.

"She'll never be yours," I shot back. "She's not your Michelle."

"Then she'll be no one's," he raised his blade again, "once I'm done making you both suffer..."

I woke with a gasp, Kaya already alert beside me. The dream had felt too real, too specific. And now I knew exactly why he'd targeted us both.

I had to tell Michelle the truth. Her life depended on it.

"Kaya," I whispered, still shaking from the dream. "We need to warn-"

A sudden scream from upstairs cut me off - Michelle. I was moving before I could think, Kaya right behind me.

I met Hunter on the stairs, both of us running toward Tomi's nursery. "She said she felt uneasy," he explained tersely. "Went to check on the baby."

The darkness in the hallway felt wrong, heavy with an energy I recognized from my dream. When we reached the nursery doorway, I saw Michelle standing rigid by Tomi's crib, her body positioned protectively over her sleeping daughter.

The air around her shimmered with crimson light, and that voice - Hunter's voice but wrong, possessive, dark - filled the room:

"My Michelle..."

Hunter moved to get Tomi, but I caught his arm. I knew what this was now. Who this was. And I had to tell Michelle exactly why she was being targeted - why this twisted version of her husband's voice was haunting her.

"Don't move," I said quietly, my Scythe materializing. "Either of you."

Michelle's eyes met mine over Tomi's crib, and I saw recognition flash in them - she'd heard this voice before, in her office. But this time was different. This time it was manifesting, the crimson light growing stronger.

"Such a precious daughter," the voice continued, making Michelle's hands tighten on the crib rail. "So different from my Harley... the daughter your other self gave me. Before you all destroyed everything, Nemesis."

We all knew who this was - the Emperor, somehow back from death. Michelle had been there, had seen what he was capable of. Had watched her alternate self choose a different path after his death.

"You're supposed to be dead," Michelle's voice was deadly calm, the way it got when she was truly afraid.

"Death is just another realm to conquer," the voice laughed. "And now I'm going to take everything from you, like you took everything from me. Starting with this perfect little family..."

The crimson light pulsed, and Michelle moved faster than I'd ever seen her, scooping Tomi up and backing away from the crib. Hunter positioned himself between his family and the manifestation, though we all knew this wasn't a fight that could be won with physical protection.

"You'll never touch my daughter," Michelle snarled into the darkness. "Or anyone else I love."

"We'll see about that," the Emperor's voice promised, and the temperature in the room dropped. "We'll see what you choose when everyone you love starts suffering..."

"Did you forget what happened last time you universe hopped to this world?" Michelle's voice was pure ice. "Mia killed you. I don't suspect you'll have better luck this time."

The crimson light pulsed with his laughter - a sound that made my skin crawl. "Oh, but I'm not the same Emperor you remember. Death has... enhanced my abilities. And this time," the darkness seemed to concentrate around Michelle, "I'm not trying to conquer a universe. I just want what's mine."

"I was never yours," Michelle snapped, holding Tomi closer. "Not in this universe or any other."

"No," his voice turned darker. "But my Empress was. We ruled together, conquered together... until you all took that from me. Now she's gone soft, playing at redemption with Jason. Everything we built, everything we were..."

Hunter moved forward, but the Emperor's next words froze us all:

"Tell me, Michelle... how many universes do you think your precious family exists in? How many versions of them can I destroy before you realize fighting me is pointless?"

"You're not touching anyone," I stepped forward, Scythe ready. "In this universe or any other."

The crimson light seemed to focus on me, and I could feel his hatred like a physical force. "Nemesis... always so righteous. But you've killed too, haven't you? You understand the taste of death, the power of it..."

"That's different," I growled, though my hands shook slightly on my weapon.

"Is it?" His laugh echoed unnaturally. "The Death Ranger and the Soldier of Death... we're not so different. Except I embrace what I am."

"Enough," Michelle's voice cut through the darkness. "You want me? Come and try. But leave my family out of it."

"Oh, but they're the key," the Emperor's voice turned sickeningly sweet. "You see, my Empress only truly loved two people - me and our Harley. And now... now I'm going to take everything you love, piece by piece, until you understand that kind of singular devotion."

The temperature dropped further as shadows started gathering more densely. Hunter moved to shield both Michelle and Tomi, but we all knew physical protection wouldn't be enough against what we were facing.

The shadows swirled tighter, and I could feel his power building - darker than anything I'd encountered before. Different from my own connection to death.

"Consider this a warning," his voice echoed from everywhere and nowhere. "A taste of what's coming. Watch your precious family closely, Michelle. You never know which version of them might... disappear."

"If you touch them-" Michelle started, but his laugh cut her off.

"You'll what? Kill me again?" The crimson light began to fade. "Death is my domain now. And soon... soon you'll understand exactly what that means."

The temperature slowly returned to normal as his presence dissipated, leaving us in the nursery with the weight of his threats hanging in the air. Tomi, somehow still sleeping, stirred slightly in Michelle's arms.

"We need to contact the others," Hunter said quietly, his hand steady on Michelle's shoulder. "All of them. Rangers, Soldiers... everyone."

"No," Michelle's voice was firm. "Not yet. First," she turned to me, "you're going to tell me everything you know about what he's become. What exactly is a Death Ranger?"

Hunter shook his head, "I don't know. I've never heard of those powers."

"Neither have I...but you know who knows the Morphin Grid better than anyone? Billy. Time to get some answers," Michelle said.

"At this hour?" Hunter asked, though he was already reaching for his phone.

"You think Billy sleeps?" Michelle managed a small smile, though her eyes were still haunted.

"Besides, after what just happened... we need to know what we're dealing with. The Emperor was dangerous enough before. But now..."

"Now he's got death powers we don't understand," I finished grimly. "And a grudge against both of us."

"And access to multiple universes," Hunter added quietly, making Michelle hold Tomi closer.

The weight of what we were facing settled over the room. This wasn't just about us anymore - the Emperor could target anyone, in any reality. And he'd made it clear he would.

Michelle

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I handed Tomi to Hunter, watching him cradle our daughter protectively against his chest. My hands shook slightly as I pulled out my phone - not from fear, but from rage. The Emperor had just threatened my family. All of them, across every universe.

It would be normal waking hours in California. I pulled up Billy's number, hesitating only briefly. This call would change everything - bring the Rangers into something that had started as Sailor business. But the Emperor had changed the rules by becoming the Death Ranger. We needed answers only Billy could provide.

I hit send, meeting Mia's eyes across the nursery as the phone rang. Whatever was coming, we'd face it together. We had no choice.

"Michelle?" Billy answered on the second ring. Even after all these years, hearing his voice immediately made me feel more grounded. "This is unexpected."

"Billy," I kept my voice steady, professional. "I need information about something called the Death Ranger."

The silence that followed was telling. Billy didn't do silence unless something was seriously wrong.

"Where did you hear that term?" His voice had lost its usual academic tone, replaced by something sharper.

"The Emperor. He's back, somehow. And he's claiming those powers."

Another pause. "That's... not possible. The Death Ranger powers were theoretical. A corruption of the Morphin Grid that was never meant to exist. Even Lord Drakkon never..."

"Well, someone forgot to tell the Emperor that," I cut in. "Because he just manifested in my daughter's nursery with enough death energy to make even Mia uncomfortable."

"Mia's there?" The concern in his voice deepened. "Michelle, if what you're saying is true... you need to get somewhere safe. All of you. I'm contacting the Morphin Masters.."

"Billy-"

"No arguments. If the Emperor has somehow accessed those powers... this is bigger than Rangers or Sailors. This is about the very nature of death itself."

I caught Hunter's eye across the room, saw my own concern reflected there. "The Morphin Masters said they stay out of our affairs."

"Indeed, but Michelle, this isn't normal Ranger affairs. This affects the Morphin Grid as a whole. In all honesty I'm rather surprised the Morphin Masters haven't reached out to me already."

"What do you mean?" I asked, though dread was already pooling in my stomach. Billy didn't invoke the Morphin Masters lightly.

"The Death Ranger powers... they're not just another color in the spectrum. They're a corruption of the Grid itself. A perversion of what Rangers are meant to be. For the Emperor to have accessed them..." Billy paused, and I could hear him typing frantically. "How long ago did he manifest?"

"Just now. In Tomi's nursery."

"That explains it then. The Masters will have felt the disturbance, but the ripples are still spreading. Michelle..." His voice went grave. "Keep your family close. All of them. The Emperor's threats about multiple universes... he might actually have the power to follow through."

I looked at Hunter holding Tomi, at Mia standing guard with her Scythe. "What aren't you telling me, Billy?"

"The Death Ranger powers don't just control death - they can manipulate the boundaries between universes. Between life and death itself. And in the wrong hands..."

"They could destroy everything," I finished quietly. "In every reality."

"Exactly," Billy confirmed. "I'm sending you everything I have on the theoretical existence of these powers. But Michelle... there's something else you need to know."

I closed my eyes, bracing myself. When Billy used that tone, it was never good news. "What?"

"The Death Ranger powers, they're... parasitic. They feed on grief, on loss, on darkness. The more pain they cause..."



"The stronger they get," I finished, understanding hitting me like a punch to the gut. "That's why he threatened my family. He's not just trying to hurt us - he's trying to feed his powers."

"Yes. And given his connection to your alternate self, to that universe's Harley..."

"He's got a direct emotional link to fuel them," I caught Hunter's eye, saw him hold Tomi closer. "Billy, what do we do? How do we fight something like this?"

"For now? Keep everyone close. I'll contact you once I've spoken with the Masters. And Michelle?" His voice went deadly serious. "Watch the boundaries between universes. If you start seeing... echoes, or overlaps..."

"I'll call you immediately," I promised. "And Billy? Thank you."

After I hung up, I turned to Mia and Hunter. "We need to get the girls back here. Now."

"No," Hunter's voice was firm but gentle. "That will make Hal and Kara suspicious. They'll be safe until morning." His tactical mind was already working. "I'll amp up their training tomorrow, make sure they're ready to defend themselves. And..." he hesitated, looking at our daughter. "I think we need to take off Tomi's power dampening bracelets."

"No." My response was immediate, visceral. "She has no control of her powers. She could hurt my mom or Rose or anyone."

"If she gets scared, she'll fire them off to defend herself," Hunter argued, his protective instincts warring with his strategic sense. "Her powers could be her best protection."

I shook my head, remembering the last time Tomi's lightning powers had manifested. The time Rose tried to take a toy from her and got zapped for it... "Too risky. We can't have her accidentally hurting someone while trying to protect herself."

The weight of being both mother and warrior had never felt heavier. How could I balance protecting my daughter with protecting everyone else from her inherited powers?

"What about a compromise?" Mia suggested carefully. "Keep the bracelets on during the day, but remove them at night when she's just with you two?"

I looked at Hunter, seeing him consider it. The incident with Rose had scared all of us - my one-year-old's instinctive defense mechanism had left Jeremy and Liv's daughter with a nasty shock. Rose had tried to tell Jeremy by saying "baby ouchie". Jeremy just interpreted it as Tomi had gotten hurt somehow and brushed it off. But it was too close for comfort.

"It could work," Hunter said slowly. "At least until we figure out what we're dealing with. And I'll be increasing security around the house anyway."

I stroked Tomi's hair, watching her sleep peacefully in her father's arms. She had no idea about the weight of her inheritance - both the powers and the responsibilities that came with them. Just like the Emperor had no idea what he'd awakened by threatening her.

"Fine," I agreed finally. "But only at night, only with us. And we need to figure out how to start training her to control them. Because if the Emperor's going to target our family..."

"She needs to be able to defend herself without hurting the people trying to protect her," Hunter finished.

"And how, pray tell, do we train a one year old?" Mia asked, voicing the question I'd been avoiding.

"The same way the Thunder Ninja Academy starts," Hunter said, his voice taking on that instructor tone I knew well. "Through play. Games that teach control without her realizing she's learning."

"She's not a Thunder student," I reminded him. "She's got my Sailor powers mixed with your Thunder abilities. That's never been done before."

"No," Hunter agreed, adjusting Tomi as she snuggled closer in her sleep. "But we've got something the Academy doesn't - a whole team of people with different powers who can help. And Michelle," he caught my eye, "you learned to control your powers young too."

"Not this young," I protested. "And not with this much raw power. You saw what happened with Rose..."

"Which is exactly why we need to start now," Mia cut in. "Before the Emperor makes his next move. Before she has to use her powers out of fear instead of choice."

I looked at my daughter, so small in her father's arms. I'd wanted to protect her from this life, from these responsibilities. But maybe the best protection was teaching her to protect herself.

"We start small," Hunter said, already planning. "Simple exercises disguised as games. Teaching her to feel her energy before she tries to use it."

"And what happens when she gets frustrated?" I asked, remembering my own early training. "One tantrum and she could-"

"I know... we will prevent that," Hunter nodded, though we both knew it was easier said than done.

"And somehow, in the midst of all of this, we need to continue to keep our identities secret from everyone else we love," I sighed heavily. "Mom, Jeremy, Livvie, Amber, Trev, Niamh, Kara, Hal, Kira, Kora... none of them can know who we really are."

"It's getting harder," Hunter admitted quietly, looking down at Tomi. "Especially now that we're all living so close. One slip, one unexplained absence..."

"One lightning bolt from our daughter," I added grimly. "And everything we've worked to protect them from comes crashing down."

The weight of our double lives had never felt heavier. These people were our family - the ones who'd moved countries to stay together, who'd built this beautiful life with us. And we were lying to them every day, keeping them in the dark about who we really were, what we really faced.

"Maybe..." Mia started carefully, "maybe it's time to consider-"

"No," I cut her off. "The more they know, the more danger they're in. Especially now, with the Emperor targeting everyone we love."

"Mich is right," Hunter's voice was gentle but firm. "They can never know. You know we're right, Mia."

Mia sighed, and I caught the flash of guilt in her eyes. "I know. I hate keeping it from Amber. After everything we've been through together..."

"I know," I said softly, understanding exactly how she felt. "I hate keeping it from Jeremy too. He's my best friend, my brother... but it's better this way. Safer."

Mia nodded in agreement, though the weight of our secrets hung heavy in the room. The people we loved most in the world could never know who we really were - not just to protect them, but to protect the delicate balance between our worlds. Between life and death itself.

The rest of the night passed in tense silence. Hunter and I took turns watching over Tomi while Mia kept guard. None of us really slept, too aware of what the Emperor's appearance meant - for us, for our family, for every universe he could reach.

As dawn started breaking over Ireland, I stood at Tomi's window, watching the sky lighten. Soon the girls would be home from their sleepover, unaware of how close danger had come. Soon we'd have to put on our normal faces, pretend everything was fine. Keep our secrets. Protect our loved ones by lying to them.

"We'll figure this out," Hunter said quietly, coming up behind me with Tomi in his arms. "We always do."

"This time's different," I turned to face him. "The Emperor, the Death Ranger powers, multiple universes at risk... and our daughter caught in the middle of it all."

"Then we'll be ready," Mia added from the doorway. "All of us. Together."

I looked at my sleeping daughter, at my husband, at my fellow Soldier. We'd faced impossible odds before. We'd keep our family safe, keep our secrets, and stop the Emperor.

We had to. Every universe depended on it.

"Something to Lose"

Hunter was outside sparring with the older girls while Mia and I sat in my office with Tomi. The tension between our feline companions was providing an almost welcome distraction from our concerns.

"You realize you're nothing but an ordinary house cat," Kaya informed Thara with her usual superiority.

Thara's response was pure cat - a deliberate turn and tail lift that made her opinion of Kaya's statement perfectly clear.

"Classy," Kaya grumbled.

"Kaya, enough," Mia sighed. "She's a cat, you're an alien in cat form. Stop tormenting her."

Kaya muttered something under her breath that was probably best left untranslated.

"Mia," I shifted Tomi in my lap, "I think it's time to warn everyone. Soldiers and Rangers both."

"That would be prudent," a familiar voice agreed.

I looked up to find Master Purple materializing in my office, her presence as commanding as ever. "You scared me. I didn't expect to see you again."

She laughed warmly. "Michelle, I lived millennia in your Amethyst. We'll always be connected."

"I was afraid of that," I sighed. "Fine. You're here. What can you tell us about the Death Ranger?"

"I can tell you these powers were never meant to be used," Master Purple's voice went grave.

"Then... how?" Mia leaned forward. "How did the Emperor get them?"

"As you both know, Universe D is a mirror of this one," Master Purple began. "Where Tommy and Michelle made very different choices, leading to very dire outcomes."

"Yeah," I nodded grimly. "Tommy became Drakkon and Michelle became the Empress. But Drakkon is dead, and last I heard the Empress was reforming, to an extent."

"Correct. But those loyal to Drakkon and the Emperor remain - those who seek to return the Empress to her previous, more ruthless tactics. These loyalists used leftover Drakkon

technology to tap into the Morphin Grid and access the Death Ranger powers, resurrecting Emperor Hunter. Unfortunately, they didn't understand what they were dealing with. Once resurrected, the Emperor sought vengeance above all else, using his power to open a portal to this universe. He's also aware of the Empress's remarriage, which he sees as betrayal."

"So we're dealing with an undead psycho that wants me dead?" Mia asked flatly.

"In a nutshell, you could say that," Master Purple confirmed.

"Great," Kaya's tail twitched. "So how do we stop someone who's already dead?"

"That," Master Purple's expression grew more serious, if possible, "is the real challenge. The Death Ranger powers don't just control death - they exist in a space between life and death. Between universes."

"Which is why he can manifest and disappear at will," I concluded, adjusting Tomi as she started to fuss. "Why traditional weapons might not work."

"Precisely. And the more fear he creates, the more grief he causes..." Master Purple paused, watching Tomi. "The stronger his powers become."

"So how do we fight something like that?" Mia asked, though I could tell from her voice she already suspected the answer wouldn't be simple.

"For now, we wait," Master Purple said. "He's still transitioning between spirit and physical form. These manifestations, these threats - they're just the beginning. When he finally materializes completely..."

"That's when we can actually fight him," Mia finished.

"But also when he'll be at his most dangerous," I added, holding Tomi closer. "When he can do more than just threaten."

"Which is why you need to be ready," Master Purple's voice was firm. "All of you. Because when he does fully materialize..."

"It's going to be war," Kaya finished grimly.

"My powers," Mia spoke up, her hand still near where her Scythe would appear. "They're connected to death too. The Scythe of Shadows can cut through spiritual forms, sever souls..." She hesitated. "How do they compare to what he can do?"

Master Purple studied her carefully. "Your powers as Sailor Nemesis are natural - part of the balance between life and death. The Death Ranger powers are a corruption of that balance. Where your Scythe can guide souls, his powers consume them. Where you can reveal truth through your Obsidian, he twists reality itself."

"But my abilities to affect the spiritual realm," Mia pressed. "Could they work against him? Even when he's not fully materialized?"

"Theoretically," Master Purple nodded. "Your Spectral Strike, your ability to cut through illusions with Truth Severance... these might be particularly effective. But be careful. The more you engage with his corrupted energy..."

"The more he might be able to corrupt mine," Mia finished quietly.

I watched my fellow Soldier absorb this information, knowing she was already strategizing how to use her powers against him without risking their corruption.

"What about my powers?" I asked, feeling Tomi stir at the mention of lightning abilities - like she somehow knew we were discussing her inheritance. "The Amethyst's destructive energy, the lightning..."

"Your powers as Sailor Saturn are particularly interesting in this case," Master Purple nodded. "The Amethyst's connection to destruction, combined with your natural lightning abilities... they exist in opposition to his death powers. Where he corrupts, you can potentially cleanse."

"Through the Amethyst Burst?" I shifted Tomi carefully.

"Yes, but be cautious. Your Future Sight might be crucial here - helping anticipate his manifestations. But direct confrontation between your lightning and his death energy..." Master Purple hesitated.

"Could be explosive," Mia finished. "Especially if you're amplifying it through the Amethyst."

"So between my lightning and your soul-severing abilities," I looked at Mia, "we might actually have a chance when he materializes."

"If we can coordinate our attacks properly," Mia nodded. "Your Crystal Shard Storm combined with my Shadow Shard Barrage..."

"Could create quite the lightshow," Kaya muttered, while Thara watched us all with suspicious feline interest.

"There's something else you should know," Master Purple's voice took on a new gravity. "The Death Ranger powers... they don't just feed on fear and grief. They can use them to create manifestations of their own."

"What kind of manifestations?" I asked, though dread was already pooling in my stomach.

"He could potentially pull versions of people from other universes, or create corrupted versions of people you know. The more emotional connection, the stronger the manifestation."

Mia and I exchanged looks. The implications were clear - he could use our loved ones against us, twist them into weapons.

"That's why he threatened our families," I said quietly, holding Tomi closer. "He's not just trying to scare us..."

"He's building up power for when he fully materializes," Mia finished. "Creating connections he can exploit."

"Which means we need to be prepared for anything," Master Purple warned. "Or anyone. The people you love most could become your greatest threats."

Thara suddenly sat up straight, her attention focused on something we couldn't see. Even Kaya tensed.

"Speaking of manifestations..." Mia's hand moved to summon her Scythe.

The temperature in the room dropped suddenly. Tomi whimpered, pressing closer to me as crimson light began seeping through the walls.

"Well, isn't this cozy?" The Emperor's voice echoed from everywhere and nowhere. "A little family meeting about me?"

"Hunter!" I called out, knowing he'd sense the energy shift from outside where he was training the girls. We needed to keep them away from this.

"Your Thunder Ninja can't help you," the Emperor laughed. "Not against what's coming. Tell me, Michelle... have you ever wondered what your precious Hunter would have become if he'd made different choices? If he'd embraced real power?"

The crimson light started concentrating in the corner, taking shape.

"Don't look," Mia warned, her Scythe materializing. "Whatever he shows us, it's not real."



"Oh, but it could have been," the Emperor's voice grew closer. "Just like your Diamond could have lived, Nemesis, if you'd made different choices..."

Master Purple moved between us and the manifestation, her power filling the room. "Enough. You're not strong enough yet to maintain physical form. These tricks waste your energy."

"Do they?" The Emperor's laugh made my skin crawl. "Or do they feed it?"

Tomi started crying - not her normal fussy cry, but something different. Something that made the hair on my neck stand up. Her tiny hands gripped my shirt as purple sparks started crackling around her.

"Ah," the Emperor's voice held sick delight. "The little princess senses it too. Such power in one so young... imagine what she could become with the right guidance."

"You'll never touch her," I snarled, feeling my own lightning respond to Tomi's distress.

"No?" His voice turned cruel. "Such a protective mother. Does it hurt, knowing your daughter will face the same battles you do? That she'll have to learn to hide who she really is, just like her parents?"

Mia stepped forward, Scythe ready. "That's enough."

"Is it, Nemesis? You're so careful to maintain your perfect image. Your successful career, your close friendship with Amber... what would she think if she knew what you really are? What you're capable of?"

Master Purple's power flared. "You're not as strong as you think, Death Ranger. Not yet."

"Perhaps not," he agreed, the crimson light starting to fade. "But soon. Very soon. And when I do fully materialize..." The temperature dropped further. "Well, let's just say keeping secrets from the people you love will become much more... difficult."

The crimson light faded completely, but the chill in the room lingered. Tomi was still crying, purple sparks dancing around her tiny fingers.

"We need to remove her bracelets," Master Purple said quietly. "Now. She needs to be able to release that energy safely."

"Michelle?" Hunter's voice came from the doorway, tension evident in every syllable. He must have felt the energy shift and come running.

"The Emperor," I explained, already working to remove Tomi's power dampening bracelets.  
"Another manifestation. He... he threatened Tomi directly this time."

Hunter crossed the room in two strides, taking our daughter as soon as the bracelets were off. The moment she was in her father's arms, Tomi released a small burst of purple-tinged lightning - harmless, but telling.

"She sensed him," Mia observed, her Scythe still ready. "Responded to his energy."

"Which means she might be able to warn us when he's coming," Master Purple added. "If we can teach her to understand what she's feeling..."

"She's one," I protested, watching Hunter soothe our daughter. "We can't expect her to-"

"To what?" Master Purple's voice was gentle. "To protect herself? She already is, Michelle. The question is whether we'll help her learn to control it."

"The bracelets were meant to protect her," I said quietly, watching the purple sparks dance around my daughter. "To give her a chance at a normal childhood..."

"Normal ended the moment the Emperor targeted her," Hunter's voice was grim but steady. "We need to help her understand her powers, even at this age."

"Through play," Master Purple suggested. "Simple games that teach her to recognize different energies. To distinguish between safe and dangerous."

Mia's Scythe disappeared as she moved closer to examine the residual energy in the room. "He's getting stronger. Each manifestation lasts longer, feels more... substantial."

"How long?" I asked, dreading the answer. "Until he can fully materialize?"

"Days," Master Purple confirmed. "Maybe a week. No more than that."

Hunter shifted Tomi in his arms as another small burst of lightning escaped her. "Then we better start her training now. Before he comes back."

"And the girls outside?" Mia asked carefully.

"Keep training them too," I decided. "And we have to warn them. Explain what we're up against. Harley has never had to worry about a direct threat, but this time she has to be ready."

Hunter nodded grimly. "She and Arissa both need to understand the reality of what's coming. No more practice scenarios."

"They're so young," I whispered, though I knew we had no choice. Our daughters had inherited more than just our powers - they'd inherited our battles too.

"Young, but strong," Master Purple reminded me. "And they have something you never had at their age - proper training, support, understanding of their abilities."

"And each other," Mia added. "Those girls are inseparable. They'll be stronger together."

Tomi made a small sound, purple sparks still dancing around her. Looking at my baby girl, I knew Master Purple was right - normal wasn't an option anymore. Not with what was coming.

"Call them in," I told Hunter. "They need to know exactly what kind of enemy we're facing."

"And this is where I leave you for now," Master Purple's form began to fade. "If I have any more information to share, I will appear to you again. Until then, stay strong and may the power protect you all."

"I will never escape," I sighed as she vanished, watching the last traces of her purple energy dissolve.

Hunter returned with the girls moments later. Arissa's posture was already defensive - her years of battle training on TK-91 had given her instincts that couldn't be taught.

"Something is off. I can feel it," she said, eyes scanning the room for threats.

"What's going on?" Harley moved closer to her sister, their training already kicking in.

I shared a look with Hunter, still holding Tomi who had finally stopped sparking. How do you tell your children that a being of death itself is targeting your family? That their training isn't just preparation anymore, but necessity?

"Girls," I started carefully, "we need to talk about a new enemy. One that's going to test everything you've learned so far."

"Remember how we've talked about other universes?" I watched their faces carefully. "About how different choices can create different realities?"

"Like the stories about Lord Drakkon," Harley nodded, her expression serious. She might be young, but she understood..

"There's a version of Hunter from another universe," I continued, seeing Arissa's eyes narrow with understanding. "He's... acquired new powers. Death Ranger powers."

"That doesn't sound good," Arissa said flatly, her TK-91 training evident in how quickly she was assessing the threat.

"It's not," Mia confirmed. "He's targeting this family specifically. And when he fully materializes..."

"We need to be ready," Hunter finished, still holding Tomi who had finally settled.

"Is that why Tomi's not wearing her bracelets?" Harley asked, noticing the purple sparks still occasionally dancing around her baby sister.

"Yes," I nodded. "She can sense him coming. And we all need to be able to use our powers if necessary."

"No more holding back in training," Arissa concluded grimly.

"No," Hunter's voice was firm but gentle. "This isn't a drill anymore. We're facing a real threat, and you both need to be prepared to defend yourselves."

"But what about everyone else?" Harley asked, worry creeping into her voice. "Uncle Jeremy, Aunt Livvie, the twins... none of them know about our powers. And Tomi..." she glanced at her baby sister. "Last time she didn't have her bracelets, Rose got zapped."

"We protect them," I said firmly. "They never need to know about our powers or this threat. Tomi will wear her bracelets around others, but at home, when it's just us..." I looked at my youngest daughter, still occasionally sparking. "She needs to learn to control them naturally."

"And Grandma?" Arissa's tactical mind was already working through scenarios. "She lives right here on the property. How do we keep this from her?"

I shared a look with Hunter. "That's... complicated. For now, we do our best. We're good at keeping secrets - we have to be. But our priority has to be preparing for what's coming."

"So what exactly can this Death Ranger do?" Arissa asked, already analyzing the threat like she'd been taught. "What are we up against?"

"He exists between life and death," Mia explained. "Between universes. He can manifest at will, create illusions, feed off fear and grief to grow stronger."

"And he's targeting us specifically?" Harley moved closer to Tomi and Hunter, protective even at her age.

"Yes," I confirmed, watching my daughters process this. "He'll try to use the people we love against us. Create manifestations to hurt us emotionally as well as physically."

"That's why Tomi reacted," Arissa realized. "She sensed him here earlier, didn't she?"

"She did," Hunter nodded. "Which is why we need to help her understand her powers, even as young as she is. And why your training becomes more crucial than ever."

"When?" Harley asked quietly. "When is he coming?"

"Days," I answered honestly. They deserved the truth. "Maybe a week. When he can fully materialize..."

"Then we train harder," Arissa said firmly, her hand finding her sister's. "We protect our family."

"Starting now," Hunter said, shifting Tomi in his arms. "Harley, I want you working with your mom on energy detection. If Tomi can sense the Emperor coming, you might be able to develop that sense too, even though you're newer to your powers."

"And me?" Arissa's stance was already combat-ready, years of TK-91 training evident in every movement.

"You'll train with me," Mia stepped forward. "Your lifetime of battle training gives you an advantage. We need to build on that."

I watched my daughters process this - Arissa with the confidence of someone trained since she could walk, Harley with the determination of someone still learning to embrace her recently discovered abilities.

"What about when Kira and Kora come over?" Harley asked. Even after two years of knowing about her powers, maintaining secrets around her best friends was still the hardest part.

"Life continues normally," I said firmly. "We maintain our routines, keep up appearances. But training becomes priority when we're home. And you both need to be ready to protect yourselves at any moment, even around your friends."

"Without letting them know why," Arissa added, the security protocols she'd learned since childhood kicking in.

"Exactly," Hunter confirmed. "Now, let's get started. We don't have much time."

"Actually," Mia spoke up, "before we start, there's something else you girls need to understand about this enemy."

Arissa's eyes narrowed - she recognized that tone from years of tactical briefings. Harley moved closer to her sister, still learning to read these situations but trusting Arissa's instincts.

"He can create manifestations," I explained carefully. "Use our memories, our emotions against us. Which means you might see things - people - that aren't real."

"Like what?" Harley asked, though from her expression I could tell she wasn't sure she wanted the answer.

"Like versions of people we know," Hunter said gently. "But twisted, wrong. You'll need to learn to distinguish real from false."

"That's why Tomi reacted so strongly," Arissa concluded, her tactical mind working. "She could sense the difference."

"Yes," I watched purple sparks still occasionally dance around my youngest. "And you both need to develop that awareness too. Especially you, Harley. Your powers are still new to you - he might try to use that."

"Then let's start training," Harley said with a determination that made my heart squeeze. Two years ago she hadn't even known about her heritage. Now she was facing this threat head-on.

"First though," I exchanged looks with Mia, "we both need a moment of normalcy. Mia, you should visit Amber. I'm going to see Jeremy."

Mia nodded, understanding perfectly. "Agreed. Which means, Kaya - no talking at Amber's. You get to play regular house cat. And please be nice to Ellie."

Kaya's tail twitched with annoyance. "Stupid dog... you know a normal cat would attack..."

"Kaya..." Mia's warning tone was perfect.

"Fine, fine," Kaya grumbled, slinking into her black travel backpack with as much dignity as possible.

"Come on, Thara," I smiled, watching my own cat perk up. "Time to visit your favorite human." Thara practically pranced into her purple backpack, the perfect picture of feline superiority.

The contrast between our cats' attitudes would have been funny if the situation weren't so serious.

"Hunter, you've got the girls?" I asked, though I already knew the answer.

"Of course," he nodded, still holding Tomi. "We'll start with basic energy detection exercises. Nothing too intense yet."

"And no taking off Tomi's bracelets unless one of us is here," I reminded him, though I caught Harley and Arissa exchanging knowing looks. My overprotective warnings were nothing new to them.

"Call if anything feels off," Mia added, adjusting her backpack as Kaya continued to grumble inside it. "Even the slightest hint of his energy..."

"We know, we know," Arissa assured us with the confidence of someone raised in tactical situations. "Constant vigilance, immediate reporting of anomalies."

"What she said," Harley added, making me smile despite everything. She might be newer to all this, but she was learning fast.

I kissed each of my daughters, saved an extra long one for Tomi, and headed out with Thara's backpack. A few hours of normalcy with Jeremy - that's all I needed. Just enough time to remember why we fought so hard to protect this life we'd built.

Even if we had to lie to protect it.

I dropped Mia and Kaya off at Amber and Trev's house, catching Kaya's last muffled complaints about having to play nice with Ellie, then headed to Jeremy and Liv's. Thara settled contentedly in her backpack, probably already anticipating the attention she'd get from the twins.

The familiar drive helped settle my nerves. This was why we'd all moved to Ireland - to be together, to build this life. Even if Jeremy didn't know everything about me and what I was facing, his friendship, his family, were anchors I desperately needed right now.

Especially with what was coming.

I pulled into their driveway, already hearing Rose's fairy chaos from outside. Some things never changed - and that was exactly what I needed today. A few hours of normality with my best friend, watching his children play, pretending the weight of multiple universes wasn't resting on our shoulders.

Mia

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Walking up to Amber and Trevor's new house felt surreal. After everything that had happened

since we met, after all these months of hearing about Rachel, I was finally going to meet my goddaughter. I adjusted Kaya's backpack, hearing her continued grumbling about having to behave, and knocked.

The door opened to reveal an older woman with Trevor's eyes and warm smile. "Yes?"

"Hi, I'm looking for Amber O'Sullivan?"

"And who might you be?"

"I'm her friend, Mia Black..."

"Oh! You're Mia!" Her face lit up with recognition. "Come in, Love, come in! I'm Trevor's mam, Niamh. I've heard so much about you. Amber's upstairs in her makeup room. I'll grab her for you. Can I get you some tea, Love?"

I smiled, stepping into their home. "I'm fine, thanks."

As Niamh headed upstairs, I took in the house and thought about how I could never let anyone hurt Amber or her family. My friend had no idea who I really was, what was really coming. And I had to keep it that way.

"MIA!" Amber's voice carried down the stairs seconds before she appeared, practically running to hug me. "I can't believe you're here! Why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

"Surprise visit," I managed, returning her hug while carefully keeping Kaya's backpack from being crushed. "Thought it was time I finally met my goddaughter in person."

"She's just gone down for a nap," Amber smiled, pulling back to look at me. "But she should be up soon. Come on up to my makeup room - wait until you see what I've been working on for the Rachel Amber line."

I followed her upstairs, noting every exit, every potential vulnerability in the house - a habit I couldn't break, especially now. The Emperor's threats were still too fresh in my mind.

"I see you brought your shadow," Amber grinned, nodding at Kaya's backpack.. I caught sight of Ellie's dog bed in the corner of Amber's makeup room and silently prayed Kaya would keep her promise to behave.

"Yeah, she goes everywhere with me," I said, carefully setting down the backpack. "Hope that's okay."

"Of course! She and Ellie can get to know each other," Amber said enthusiastically, completely unaware of how impossible that friendship would be.

"I love your house," I said kindly.

"Oh yeah! You haven't been here yet. When Rachel is up I'll give you the grand tour. In the meantime, this is my makeup room. You have got to look at these formulas. I even have some black shit for you to put around your eyes," she teased. Amber always mocked my more gothic makeup style.

We were an odd pair, no doubt about it. The pseudo-goth rock singer and the fashion model turned CEO who was always perfectly put together. But somehow it worked. We accepted each other exactly as we were. Besides Kaya, I'd never had a real friend until Amber. Someone worth protecting, even if she could never know from what.

"I like my black shit... and my fans expect it," I smiled, watching her organize her latest formulations with typical precision.

"Someday you're going to let me give you a proper glow up," Amber said, pulling out products for me to examine. Her enthusiasm for her work was always infectious.

"Sure. The day hell freezes over," I teased.

Amber rolled her eyes. "So, how have you been?"

"Good. Busy, but good," I lied, hating how easily the deception came. "How are you?"

"Spectacular. I'm healing up from my near-death experience," Amber said casually, as if discussing the weather.

"Oh Amber, I am so sorry I wasn't here for that," guilt twisted in my stomach. "I was so scared when Michelle told me what happened at Rachel's birth."

Amber shook her head. "Don't. It's fine. There was nothing you could have done, and I couldn't have taken anyone else hovering over me. Trev and Niamh were quite enough."

"Still. I'm so happy you're okay."

"You and me both," she laughed. "But seriously, Trev was out of control. The doctor cleared me for light activity but Trev disagreed. He came home and saw me dancing and picked me up over his shoulder and carried me to bed."

"He did not."

"Oh, he did. I told him if he ever did that shit again I would take Rachel and leave. That made him stop and think. We're good now." Her smile turned mischievous. "Actually, Trev finally met Andy Bell a few days ago."

"Oh my god! Did he fan girl?"

"He cried three times..."

I burst out laughing, momentarily forgetting my darker concerns. "Only three? What happened?"

"Oh god," Amber grinned, settling into her makeup chair. "He was so nervous he put his shirt on inside out that morning. Couldn't decide what to wear, kept worrying about every detail. Then at the concert..." she shook her head fondly. "He cried during the show, cried when they met backstage, and cried again during their champagne toast."

"Wait - they had champagne?"

"Andy gave him a bottle as a Father's Day gift. Trevor could barely hold his glass, he was shaking so much. But Andy was incredibly sweet about it. Even posed for special photos to show Rachel someday."

"Please tell me you got pictures of all this."

"Of course. Including Trevor doing Erasure choreography with Andy Bell himself. Though honestly?" Amber's voice softened. "Seeing Trevor that happy, that purely himself... it was worth everything."

We were interrupted by a soft cry from down the hall - Rachel waking up from her nap. Amber's face lit up the way it always did when she talked about her daughter.

"Perfect timing. Ready to meet your goddaughter properly?"

"More than ready," I smiled, though my heart squeezed. Looking at Amber's happiness, all I could think about was the Emperor's threats. I would die before I let him hurt this family.

A sharp hiss from Kaya's backpack interrupted my dark thoughts - clearly Ellie had gotten too close for her liking.

"Kaya, stop," I warned as we headed to the nursery. So much for playing nice.

Amber lifted Rachel from her crib with practiced grace, then carefully transferred her to my arms. "Rachel, meet your godmother, Mia. Well, one of them anyway." She glanced toward the door. "I need to get Niamh to change her diaper."

"You don't change diapers?" I asked, cradling Rachel close.

Amber shook her head with a laugh. "Still never have. I know I'm a terrible mother."

"Or a brilliant one," I smiled as she went to fetch Niamh, looking down at the tiny face of the child I'd sworn to protect - even if her mother could never know from what.

Rachel studied my face with that intense focus only babies have, her tiny hand reaching up to grab a strand of my black hair.

"Well, she definitely has your grabby tendencies," I called out to Amber as she returned with Niamh.

"Oh aye, she's got quite the grip," Niamh smiled, expertly taking Rachel for her diaper change. "Though usually it's her Da's hair she's after."

I watched Niamh work with practiced efficiency while Amber perched on the edge of the changing table, talking softly to Rachel. The scene was so perfectly domestic, so precious... and so vulnerable. The Emperor could destroy all of this with a single manifestation.

Another hiss from Kaya's backpack - Ellie must have followed us in.

"Your cat really doesn't like dogs, does she?" Amber observed, though her tone was amused.

"She doesn't like much of anything," I said, trying to keep my voice light while silently willing Kaya to behave. One slip, one wrong move...

"Except you," Amber smiled. "I've never seen a cat so devoted to their person."

If she only knew the real reason for that devotion.

"Well, there's Thara," I pointed out, trying to keep the conversation light.

Amber laughed. "Touché. Although Thara would sell Michelle out for Jeremy any day."

"True... her 'kitty crush,' as Mich would say. Speaking of, how are things with Mich?" I asked, genuinely curious about their unique dynamic.

Amber shrugged, that familiar mix of exasperation and fondness crossing her face. "Same as always. She slams me, I slam her, but in the end she comes through when I need her. Best frienemies."

"You enjoy it, Love. Don't pretend," Niamh chuckled as she finished with Rachel's diaper. "You and Michelle love each other like sisters."

"I wouldn't go THAT far," Amber protested, though her smile suggested otherwise.

"I would," Niamh said firmly, lifting Rachel. "Now, Mia, Love, you are staying for dinner, right? I know Trevor would love to see you."

"I would love to," I nodded. "But while I'm in town I have to try Celtic Cantina. I love Shamrock so much, I can't wait to try his new place."

"Oh! Yes!" Amber's eyes lit up. "Let me call Trev and tell him we'll be by. You have to meet Fionn anyway - he's become like a little brother to Trev."

"Can I take Kaya?" I asked, already anticipating her reaction to a restaurant full of new people.

"Michelle takes Thara so I'm gonna say yes," Amber said, as another hiss emanated from Kaya's backpack.

"Perfect," Amber pulled out her phone. "Let me just text Trev to make sure he can fit us in tonight. The place has been packed since they opened."

"The reviews have been incredible," I said, watching Rachel drift off in Niamh's arms. "Even in the States, people are talking about it."

"As they should be," Niamh said proudly. "My boy's done well for himself. Both restaurants thriving, a beautiful wife, perfect daughter..."

"Speaking of perfect daughters," Amber's phone buzzed, "Trev says he'll have the private room ready for us at seven. And he's excited to see you, Mia."

Another hiss from Kaya's backpack made me sigh. "Kaya, enough. Ellie is not attacking you."

"She's... particular about other animals," I said carefully, catching Kaya's eye through her backpack window. If they only knew how particular my 'cat' really was.

"Well, at least she's not as bad as Thara," Amber laughed. "That cat thinks she's actual royalty."

"I should text Liv and Jeremy, see if they want to join us," Amber said, already pulling out her phone.

I smiled, watching her type. "Jeremy and Trev really have become like brothers, haven't they?"

"Yeah, and Liv and I are like sisters," Amber nodded. "They even call Niamh 'mam' now."

"Well, with Mary O'Brien as Jeremy's mam, I don't blame him for wanting a replacement," Niamh said as we headed downstairs, her voice carrying a protective edge.

"Oh, speaking of Mary," Amber's eyes lit up with mischief, "you should have seen her face at the wedding. Trevor and Jeremy did this whole dance to a song from when they were together, and at the end, Trev just planted this massive kiss right on Jeremy. I thought Mary might actually faint."

"Oh my god!" I couldn't help laughing, picturing the scene. "That's brilliant!"

"It was indeed," Niamh said proudly as we reached the bottom of the stairs. "My boy doesn't tolerate judgmental cunts like her. I raised him well."

Amber scooped Ellie into her purse while Niamh gathered Rachel's seemingly endless supply of baby necessities.

"We'll take Niamh's car," Amber explained, jingling her keys. "The car seat doesn't exactly fit in my sports car."

The drive into Cork City was beautiful - nothing like my concrete jungle in NYC, but charming in its own way. Small for a 'city,' but with a warmth that felt genuine.

The Celtic Cantina stood out immediately - Trevor's signature blend of modern elegance and Irish tradition evident even from outside.

"Welcome to the Cantina!" Amber announced proudly as she led us into a private banquet room. I could see why the reviews had been so glowing - the atmosphere was perfect.

Trevor appeared from the kitchen, his face lighting up. "Mia! Love, it's so good to see you!" He wrapped me in one of his signature enthusiastic hugs.

"It's amazing to finally be here," I hugged him back. "The place is gorgeous!"

"Oh, wait until you try the food. Who all is joining us, mo ghrá?" he asked Amber.

"Liv and Jeremy with the twins," Amber started counting off. "Which means Hal and Kara with their girls will probably come too..."

"Mich was at Jeremy's," I added. "So maybe her as well?"

"Oh, then definitely Michelle and Hunter with their three, and probably Lea too," Amber concluded.

"Right then, full family affair. I'll warn Fionn," Trevor grinned.

Amber nodded, "Though make sure he comes to meet Mia."

"Of course," Trevor nodded, spotting my backpack. "Hi Kaya, lovely to see you too. Can she play nice with Thara?"

"No chance," I laughed. "But they'll both stay in their respective diplomatic territories."

"Perfect. Now, give me my daughter. Time to show her off to my staff," Trevor beamed, scooping Rachel from her carrier with practiced ease before heading back to the kitchen, already cooing to her in Irish.

Michelle

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The moment Jeremy opened his door, I practically fell into his hug. After everything with the Emperor, I needed this - needed my best friend's unconditional love, even if he couldn't know why.

"Michelle, Love, are you okay?" His accent thickened with concern as he held me.

I pulled back slightly, realizing how desperate I must seem. "I'm fine. Just needed my bestie."

He hugged me tighter, no questions asked. "You've got me, Love. Always."

"AUNTIE MICHELLE! FAIRY DANCE!" Rose's voice preceded her as she launched herself at my legs with typical fairy enthusiasm.

I laughed, scooping her up and letting her energy wash away my darker thoughts. "Hey fairy girl. Where's your brother?"

"Ki Ki with Mummy," Rose announced proudly.

"He's watching Liv code again," Jeremy explained with clear pride. "Somehow he can pick out coding errors without even understanding the code. The way he sees patterns is truly amazing."

"That boy is a genius," I said, watching Thara paw impatiently at her backpack window.

"He takes after his Da," Jeremy smiled.

I rolled my eyes. "Your girlfriend wants to see you," I nodded toward my increasingly impatient cat.

Jeremy laughed. "Let her out... but she has to be nice to Daisy and Peach."

"No promises," I muttered, releasing Thara who immediately leapt into Jeremy's arms. "Traitor."

"FAIRY DANCE NOW!" Rose demanded, tugging at my shirt.

"Inside voice," Jeremy and I said automatically, making us both laugh. Some habits were too ingrained to break.

"Let Auntie Michelle breathe first," Liv called from down the hall, appearing with Killy who was studying something on her tablet with intense concentration.

"Need straight," he muttered, pointing at what I assumed was code on the screen.

"He's already found three errors," Liv said proudly. "I don't know how he does it."

I watched my nephew work, grateful for these normal moments with my family. After this morning's confrontation with the Emperor, seeing them all safe, all exactly as they should be...

"Mich?" Jeremy's voice brought me back. "You sure you're okay? You seem..."

"Just tired," I lied smoothly, hating how easily it came. "Tour prep, you know how it is."

"FAIRY DANCE!" Rose insisted again, apparently done waiting.

"How about we all dance?" Jeremy suggested, still holding Thara who looked entirely too pleased with herself. "Even Ki Ki?"

"Need music first," Killy said seriously, not looking up from the tablet.

"Auntie Michelle sing?" Rose's eyes lit up with hope, momentarily distracted from her fairy dance demands.

"Sure, if Jeremy plays guitar," I smiled, already knowing what was coming. "What song?"

"Moon Fight!" Rose bounced excitedly.

I laughed - her consistent misname for 'Can't Fight the Moonlight' never failed to amuse me. "Sure. Jeremy?"

He was already reaching for his guitar, Thara reluctantly surrendering her spot in his arms. As the familiar chords filled the room and I started singing, Liv scooped up both twins, even managing to get Killy to set aside his tablet for a dance. These intimate family moments - just us, just music, just love - somehow meant more than any stadium show ever could.

When we transitioned into "Dreams" by Fleetwood Mac, Jeremy's voice blending perfectly with mine, I felt that familiar twinge. His talent was extraordinary - I'd tried more than once to convince him to sign with my label, to share that gift with the world. But Jeremy was content here, making music just for his family, building this beautiful life with Liv and the twins.

Watching Rose fairy dance while Killy tried to impose proper choreography, seeing the pure joy on their faces... maybe Jeremy had the right idea. Maybe simple was exactly what we all needed.

If only we could keep it that way.

"More!" Rose demanded as the last notes of "Dreams" faded.

"Inside voice, mo stór," Jeremy reminded gently. "And maybe we should let Auntie Michelle rest her voice?"

"Actually," Liv scooped up Killy with practiced ease, "why don't we let Auntie Michelle visit with Da? Let's take the dogs outside. Spare them from that vermin's wrath."

Thara looked up from her spot in Jeremy's arms at Liv's nickname, her expression pure feline disdain. The cat equivalent of 'how dare you.'

"She isn't vermin! She's a sweet baby girl," I protested, though we'd had this conversation a hundred times.

"That wants to kill me in my sleep and take my husband," Liv shot back, amusement dancing in her eyes.

I shrugged, unable to deny the obvious. "Well, yes."

"Come on," Liv called to Rose. "Let's go play with Daisy and Peach while Da and Auntie Michelle talk."

"PUPPIES!" Rose cheered, already fairy-dancing toward the door.



"Inside voice," Killy reminded his sister automatically from Liv's arms.

Once they were gone, Jeremy settled on the couch, Thara still purring contentedly in his lap. "Alright Love, what's really going on? And don't tell me it's just tour prep."

I sat beside them, watching my cat shamelessly flaunt her devotion to my best friend. "Can't I just want to see you?"

"Of course," his accent softened with concern. "But I know that look, Michelle. Something's bothering you."

If he only knew. If I could just tell him everything - about the Emperor, about the danger coming for all of us... but I couldn't. Not without putting him at even more risk.

"Just... a lot on my mind," I managed. "Sometimes I need my best friend to remind me what's real."

Jeremy's expression told me he knew there was more to it, but he wouldn't push. He never did. That's why I loved him.

"Are you okay though?" His voice carried that protective edge I knew so well. "You're not in danger, are you? I've seen those stories about actresses being stalked by obsessed fans..."

I forced a smile, hating myself for the lie I had to tell. "Nothing like that. I'm fine. Not in any danger." The Emperor's threats echoed in my mind, making the words taste bitter.

"Okay, well, whatever you need, I'm here, Love," he said softly as I leaned against him.

Thara chose that moment to roll onto her back in his arms, presenting her stomach in a blatant bid for attention.

"Your girlfriend is demanding attention," I laughed, grateful for the distraction.

Jeremy rolled his eyes. "The vermin is fine."

"She is not vermin!" I protested automatically, our familiar argument comfortable and safe.

"And she's not a 'sweet baby girl' either," he countered. "Nothing sweet about this cat."

"Except her endless devotion to you and her kitty crush," I offered, watching my cat shamelessly flaunt her affection.

"She is ridiculous," Jeremy muttered, but his fingers were already scratching under her chin exactly the way she liked.

"She is ridiculous," Jeremy muttered, but his fingers were already scratching under Thara's chin exactly the way she liked.

"How's the salon doing?" I asked, trying to keep the conversation normal, to push away thoughts of the Emperor's threats.

"Brilliant, actually. Though I've got this one client who keeps demanding I fix her roots every three weeks..."

"My roots are very high maintenance," I played along with our old joke. "And you're the only one I trust with my hair."

"The great Michelle Morris, trusting a small-town Irish hairdresser," he teased.

"The best hairdresser," I corrected. "Even if your cat girlfriend is a menace."

Thara's purring got even louder, as if she was proud of her reputation.

"Speaking of menaces," Jeremy grinned, "you did great at the wedding. Mary looked like she was going to pass out."

I laughed, remembering how satisfying it had been to torment her. "Glad my need for chaos was useful for once. Mary was an easy target. Though her face when Trev kissed you? Absolutely priceless!"

"Oh my god," Jeremy shook his head, "I thought Liv was going to have my dick for that! I was so relieved when she said she was okay with it. But yes, her face was priceless."

"What was it like?" I couldn't help asking. "Kissing Trev again?"

"Honestly?" Jeremy considered, absently stroking Thara. "It was familiar. Nice - kissing him was always nice. But different now. I'm not in love with him anymore. Haven't been for a long time."

"And he's not in love with you either," I added softly. "The way he looks at Amber..."

"Like she's his whole world," Jeremy smiled. "The same way I look at Liv. It's funny how things work out, isn't it? If you'd told me years ago that Trevor would end up married to a woman..."

"With a baby," I added.

"And I'd be married to the most brilliant tech genius in Ireland..."

"With fairy twins," I finished, glancing out the window where Rose was still attempting to teach the dogs her latest dance moves while Killy maintained order.

"Life's weird sometimes," Jeremy mused. "But good weird, you know?"

I nodded, watching my best friend with his cat girlfriend, thinking about how this simple moment - just us talking, being honest about everything except the one thing I couldn't tell him - was exactly what I'd needed today.

"Though speaking of Trevor," Jeremy added, "have you heard about his Andy Bell encounter?"

"No, I know he was excited, but I haven't had time to call him," I said, curious about how my friend had handled meeting his idol.

"Oh my god," Jeremy's eyes lit up with that mischievous gleam I knew so well. "He cried. Three times. And did choreography with Andy Bell himself. Amber got photos of everything."

"She better send those to me," I grinned.

"Though from what Amber tells me, nothing will ever top his Dolly Parton drag disaster story."

"The sideways boobs during 'Jolene'?" I laughed. "I wish I'd been around to see that one."

A crash from outside interrupted us, followed by Rose's "Oopsie!" and Killy's exasperated "Ro Ro!"

"I should probably..." Jeremy started.

"Go parent?" I finished, watching Thara's irritation at potentially losing her human pillow. "Yeah, probably."

"I'M OK!" Rose called out, her fairy confidence unshaken.

Liv appeared in the doorway with a twin tucked under each arm, looking exactly like the tech genius mom she was. Daisy and Peach trotted behind her, carefully avoiding Thara's judgmental stare.

"Your daughter," Liv announced to Jeremy, "just tried to teach the dogs to fairy dance on the patio furniture."

"Need straight," Killy added seriously from under her left arm.

"Everything's crooked," Rose agreed from the right, though she didn't sound particularly concerned about it.

"At least nothing's broken this time," Jeremy offered optimistically, earning an eye roll from his wife.

"The furniture is fine," Liv set the twins down. "Though we might need to revisit the 'gravity exists' conversation with our fairy princess."

"Fairy magic stronger!" Rose declared proudly.

"Inside voice," we all said automatically.

"Need snack," Killy announced, already heading for the kitchen with his usual precision.

"Actually," Liv glanced at her phone, "Amber just texted. Mia's in town and they're all heading to the Cantina. Apparently the whole family's going."

My heart skipped - being in public right now felt risky. But then I heard Mia's name and understood. She must have needed to see everyone too, after this morning's confrontation.

"UNCLE TREV!" Rose cheered, while Killy immediately reversed course from the kitchen, already organizing his shoes with careful movements.

"What do you think, Mich?" Jeremy asked, still absently petting a very content Thara. "Family dinner?"

Looking at my best friend - who could always make me feel safe without knowing why I needed it - I made my decision. We couldn't let fear control us. And maybe having both Mia and me there was safer anyway.

"Sure! Let me call Hunter and have him and the girls meet us there," I said, already pulling out my phone. Having my whole family close right now felt important, even if I couldn't explain why.

"HARLEY!" Rose bounced excitedly.

"Need shoes first," Killy reminded his sister, already meticulously organizing his own.

"Your vermin needs to go back in her prison," Liv smirked, nodding at Thara who was making herself even more comfortable in Jeremy's lap.

"It's a luxury transport vessel, thank you very much," I corrected, reaching for Thara's purple backpack. "Come on, princess. Time to leave your boyfriend."

"Not boyfriend," Killy called from the entryway, making us all laugh.

Thara gave me her most betrayed look as I attempted to extract her from Jeremy's lap. Some battles were harder than others - even facing the Emperor felt simpler than separating my cat from her favorite human.

I took my car while the O'Briens took theirs, and we headed toward the Cantina. Glancing at Thara's backpack in my passenger seat, I could see her still sulking. "You behave, baby girl. Kaya's going to be there, and you both need to just sit nicely in your backpacks."

The look she gave me clearly said she had no intention of being nice to anyone. My spoiled princess of a cat versus Mia's mysterious guardian - at least they'd both be confined to their "luxury transport vessels." Though knowing Thara, she'd find some way to make her disdain known even from inside her backpack.

Having Mia there too meant we could both keep watch, protect our families without them ever knowing they needed protection. Even if that meant enduring whatever cat drama Thara decided to instigate.

The Cantina was already buzzing when we arrived. Mia sat with Amber and Niamh, Kaya's backpack placed carefully away from where Ellie was sleeping under the table. The Jordans came in right behind us. Hunter arrived moments later with our girls and Mom, Tomi already reaching for me from his arms with Harley and Arissa immediately gravitating toward Kora and Kira.

"Where's Rachel?" I asked, settling Tomi on my hip while trying to position Thara's backpack where she could still see Jeremy without causing an incident.

"Trev took her back to show her off to the kitchen staff," Amber rolled her eyes fondly. "Apparently they haven't seen her in two whole days."

"That checks," I laughed, catching Mia's eye briefly. We both positioned ourselves where we could see all the exits - an instinct neither of us could ignore tonight.

"UNCLE TREV!" Rose announced at full volume, making everyone wince.

"Inside voice, mo stór," half the table chorused automatically.

"Need food," Killy added seriously, already arranging his silverware with precise movements.

Trevor appeared with Rachel still in his arms, grinning. "Food's coming. Fionn's just finishing up. Speaking of..." he turned toward Mia. "You haven't met Fionn yet. FIONN!"

Fionn appeared from the kitchen, his face lighting up with recognition. "You must be Mia! I've heard so much about you."

"All good things, I hope," Mia smiled, though I could see her cataloging exits even during the introduction.

"Give me that baby," Mom reached for Rachel. "Let the boys handle dinner."

I caught Hunter's eye across the table, saw his subtle nod. He'd positioned himself where he could watch the main entrance while Mia and I covered the other angles. The three of us had done this dance before - protecting our family without them knowing they needed protection.

Harley and Arissa had settled with Kira and Kora, but I noticed they were staying alert too. Sometimes I forgot they understood more than most twelve and thirteen-year-olds.

The table fell into its usual comfortable chaos once orders were placed. Fionn disappeared back to the kitchen while Trevor joined us, slipping into the familiar dynamics. Mom and Niamh cooed over Rachel, Jeremy and Hal pulled Hunter into their Formula 1 movie debate, while Trevor, Amber, Liv, and Kara discussed something that had Amber gesturing enthusiastically. The girls had formed their own little world at their end of the table.

I caught Mia watching it all with an expression I recognized too well.

"You okay?" I asked quietly.

"Just..." she hesitated, her eyes still scanning the room. "This family you've all built here. It's a little overwhelming." The words carried weight - Mia had always kept her distance, staying in NYC, touring constantly, maintaining that careful space even while being part of us.

"It's your family too, like it or not," I reminded her gently. "Arissa and Rachel are your goddaughters, Amber's your best friend. You're part of this, no matter how much you try to fight it."

"I was fine with just Kaya and me," she said softly. "This is overwhelming. This is... something to lose."

I nodded, understanding exactly what she meant. "Which is why we make sure we don't lose it."

"Speaking of not losing things," Mia's voice dropped even lower, "any manifestations since this morning?"

I shook my head slightly, watching Tomi try to grab Hunter's sleeve from her high chair. "No. You?"

"Nothing since this morning. But..." she glanced at our gathered family, "he's building up to something. I can feel it."

"Me too," I admitted. "The way he threatened-"

A crash from the kitchen interrupted us, followed by what sounded like Fionn cursing in Irish.

"I should check on that," Trevor started to rise, but Amber put a hand on his arm.

"Let him handle it. He needs to learn to manage kitchen chaos without you hovering."

"Need straight," Killy announced seriously, making everyone laugh as the tension broke.

But I caught how Mia's hand had instinctively moved to where her Scythe would materialize, saw Hunter's subtle shift toward a defensive position. We were all on edge, waiting for the Emperor's next move.

I reached for Mia's hand under the table, feeling her startle at the contact. For someone so used to being alone, even simple comfort was foreign.

"Relax," I said softly. "Enjoy being part of this big, amazing family we've built. Whatever happens, we got this. We always have before and this time is no different." The words came out more confident than I felt, but maybe that's what we both needed right now.

Looking around the table at our chosen family - at everything the Emperor had threatened to destroy - I felt my resolve strengthen. He might be powerful, he might be between life and death, but if he wanted to hurt my family, he'd have to go through me first.

And I wasn't going down without one hell of a fight.







"Glam and Goth"

The steady rhythm of paperwork and Ellie's soft snoring under my desk made for a peaceful morning in my office. Another normal day running my empire - or it was, until my phone rang.

"Amber O'Sullivan."

"Amber, it's Brody. Can we talk?"

My hand stilled over the contract I'd been reviewing. Last I'd heard, my sister's husband was in rehab for 'sex addiction' - a transparent attempt to save both his position as CFO of Dalton Industries and his marriage to Bre.

"Brody," I kept my voice professionally neutral. "I admit, I didn't expect to hear from you again. What do you want?"

"I just have to know..." His voice carried that familiar manipulative edge. "Was it all a con to you? Us? Did you ever love me? Did you ever consider taking me back, bringing Rachel to build a family with me?"

I rolled my eyes, grateful he couldn't see my expression. "Brody, there is no world in which I ever leave Trevor, period. And honestly?" I glanced at the photo of my husband and daughter on my desk. "Trevor is the only man I have ever loved."

"You can't mean that," his voice took on that wheedling tone I remembered too well. "What we had-"

"Was exactly what it was always going to be," I cut him off coldly. "A calculated move by a selfish businessman who cares more about image and money than actual relationships. I always knew exactly who you were, Brody. That's why I ran to LA rather than marry you."

"I've changed. The therapy-"

"The PR stunt, you mean?" I couldn't keep the edge from my voice. "Tell me, Brody, how's that working out? Has pretending to have a sex addiction saved your position at Dalton? Fixed things with Bre?"

"Don't," he snapped, that carefully constructed calm cracking. "Don't talk about my marriage."

"Then don't call me asking about rebuilding a family that never existed," I shot back. "You proved exactly who you are when you thought I might leave Trevor for you. Rachel is his daughter. My family is with him. Nothing will ever change that."

Ellie stirred under my desk, probably sensing my tension. I forced myself to take a calming breath.

"Amber, please-"

"Goodbye, Brody. Don't contact me again."

"Amber, wait, please."

I sighed, already exhausted by his predictability. "What do you want?"

"I'm going home today, so before I go back to Bre, I just needed to know if there was any hope for us," he said, as if this was somehow a reasonable request.

I laughed, the sound sharp with disbelief. "You're unbelievable, Brody. Bre agrees to take you back and she's still the backup plan? You still have to make sure you can't have me first?" I shook my head, though he couldn't see it. "Well, let me set your mind at ease - you can't. That door isn't just closed, it never really existed except in your own delusions."

"You don't mean that-"

"I do. And you know what's truly pathetic? You're about to go home to my sister, who's giving you another chance you don't deserve, and you're on the phone with me trying to keep your options open. Some things never change, do they?"

"I just thought..." he started, but I was done with his games.

"No, you didn't think. You never do. You calculate, you manipulate, you plan - but you don't think about anyone but yourself. Not about Bre, not about your position at Dalton, and certainly not about what this phone call means about your supposed 'rehabilitation.'"

"The therapy has helped-"

"Has it?" I couldn't keep the acid from my voice. "Because from where I'm sitting, you're still the same Brody - trying to keep all your options open, treating my sister like a backup plan, caring more about appearances than actual change."

Ellie had woken up completely now, pressing against my legs as if trying to offer support. I reached down to scratch her ears, letting her presence ground me.

"You know what the saddest part is, Brody? I'm not even angry anymore. I just feel sorry for you. Because you'll never understand what real love looks like. What Trevor and I have, what you could have had with Bre if you weren't so busy looking for better options..." I paused,

watching Mia slip quietly into my office. "Because for reasons I can't comprehend, I actually don't think Bre is conning you. She actually loves you."

I waved Mia to the chair across from my desk, grateful for the distraction. Ellie's tail started wagging at the sight of Kaya's backpack, though I noticed Mia kept it well away from my dog.

"Amber-" Brody started, but I was done.

"Go home to my sister, Brody. Try to be worthy of her love for once. And don't call me again. We're done here."

I hung up before he could respond, letting out a long breath as I looked at Mia. "Sorry about that. Brody's finishing his PR rehab stint."

"PR rehab stint?" Mia raised an eyebrow, settling into the chair. "Let me guess - calling to check his options before going home to Bre?"

"Got it in one," I rolled my eyes. "Some things never change."

"Men like Brody don't," Mia agreed, adjusting Kaya's backpack carefully. "Though I have to admit, 'sex addiction' was a creative PR spin."

"Please," I couldn't help but laugh. "Only in LA can you explain away a scandal with 'sex addiction' rehab and come out looking sympathetic."

"Speaking of LA," Mia's expression shifted slightly, becoming more serious. "Have you heard from anyone else there recently? Any... unusual contacts?"

Something in her tone made me pause. There was a weight to her question that seemed to go beyond casual conversation.

"No, just Brody being Brody. Why?" I studied her face, trying to read what wasn't being said. "Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing's wrong," Mia said, though something in her voice didn't quite convince me. "Just... keeping tabs. You know how it is."

I did know how it was with Mia - always slightly guarded, always watching. It was part of why we worked as friends; we both understood the need for walls.

"Well, other than Brody being predictably Brody, everything's quiet," I assured her. "Though speaking of keeping tabs - how was family dinner last night? Trevor said you seemed... overwhelmed."

"It was..." she hesitated, searching for words. "A lot. Good, but a lot. Your family is..."

"Our family," I corrected gently. "You're Rachel's godmother, remember? No taking it back now."

"That's what Michelle said too," she smiled slightly, though it didn't quite reach her eyes.

"Michelle's right sometimes," I grinned. "Don't tell her I said that though. Her ego's big enough."

"Never," Mia promised with a smile.

"But I am glad you stopped by!" My excitement about showing off my empire took over. "You haven't seen this place yet. Can you believe this was an abandoned warehouse? Now it's the headquarters of Amber Nichole Cosmetics!" I stood up, already eager to give the tour. "You have to see what we've built here - the labs are incredible, and wait until you see the testing facilities..."

Ellie trotted after us as I led Mia out of my office, Kaya's backpack held carefully away from my enthusiastic dog. This was my domain - where strategic business mind met creative passion. Where I'd built something real, something mine.

"The whole top floor is dedicated to product development," I explained, leading her toward the labs. "We've got state-of-the-art equipment, and the team we've assembled..."

"The formulation lab is my favorite part," I said, using my key card to access the restricted area. "This is where the magic happens. We're working on things that will revolutionize the industry - formulas that stay perfect even under stage lights, colors that adapt to different skin tones..."

I caught Mia taking in everything with that careful observation she brought to all situations. Sometimes I wondered if that was what made us work as friends - we both noticed everything, just in different ways. Me through my strategic mind, her through... whatever made her Mia.

"This is incredible," she said, genuinely impressed. "You built all this from scratch?"

"From nothing," I confirmed proudly. "Though having Lydia James as a partner helped with some doors. Speaking of which..." I pulled a sample kit from my pocket. "I have something for you. New formulation of black shit for your eyes."

That got a real smile from her. "You're never going to stop calling it that, are you?"

"Never. Now come see where we test everything. The lighting system replicates everything from natural daylight to stage lights," I explained, flipping through different settings. "We can test how the formulas hold up under any conditions. Michelle's been helping us with the performance wear testing - if makeup can survive one of her concerts..."

"It can survive anything," Mia finished, examining the setup with interest. "This is seriously impressive, Amber."

"Wait until you see the color lab," I started, but something in her posture made me pause. That slight tension I'd noticed earlier was back.

"Mia?" I studied her carefully. "What's really going on? And don't tell me nothing - I know that look."

She hesitated, adjusting Kaya's backpack. "I just... wanted to make sure you were okay. After Brody calling, and..." she trailed off, but something told me Brody wasn't really what she was worried about.

"And?" I pressed gently. Sometimes getting Mia to open up was like trying to get Trevor to stop showing everyone pictures of Rachel.

Mia sighed, adjusting Kaya's backpack again - a nervous habit I'd noticed. "It's just... being a godmother, having people I care about... it's new for me. When it was just Kaya and me, it was simpler. I never had anyone else to worry about. Now I do. It's... weird."

I nodded, understanding completely. "That's how I felt when I met Trevor, and even more when we moved to Austin and he reconnected with Jeremy. Suddenly we had this whole family building up around us. It was overwhelming at first."

"Yeah," she said quietly. "But last time I had something to lose..."

"It was Diamond, and you lost him," I finished softly, watching her face close off slightly at his name.

She nodded, that familiar shadow crossing her expression.

"I get it. I do," I said gently. "But caring about people isn't a bad thing, Mia."

"It is when you can't protect them," Mia said so quietly I almost missed it.

Something about her tone made me pause. There was a weight to those words that felt... specific. Like she wasn't just talking theoretically.

"Is that what this visit is really about?" I asked carefully. "Are you worried about something specific?"

She seemed to catch herself, that familiar guard sliding back into place. "No, just... being philosophical, I guess. Too much time alone with my thoughts."

"Well, that's easily fixed," I smiled, trying to lighten the moment. "You should stay a while. Really get to know Ireland. Rachel needs more time with her godmother, and Trevor would love having you around. He's already planning meals he wants to cook for you."

"I don't know..." she started, but I could see her considering it.

"At least think about it? The guest room is always open. And honestly?" I caught her eye. "Having you here would make me feel better too."

"Maybe..." Mia hedged, though I could see her considering it.

"And why are you staying with Michelle of all people anyway? I'm insulted," I smirked.

Something flickered across Mia's face at the mention of Michelle - so brief I almost missed it. Like they shared some secret I wasn't privy to.

"I wanted to see my other goddaughter," Mia shrugged, but the casual tone felt forced. "I missed Arissa. But I suppose I should get to know my newest goddaughter too. And Michelle really is already grating on my nerves."

I laughed, recognizing the familiar complaint. "She has a way of doing that after five minutes."

"Facts. Okay, sure. I'll stay with you for a few days," Mia nodded, as if making some larger decision than just changing guest rooms.

"Perfect! Trevor will be thrilled. Though..." I grinned, already imagining the chaos, "we might need to establish some ground rules about Kaya and Ellie."

"Kaya will behave," Mia said firmly, though the look her cat gave her through the backpack window suggested otherwise.

"Sure she will," I smiled, reaching down to scratch Ellie's ears. "Just like Michelle claims Thara isn't plotting to steal Jeremy."

"Let me show you the rest of the labs while we're here," I said, leading her deeper into my domain. "Then we can grab lunch at the Cantina - Trevor's trying out new menu items today."

"More food critics coming?" Mia asked, carefully keeping Kaya's backpack away from an enthusiastic Ellie.

"Always. Though this batch is from London. The Cantina's reputation is growing faster than we expected. He's already working on his next restaurant concept."

"Really? Where?"

"Limerick," I smiled proudly. "A traditional Irish fusion place. We've got plans for Galway and Dublin down the line too, but we're taking it slow. Rachel's too young for us to rush into major expansions right now."

"Speaking of Rachel," Mia's voice softened slightly. "How is motherhood? Really?"

I caught something in her tone - like she was asking about more than just my daughter. "It's... transformative. Scary sometimes, knowing this tiny person depends on you completely. But also amazing. Though I still refuse to change diapers."

"That's what Niamh is for," Mia smiled, but there was still something guarded in her expression.

"And Trev," I admitted quietly. "Honestly, it's been hard. As her mother, I feel like I should have bonded with Rachel right away, but... I couldn't even bring myself to hold her for nearly three weeks after she was born. I love her, but motherhood has not come naturally." The guilt I'd been carrying weighed heavy in my voice.

"Amber," Mia's tone was gentler than I'd ever heard it. "You went through a very traumatic birth. You have to give yourself time. I saw how you held Rachel yesterday. You're a fantastic mother."

"Yeah, that's what Trev and the doctor have told me," I nodded, trying to believe it. "The therapy helps too. I just... sometimes I wonder if I'm doing enough. If I'm present enough. Between the company launching and everything else..."

"You're building something for her future," Mia said firmly. "And you have this whole amazing family supporting you. Rachel is loved, protected, cherished. That's what matters."

I nodded, pushing away the lingering guilt. "You're right. Okay, let's put Ellie and Kaya in my office and I'll take you to see the rest of the labs. No pets allowed in there."

We headed back to my office, where Ellie immediately curled up in her bed while Mia carefully positioned Kaya's backpack on the opposite side of the room.

"They'll be fine," I assured her, though we both knew that was optimistic at best. "Now, wait until you see our color development lab. We're working on some revolutionary pigments that actually adapt to different lighting conditions..."

When we finished the tour, we headed back to my office, where Ellie and Kaya had maintained their careful distance.



"Wow, Amber," Mia shook her head, genuinely impressed. "This place is truly incredible. You did it - you made your dream happen."

"Almost," I tempered my pride with caution. "We launch at London Fashion Week in September. That's the real test."

"I know it's going to be wildly successful," Mia said firmly. "With you steering the ship, how could it not be?"

"You're sweet. Cantina time?"

"Yes, I'm starving," Mia nodded, collecting Kaya's backpack while I grabbed my purse and keys, tucking Ellie inside.

"Perfect. You can see my new sports car," I grinned, leading the way to the parking lot.

"How do you like living in Ireland?" Mia asked as we pulled out, my playlist automatically filling the car with Selena's voice.

"It's different," I admitted, navigating through Cork's narrow streets. "I was terrified to leave the US, but... it's been amazing. The people are incredibly welcoming, it's beautiful even in the city, and Trevor..." I smiled, thinking of my husband's renewed energy. "He's happier than I've ever seen him, being back home. And honestly? It's starting to feel like home to me too."

Mia laughed as Selena's voice filled a comfortable pause. "And you still bring your Latina flare everywhere you go."

"Always," I grinned. "Selena knows no language barrier. And yes, always bringing the Latina touch of mocha."

"Though watching Rachel try to process three languages is fascinating," I said as we pulled into the Cantina's lot. "Niamh speaks to her in Irish all day because it's her first language, I throw in Spanish, and then there's English..."

"How's that going?" Mia asked, gathering Kaya's backpack.

"Well, when Trevor and I had that fight a few weeks ago, I was yelling in Spanish while he was yelling in Irish. Neither of us understood a word the other was saying," I laughed at the memory. "Rachel's definitely going to be trilingual whether she wants to be or not."

We walked into the restaurant, where Fionn was managing the lunch rush with growing confidence. The place was packed - typical for a weekday lunch now.

"Ms. O'Sullivan," he greeted warmly. "Chef's in the kitchen testing new recipes. Should I let him know you're here?"

"Please. And it's still just Amber, Fionn." I led Mia to my usual table. "Though fair warning - he's probably going to use us as guinea pigs for whatever he's creating."

"I'm always up for Trevor's cooking," Mia smiled.

"Well then," Trevor's voice came from behind us, making me smile, "you're in luck. I've got some new fusion dishes I need opinions on."

"Is one of them Patrick's Mexi Mac?" I asked hopefully. Ever since Michelle gave Trevor that lobster as a joke and Patrick O'Claw became an Instagram sensation, I'd been pushing to capitalize on it.

"I can't believe Michelle gave you a pet lobster," Mia laughed.

"I can't believe how protective he's become over Patrick," I shook my head fondly. "He bought a small travel tank so he can take Patrick to his office. The lobster has his own Instagram account with more followers than the restaurant."

"Patrick is family," Trevor defended, though his grin suggested he knew how ridiculous it sounded. "And yes, mo ghrá, I'm testing the Mexi Mac today. Your marketing brain never stops, does it?"

"Never," I smiled. "That lobster is a gold mine and you know it."

"I would never argue with your business savvy," Trevor said, knowing better than to question my marketing instincts.

I nodded. "Good, because I'm still looking into suppliers to make some Patrick plushies we can sell."

"Of course you are," Trevor laughed. "Though speaking of Patrick, he's been helping me test the new mac and cheese. Well, supervising from his tank anyway."

"Your lobster is a food critic now?" Mia raised an eyebrow.

"Patrick has very refined tastes," Trevor said with mock seriousness. "He only approves dishes worthy of bearing his name."

"The fact that this conversation is happening with complete sincerity..." Mia shook her head. "Only in this family."

"Welcome to the madness," I grinned. "Now feed us something amazing before I start showing potential plushie designs."

"Right then," Trevor's chef mode activated. "I've got three new fusion dishes to test. The Mexi Mac obviously, then a Guinness-braised short rib tacos, and a whiskey cream sauce pasta that I think might be the signature dish for the Limerick restaurant."

"The whiskey cream sauce was incredible last night," Fionn added, appearing with water glasses. "Though the kitchen staff might have been biased after testing the whiskey itself."

"Quality control is very important," Trevor said solemnly, making us all laugh.

"How's the Limerick location coming along?" Mia asked.

"We close on the property next week," I answered, my strategic mind already running numbers. "Though we're taking our time with the renovations. Trev isn't opening until after my launch is complete. Aiming for spring at the earliest."

"We have to work together so we're not both launching big projects at the same time," Trevor added, his hand finding my shoulder. "Ráichéal comes first."

The gentle squeeze he gave my shoulder said everything - we both remembered how close we'd come to losing everything.

"Right then," Trevor shook off the heavy moment. "Let me get your food started. Fionn, grab that new Mexi Mac from Patrick's testing station."

"Your lobster has his own testing station now?" Mia asked incredulously.

"Of course he does," I grinned. "He's our most discerning critic. And our most popular social media star."

"Speaking of," Trevor pulled out his phone, "wait until you see his latest post. He's wearing a tiny chef's hat."

"A chef's hat?" Mia looked between us like we'd lost our minds. "You put clothes on your lobster?"

"Michelle gave it to me," I explained, as if this was completely normal. "She's determined to make Patrick a fashion icon. Though I have to admit, his engagement numbers went up thirty percent after the hat debut."

"This family..." Mia shook her head, but she was smiling. "You're all completely insane."

"Says the woman who carries her cat everywhere in a designer backpack," I countered.

Trevor headed back to the kitchen, leaving us to chat.

"So, what is Rachel's actual name?" Mia asked. "I've heard you call her Rachel, Liv calls her Rach, and Niamh and Trevor call her Ráicheál."

I laughed, settling into an explanation I'd given several times now. "Legally her name is Ráicheál Ámbar Ó Súilleabháin. But Anglicized it's Rachel Amber O'Sullivan. I didn't know until after we were married that Trevor's legal name isn't Trevor O'Sullivan - it's Treabhair Ó Súilleabháin. So I decided it was only right that Rachel have an Irish name like her father."

I smiled, remembering the research I'd done. "And I looked up Amber one day only to find out the proper Spanish form is Ámbar, so I decided that should be her middle name. Both her cultures on full display." I hesitated, then added, "Truth? I'm actually considering changing my legal name to Ámbar Nicolasa Ó Súilleabháin."

"Really?" Mia leaned forward, interested. "Have you talked to Trevor about it?"

"Of course," I smiled. "You know Trevor - he's completely supportive of however I want to celebrate my culture. Says it's only fair since I embraced his so fully. Though professionally I'd still use Amber O'Sullivan, just like he uses Trevor O'Sullivan for the restaurants."

"That's sweet," Mia said. "Though not surprising. Trevor's always been good about cultural appreciation."

"He really has," I nodded, thinking of how seamlessly we'd blended our backgrounds. "Though Niamh would definitely cry."

"In a good way?"

"The best way. She already tears up every time Rachel makes a sound that's even vaguely Irish," I smiled, remembering Niamh's joy when Rachel had made a sound that might have been 'Mamó.' "She's determined our daughter will be fluent in Irish before she can walk."

"While Michelle tries to teach her to say 'y'all,'" Mia added dryly.

"God, don't remind me. Between Michelle's Faux Texan, Trevor, Jeremy, Sosaidh, and Niamh's Irish, Abby's Australian, whatever accent Livvie has developed, and my Spanish... poor kid's going to have the most confused accent ever."

Fionn appeared with our first course - Patrick's Mexi Mac, complete with a small sign that read 'Patrick Approved.'

"This is incredible," Mia said after her first bite. "The lobster has good taste."

"Patrick takes his role as chief taste-tester very seriously," Fionn grinned. "Though he was particularly invested in this one, given the name."

"I still can't believe a lobster is our brand ambassador," I shook my head, though I was already planning the next marketing campaign. "Though his Instagram numbers..."

"Are better than the restaurant's," Trevor appeared with the next dish. "The Guinness-braised short rib tacos. Though fair warning - we're still working on the sauce ratio."

"These look amazing," I smiled, then remembered. "Oh, by the way - Brody called earlier. Fresh out of rehab, checking his options before going back to Bre."

Trevor's expression darkened slightly. "Of course he did. Bloody wanker. You ok?"

I nodded. "Si. I told him there was no universe where I leave you for him and that you're the only man I have ever loved. Everything with him was a con."

"Mionnaím má théann an t-amadán sin in aice leat nó le Ráichéal cuirfidh mé deireadh leis," Trevor muttered darkly.

"Mi corazón, I have no idea what you said, but it's fine. I'm done with Brody."

"He better be done with you because if not he and I will be taking a trip to the cliffs," Trevor said, his accent thickening with protective anger.

I rolled my eyes and looked at Mia. "This is Trevor's thing now. Everyone who pisses him off, he threatens to take them to the Cliffs of Moher and push them off."

"Aye, it's efficient, quick, and little mess," Trevor said with disturbing cheerfulness. "Accidents happen every day. And there are plenty of beautiful cliffs to visit in Ireland. Not just Moher."

Mia nodded approvingly. "I support this. I like your style, Trev."

"See! Thank you Mia, you get it," Trevor beamed, like they were discussing recipe ideas instead of hypothetical murder methods.

I rolled my eyes again. "Ugh, don't encourage him."

"Too late," Trevor grinned, setting down another plate. "Now, about this whiskey cream sauce - I've adjusted the ratio of..."

"Don't think changing the subject to food gets you out of this cliff obsession," I pointed out, though the sauce did smell amazing.

"It's not an obsession, mo ghrá. It's a practical solution to problems," Trevor said innocently. "Now taste this and tell me if the whiskey comes through enough."

"You two are perfect for each other," Mia observed, watching our exchange with amusement. "Completely insane, but perfect."

"The whiskey balance is perfect," I said after tasting. "This is definitely your signature dish for Limerick."

"Good, because Patrick wasn't as invested in this one," Trevor admitted. "Kept turning his back on it."

"Your lobster is a food critic with attitude," Mia shook her head. "How is this my life now?"

"Welcome to the family," I grinned. "Where pet lobsters have Instagram followers, everyone threatens to throw people off cliffs, and somehow it all makes perfect sense."

"Speaking of family," Trevor's expression softened. "I should get back to the kitchen, but are you coming by the house later? Rachel will be up from her nap soon, and Niamh's been teaching her this new sound that almost sounds like-"

"Of course she has," I laughed. "Yes, we'll be there. Mia's staying with us for a few days."

"Brilliant! I'll plan dinner accordingly. And Mia?" Trevor's grin turned mischievous. "I'll show you my favorite cliff spots on the map."

Back at my car, I felt more relaxed than I had since Brody's call. "I can take the rest of the afternoon off if you want to hang. One of the perks of being CEO - no one can question my schedule."

"Sure," Mia nodded. "We can stop by Michelle's to get my stuff, then head to your place."

I made an exaggerated face of suffering. "Go to Michelle's? The things I do for you, Mia."

The drive to Michelle's estate was gorgeous, even if I'd never tell her that. Her property stretched across the Irish countryside in a way that should have felt ostentatious but somehow worked. I pulled up to the elaborate gate and hit the buzzer.

"Yes?" Hunter's voice carried that calm authority it always had.

"Hey, it's Amber. Mia and I are here."

"Come on up," he said, the gate swinging open smoothly.

Michelle was already at the door when we parked, looking annoyingly perfect as always. "Well, if it isn't my favorite CEO and her goth sidekick."

"Just getting my stuff," Mia rolled her eyes. "I'm staying with Amber and Trevor for a few days."

"Thank god. I want my house back. With love," Michelle's grin took any sting out of the words.

"And I want to get away from you, annoying bitch. With love," Mia replied with equal affection.

Thara immediately abandoned her usual regal posture to investigate my purse, clearly sensing Ellie inside. Robbie, Hunter's massive Golden Retriever, bounded in with his usual enthusiasm, still somehow convinced my tiny dog was a potential playmate despite their significant size difference.

"Have a seat," Michelle gestured to her ridiculous designer furniture. "Hunter's making coffee."

I settled onto the couch that probably cost more than most cars. "Oh, speaking of annoying people - heard from Brody today."

Michelle's perfectly manicured eyebrows shot up. "No way! Fresh out of rehab and already making bad decisions?"

"Apparently. Still wants me back. Needed to check his options before returning to Bre."

"Wow... just wow." Michelle shook her head. "Though I shouldn't be surprised. Men like Brody don't change, they just get better at PR."

"Speaking of PR," Michelle settled into her favorite chair, "how's the 'sex addiction' treatment working out for him?"

"Oh, you'll love this," I leaned forward. "He actually tried to use it as proof he's changed. Like somehow acknowledging his 'addiction' makes everything okay."

"While calling you to check his options before going back to Bre," Michelle's voice dripped with disdain. "Stellar recovery there."

Hunter appeared with coffee, his expression suggesting he'd caught enough of the conversation. "Want me to take him cliff walking with Trevor?"

"See?" I laughed. "Trevor's corrupting everyone with his cliff obsession."

"It's efficient," Hunter shrugged, setting down our drinks. "And Ireland has some beautiful views."

"You're all insane," Michelle said fondly. "Though speaking of Trevor - how's he handling the Brody situation?"

"Threatening him in Irish," I smiled. "Though I have no idea what he actually said. Could have been a recipe for all I know."

"Knowing Trevor?" Michelle raised an eyebrow. "Definitely not a recipe. Probably something involving those cliffs he's so fond of."

We could hear Mia moving around upstairs, gathering her things.

"Hey Mom," Arissa's voice carried from the doorway. She walked in with Tomi balanced expertly on her hip, Harley right behind her. "Oh, hi Amber! How's the makeup line coming along?"

The Bradley girls settled onto the couch, Tomi immediately reaching for Michelle's throw pillows while Arissa's eyes lit up with genuine interest. She'd been following the development of Amber Nichole Cosmetics from the start.

"Actually," I smiled, always happy to talk about my creative process with someone who truly appreciated it, "we just finished testing some new formulations in the lab. Want to see the samples?"

"Yes!" Arissa leaned forward eagerly while Harley took Tomi from her. "Are these from the Rachel Amber collection?"

"Some of them. The foundation still needs work, but the highlighters..."

"Remember, no one knows about the Rachel Amber line. That's a secret launch after the Amber Nichole launch," I reminded her, though I knew I could trust Arissa's discretion.

"I haven't told anyone..." Arissa assured me earnestly. "But I'm so excited about your new formulas. And the palettes are so pigmented and pretty!"

"Speaking of formulas," Mia's voice carried from the stairs as she returned with her bags, "did you bring those samples you promised me?"

"The black shit for your eyes?" Michelle smirked. "Please tell me you're finally upgrading from that drugstore garbage."



"My makeup is not garbage," Mia defended. "But yes, Amber's giving me some samples."

"Good," Arissa nodded seriously. "Because that last brand you were using had terrible staying power under stage lights. I noticed at your LA show."

I couldn't help but smile at Arissa's technical knowledge. The girl had a genuine eye for cosmetics - something that made me even more excited about having her test the new collections.

"So, if Mia is my godmother and she's going to be Rachel's godmother too, does that make Rachel my godsister?" Arissa asked, adjusting Tomi in her lap.

I smiled warmly. "If you want her to be, absolutely. Rachel would love to have you as a godsister."

"Of course! I love Rachel!" Arissa beamed. "She's not quite as cute as our Marshmallow, but she's beautiful too. She's more like... a little Kiss. You know, the candy? She's not squishy like Tomi, but she is yummy."

I couldn't help but laugh. "I like that, but maybe more of a Hershey Hug than a Kiss. She does have a lot of white in her and only a bit of mocha."

"A Hug! Oh my god, I love that. Rachel is my little Hug! And yes, I want her to be my godsister!" Arissa's whole face lit up with joy.

"Look at that, Mia. You have kids after all," Michelle teased.

Mia shook her head. "Godchildren. I get to have fun and spoil them then send them home to you two."

"Oh, Rachel is going to be so spoiled by our whole family," I said fondly.

"Tomi too," Michelle laughed, watching her youngest daughter reach for her throw pillows again. "I'm pretty sure those two girls will be the most spoiled babies in Ireland."

Arissa gave Tomi a gentle squeeze. "Don't worry, Marshmallow. Even though I love my little Hug too, I will always be here for you. I love you both."

Tomi babbled happily, making a grab for her sister's hair.

"You're a really good big sister, Arissa," I said sincerely. "And since Rachel won't have any siblings, I'm really glad you're going to be her big sister too."

"No more kids for you?" Mia teased.

"Girl, after what I went through giving birth to Rachel? No way in hell am I ever doing that again. I told Trevor he's not touching me until he's shooting blanks."

Arissa tilted her head. "What does that mean?"

"It means Uncle Trevor is getting a vasectomy like Dad did," Harley explained matter-of-factly. "They cut something 'down there' so they can have sex but not get anyone pregnant."

Mia laughed. "Thank you, Professor Bradley."

"What? Mom explained it when Dad had it done. He spent a whole day laying on the couch with ice on his thing," Harley shrugged.

"Blunt child, isn't she? I love it," Mia said with genuine admiration.

"Yes, that's exactly what Trevor's going to do," I nodded. "As soon as Sosaidh gets pregnant."

"Uncle Trevor is getting Aunt Sosaidh pregnant?" Arissa asked.

"Yeah, but not with sex," Harley explained knowledgeably. "He's just gonna give her sperm and Aunt Abby is gonna use it to get Aunt Sosaidh pregnant since they're both girls. But the baby will be Aunt Abby and Aunt Sosaidh's. Not Uncle Trevor's."

Mia raised an eyebrow. "Kid is too smart for her own good."

"Don't I know it?" Michelle sighed proudly.

"On that lovely note," I stood up, "Mia, you ready to head back to my place?"

Mia nodded. "Sure am. Mich, if you guys need anything..."

"I know how to reach you," Michelle nodded, something unspoken passing between them.

"Aunt Amber?" Arissa piped up. "Can I come over later this week to swatch some of your makeup?"

"Of course," I smiled. "I'll have both you and Kira over for makeovers."

"Awesome! Thanks!"

The drive back to my house was peaceful, and Niamh had tea waiting for us in the sun room. Sometimes I still couldn't believe this was my life - this family, this home, this peace.

"So," Niamh set down a plate of fresh scones alongside our tea, "how was lunch with my boy?"

"Patrick approved of the Mexi Mac," I grinned. "Though apparently he was less enthusiastic about the whiskey cream sauce."

"That lobster," Niamh shook her head fondly. "Though speaking of my boy - he told me about Brody calling."

I caught the protective edge in her voice. Like Trevor, Niamh's first instinct was always to defend her family - and somehow along the way, I'd become part of that.

"It's fine," I assured her. "Though Trevor's already planning which cliff to take him to."

"Good lad," Niamh said with disturbing cheerfulness. "Though there are some lovely bog bodies in the museum. Very educational about what happens to people who disappear in Ireland."

Mia nearly choked on her tea. "Now I see where Trevor gets it from."

"The O'Sullivans are very protective of their own," Niamh said primly, but her eyes sparkled. "And you, Love, are one of ours now. Both of you are."

"Though technically," I smiled at Niamh, "we're Ó Súilleabháins."

"Ah, you've been practicing!" Niamh beamed with pride. "Your pronunciation is getting better too."

"Well, if Rachel's going to grow up speaking Irish with her Mamó, I should at least try," I said, warming at Niamh's obvious pleasure. "Though I still can't understand half of what Trevor says when he gets excited."

"That's because he has that thick Kilmaley accent," Niamh laughed. "Even other Irish speakers have trouble with him sometimes. Clare Irish is its own beast entirely."

A cry from upstairs interrupted us - Rachel waking from her nap.

"I'll get her," Niamh started to rise, but I shook my head.

"No, I've got her." I caught Mia's surprised look. "What? I'm trying. Besides, changing diapers is still your job, Niamh."

"As it should be," Niamh settled back with her tea. "That's what Mamós are for."

I felt a rush of gratitude for this woman who'd become more of a mother to me than my own ever was. She never pushed, never judged my struggle to bond with Rachel. She just stepped in where needed, making sure both Rachel and I had the support we needed while I figured out this whole motherhood thing.

"I'll be right back," I said, heading upstairs to my daughter. Every day it got a little easier, every small step forward celebrated by the family that had chosen me as much as I'd chosen them.

Rachel's face lit up when she saw me - that perfect little smile that was all Trevor. Maybe I wasn't a natural mother, but with Niamh's guidance and Trevor's patience, I was learning.

I carried Rachel back downstairs, that familiar mix of love and uncertainty twisting in my chest. Some days were easier than others, the joy coming naturally. Other days... other days felt harder, though I couldn't quite explain why.

But watching Rachel's face light up when she saw Niamh, hearing Mia's surprised "oh!" at how much she'd grown since yesterday, feeling the warmth of this family we'd built... it helped. Even when things felt foggy, they were here.

"There's my beautiful girl," Niamh cooed, but her eyes checked mine too, that subtle maternal concern I pretended not to notice. "Ready for more tea, Love?"

"Always," I settled back into my chair, adjusting Rachel in my lap. She immediately reached for Mia's necklace, making us all laugh.

"Definitely your daughter," Mia smiled. "Already got an eye for accessories."

Looking around at these women - my mother-in-law who loved me like her own, my friend who was learning to let people in, my daughter who deserved the world - I felt steady. Even on the days when motherhood felt overwhelming, even when I couldn't quite understand my own emotions, I knew Rachel would grow up surrounded by more love than I'd ever thought possible.

Sometimes that had to be enough.

"Ancient Sightings"

Hunter's voice carried that gentle steadiness that always centered me. "Breathe in for four... hold for four... release for eight."

I followed his guidance, letting each breath settle deeper into my body. Morning sun filtered through Tomi's playroom windows - our temporary meditation space until the new training facility was finished. Between tours and shows, we grabbed these moments when we could, making them count.

"Now move through your sun salutation," he directed softly. "Mountain pose... forward fold... plank..."

My body responded automatically to his cues, flowing through each position. Half cobra, downward dog, warrior one... years of practicing together had created a natural rhythm. Hunter's presence behind me was solid, grounding - the Thunder Ninja's calm energy a perfect counter to my lightning.

"Warrior two... triangle pose... tree pose," his voice guided me through each transition. We worked around Tomi's play mats and climbing wall, finding our space in the organized chaos of our daughter's domain.

As we moved through the positions, I felt the tension from the Emperor's threats begin to loosen. This was why Hunter had started teaching me Buddhist meditation and yoga practices years ago - a way to find stillness in chaos, even if we couldn't practice as often as we'd like.

"Ready for supported child's pose?" he asked, already knowing my answer. This was always where we ended - my favorite position, the one that made me feel most safe.

Hunter settled onto the mat, and I moved into position - knees on either side of his hips, my torso resting against his chest, my head over his heart. Nothing sexual, just pure connection. His steady heartbeat under my ear, his hands resting lightly on my back, supporting without restraining.

"Your breathing's still tight," Hunter observed quietly, one hand moving in gentle circles on my back. "The Emperor?"

"Among other things," I admitted, letting his heartbeat ground me. "Mia staying with Amber instead of here... probably for the best, but..."

"But you want to keep everyone close," he finished. "I understand, Mich."

The steadiness in his voice helped center me. After all these years, he still knew exactly what I needed - when to push, when to just be present.

"The girls were quiet at training yesterday," I said after a moment. "I think telling them about the Death Ranger... seeing them process what's coming..."

Hunter's hand stilled briefly on my back before resuming its calming circles. "They're strong, Mich. Arissa's been training for this her whole life, and Harley... she's adapting faster than any of us expected."

"I know," I sighed. "I just hate that they have to face this at all. That we can't protect them from it."

"We're not just protecting them," his voice was gentle but firm. "We're preparing them. Teaching them to protect themselves. That's more valuable than trying to shield them from everything."

As if on cue, Tomi's morning babbles came through the monitor, followed by what sounded like her trying to escape her crib again.

"And that's our cue," I smiled against Hunter's chest before reluctantly pushing myself up. "Your daughter's attempting another jailbreak."

"Wonder where she gets that from," Hunter's lips twitched as he sat up. "I'll start breakfast while you change her. Training with the girls this morning?"

"Yeah, and Arissa has that thing with Amber later - something about makeup testing."

"Good," Hunter nodded, his tactical mind always working. "Keep them busy, keep them training, keep them close. Even if it's just normal activities."

I headed upstairs to get Tomi, knowing Hunter would have breakfast by the time I came down. Our morning routine - as normal as we could make it, even with what was coming.

I went into Tomi's nursery and saw her hanging on to the edge of the crib rail bouncing and babbling.

"Hi Baby Girl," I smiled, reaching for her. "Come here my sweet love."

She continued her happy babbling as I laid her on the changing table, her tiny hands reaching for my face. These quiet moments with her were precious - just us, no threats, no powers, no complications. Just a mother and her daughter starting another day.

As I changed her diaper, I could hear Hunter downstairs in the kitchen, the older girls' voices joining his. The sounds of my family, safe and together. For now.

I finished changing Tomi and dressed her in an outfit Mom had bought her. The purple bracelets went on last, dampening the energy that still crackled at her fingertips.

"Sorry baby girl," I murmured, adjusting the bracelets carefully. "If Grandma comes by, we can't have you putting on a light show."

Tomi babbled what might have been a protest, reaching for the bracelets she already knew how to hate. Hiding who we were from Mom had never been easy - not during my Ranger days, not when I became a Sailor Soldier, not through any of it. But watching my baby girl have to wear power dampeners just to hug her grandmother... that was a whole new kind of hard.

At least the girls understood why we had to be careful around Mom. Why some secrets had to be kept, even from family. Even if keeping those secrets got harder every day.

I carried Tomi downstairs to the dining room, where Hunter was serving up eggs, toast, and rashers. After settling Tomi into her high chair, I prepared her plate - cutting everything into safe sizes before adding her sippy cup of juice. She immediately grabbed for a piece of toast with surprising precision.

"Hey Marshmallow," Arissa smiled at her baby sister.

Tomi responded with one of her happy morning coos, already reaching toward Arissa with sticky fingers.

"Your mom texted while you were upstairs," Hunter said as I took my seat. "She wants to take Tomi to the park with Niamh and Rachel after breakfast. I told her that was fine, said you'd bring her over when we're done eating."

I nodded, grateful as always for how Hunter handled these normal family moments. "Thanks babe. I think that's a great idea."

The park was public enough that the Emperor wouldn't try anything, and having both Mom and Niamh with the babies meant extra eyes watching. Even if Mom didn't know what she was watching for.

"I know we have to train today, but can I go to the park with Kora later?" Harley asked between bites of toast.

I tensed automatically, parental instinct warring with memories of my own childhood - running around Angel Grove with Kim at her age, facing dangers we didn't even understand yet. I sighed, "Yeah, that's fine. Once your dad says you're done with training."

"And can you drop me off at Kira's house?" Arissa added. "Aunt Amber's picking us up after work."

I nodded, forcing myself to stay casual. "Yeah, I'll take you."

"Mich," Hunter's voice carried that gentle understanding that always steadied me. "The girls are working hard in training, but they have to keep living."

"I know," I managed, watching Tomi attempt to share her eggs with Arissa. Normal moments, normal life - even with what was coming. Maybe especially because of what was coming.

After breakfast, I changed Tomi again and packed her bag before getting myself dressed. The walk to Mom's house was beautiful - across our sprawling property to her private corner of it. I had to smile at the arrangement. A quarter mile was the perfect distance - close enough for family, far enough for independence. Mom had insisted on that privacy when she agreed to move to Ireland, and right now I was grateful for that separation.

Mom opened the door before I could finish knocking. "Hey Mich... hey Sunshine Girl!"

Tomi immediately reached for her grandmother, babbling happily as Mom scooped her up. "Want to come in for coffee?"

"Can't - work to do," I shook my head. "You keeping her through naptime?"

"I'll keep her till dinner if that's okay," Mom offered.

I nodded, already calculating security scenarios. "Of course. Just remember..."

"Yes, Mich, I know," Mom sighed. "Those bracelets stay on. Though I still don't understand why you're so obsessed with them."

"They're very expensive, Mom. I just don't want them getting lost." The lie came easily after years of practice, though it still stung. "I know you think it's ridiculous to put expensive jewelry on a baby, but please - just make sure they stay on."

"Of course," Mom assured me. "She's your daughter."

"Thanks. I'll see you later. Love you both." I kissed Tomi's head, then Mom's cheek, trying not to think about how many secrets lay between those gentle gestures.



The walk back felt longer, heavier with each step away from my baby. But when I reached the house, I could hear Hunter already working with the girls in our makeshift training space.

"Again," Hunter's voice carried that patient authority he'd learned from Sensei Omino. "Harley, watch your stance. Arissa, good form."

I paused in the doorway, watching my family. The girls moved through their forms with increasing confidence - Arissa's lifetime of training evident in every precise movement, Harley's natural ability showing through despite her later start. Hunter guided them with the perfect balance of father and instructor.

"Mom!" Harley noticed me first. "Watch this new move Dad taught us!"

"After you perfect your basic forms," Hunter reminded her gently. "Mich, ready to join us?"

I nodded, already moving to my position. Even with the Emperor's threats looming, there was something comforting about training together. This was how we'd always faced challenges - as a family, growing stronger together.

"Alright girls," Hunter's voice shifted to full instructor mode. "Let's show your mom what we've been working on."

"Let's work on energy control first," Hunter said, his eyes meeting mine briefly. We both knew why - if the Emperor manifested again, the girls needed to be ready.

Arissa immediately settled into her stance, years of practice evident in how naturally she called up her power. The crimson energy that danced around her hands was controlled, precise - just like everything else about our eldest.

Harley took longer to center herself, but when the purple lightning finally sparked between her fingers, it was strong. Raw, still untamed, but strong.

"Good," Hunter nodded. "Now, remember what we discussed about sensing different types of energy. The Death Ranger's energy will feel cold, wrong. You need to be able to recognize it instantly."

"Like when Tomi got upset yesterday?" Harley asked, her lightning flickering slightly with concern.

"Exactly," I confirmed. "She sensed something off. That's the kind of awareness we need you both to develop."

"But without losing control of your own power," Hunter added, moving to adjust Harley's stance slightly. "Balance is crucial."

The irony of practicing energy control in a room full of Tomi's toys wasn't lost on me. But then, nothing about our lives had ever been conventional.

"Good," I nodded, shifting into attack stance. "Harley, fire your power at me."

"What? Mom..." Harley's purple energy flickered with her confusion.

"Don't hesitate. Do it!" I yelled, launching a bolt of lightning toward her.

Arissa's crimson power flashed between us, blocking my attack with practiced precision.

"Good job, Arissa," I acknowledged, preparing another strike.

"Mich," Hunter's voice carried a warning. "What are you doing?"

"They have to be ready to attack with no hesitation," I said, the Emperor's threats echoing in my mind. "They need to be prepared-"

"Not like this..." Hunter's tone was firm but gentle, understanding my fear even as he disagreed with my methods.

"They need to learn-" I started, but Hunter cut me off.

"They need to learn control first," he said, moving between me and the girls. "Fear isn't the right teacher, Mich. You know that."

I looked at Harley's wide eyes, at Arissa's protective stance in front of her sister, and felt shame wash over me. This wasn't teaching - this was my own fear taking over.

"Girls," Hunter's voice remained steady. "Take five minutes. Get some water."

Once they left the room, Hunter turned to me. "I know you're scared. We all are. But pushing them like this... it won't help them face what's coming."

"The Emperor won't give them time to prepare," I argued, but the fight was already leaving my voice.

"Which is exactly why we need to teach them to think clearly under pressure, not react from fear." His hand found my shoulder. "They're strong, Mich. But they need us to guide them, not terrify them."

"I just..." I let out a shaky breath. "When the Emperor manifested in Tomi's nursery... Hunter, he threatened our children. And now here I am, doing exactly what he wants - letting fear control me."

"You're not letting it control you," Hunter's voice was gentle. "You recognized it. Stopped it. That's what we need to teach them - how to recognize fear without letting it drive their actions."

The girls returned, both looking uncertain. Harley's purple energy still flickered nervously around her hands, while Arissa's crimson power remained steady but ready.

"I'm sorry," I said, meeting their eyes. "That's not how we train. That's not how we face threats."

"It's okay, Mom," Arissa said quietly. "We understand."

"Yeah," Harley added. "We're scared too sometimes."

"Then let's work on that together," Hunter suggested. "Proper forms, controlled power, clear minds. That's how we prepare."

I nodded, falling into position beside my daughters. "Show me that stance again, Harley."

We spent the next hour working through proper forms, Hunter guiding us with practiced patience. Watching Harley's purple energy grow more controlled with each exercise, seeing Arissa's natural crimson power flow smoothly into each movement - it helped settle my own anxiety.

"Better," Hunter nodded as Harley successfully completed a particularly complex sequence. "You're learning to direct your power instead of just releasing it."

"It's easier when I'm not scared," Harley admitted, purple energy dancing more confidently around her hands now.

"Fear is natural," Hunter explained, moving to adjust her stance slightly. "But it can't be what drives your power. Remember-"

"Power comes from within, not from emotion," Arissa recited quietly, her crimson energy pulsing with a controlled intensity that reminded me too much of her early training on TK-91. Before we'd found her, before we could protect her from Aria's harsh methods.

I pushed away thoughts of what my daughter had endured there. That wasn't who she was anymore - she was safe now, loved, training with family instead of being molded into a weapon.

"Alright," Hunter checked the time, his hand briefly squeezing Arissa's shoulder - he'd caught her tone too. "One more sequence, then Harley needs to get ready for the park, and Arissa needs to prepare for Amber's."

The girls moved through their final sequence together - Harley's purple energy and Arissa's crimson power complementing each other perfectly. Sometimes it was hard to believe they hadn't grown up training together, hadn't always been sisters.

"Good work, both of you," Hunter said as they finished. "Harley, go get changed. Arissa-"

"I know, shower first," Arissa nodded. "Aunt Amber won't let me near her makeup if I'm sweaty from training."

As the girls headed upstairs, Hunter turned to me. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I managed a small smile. "Just... remembering. Seeing Arissa quote training principles..."

"She's not there anymore," Hunter reminded me gently. "She's here, she's safe, she's ours. And she knows the difference between what Aria taught her and what we're teaching them now."

"I know." I leaned into his steady presence. "Sometimes I just wish..."

"That we'd found her sooner?" His arms wrapped around me. "Me too, Mich. Me too."

The drive was quiet at first, Arissa lost in thought beside me. After we picked up Kira, the girls started chatting softly in the backseat about the makeup testing they'd be doing later.

Mia answered Amber's door before we could knock, Kaya visible on a plush pillow in the sun room behind her. "Hey stranger."

"Thanks for entertaining them until Amber gets home," I said as the girls headed inside.

"Girls, makeup room's all set up," Mia called after them. "Just don't touch anything until Amber gets here."

Once they disappeared upstairs, Mia's expression shifted. "Want to come in? Niamh tried to convince me to join her and your mom at the park with the babies, but..." she shrugged.

"Avoiding the mom squad?" I teased, following her to the sun room. Though I understood completely - especially with everything going on.

"God yes," Mia settled back into her chair, Kaya watching us lazily from her pillow. "Though speaking of avoiding things... any manifestations?"

"Not since the nursery," I shook my head, sinking into one of Amber's ridiculously comfortable chairs. "Though training got... intense today."

"Intense how?" Mia asked, her posture shifting subtly. Always ready for a threat, even while lounging in Amber's peaceful sun room.

"I..." I hesitated, shame creeping back in. "I let fear drive me. Started pushing too hard. Thank god Hunter was there to stop me."

"The girls okay?"

"Yeah. Better than okay - they handled it well. Too well, maybe." I watched Kaya stretch lazily on her pillow. "Sometimes I forget how strong they are. How much they can handle."

"Speaking of handling things," Mia's voice dropped slightly, "how's Arissa doing? I noticed that look earlier, during training."

"TK-91 memories," I said quietly. "They surface sometimes during practice. The way she quotes battle principles..."

"At least now she's learning them from love, not fear," Mia observed. "Though speaking of fear - any word from Billy about the Death Ranger powers?"

"Nothing more than what Master Purple told us," I sighed.

"She does realize I'm not a Ranger, right?" Mia's tone carried familiar exasperation.

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, well, at this point it's pretty safe to say the Sailor Soldiers and Rangers have a connection with their powers."

"I suppose," Mia conceded reluctantly.

"Much as I hate to utter these words, Michelle is right," Kaya said softly, mindful of Kira upstairs. "Rangers and Soldiers are not the same, but the connection between the Morphin Grid and the cosmic source of Soldier powers is undeniable."

"Fair," Mia sighed.

"So what now?" I asked, frustration creeping in. "We just wait around for the Death Ranger to materialize again?"

"I hate it, but I don't know what else to do. We can't exactly seek him out without a physical form to track," Mia said.

"You both have death power," I suggested carefully. "Could you tap into it? Track him through your obsidian maybe?"

Mia's expression hardened. "First, I'm not sure that's even possible. Second, I'm about as eager to use my obsidian as you are your amethyst. Or did you forget it's attached to my life force?"

"You're right. Sorry." I slumped back in my chair. "I'm just scared and desperate."

"That's exactly what he wants," Kaya observed from her pillow. "He will feed off your fear, and it will only make him more powerful."

"Easier said than done," I muttered, but Kaya suddenly sat up, alert.

"Something is wrong. I can sense it," she said just as my phone buzzed.

"Hunter," I checked the message. "Attack in town. People panicking, saying they're being chased by spirits."

"Parlor tricks," Mia's voice hardened with understanding. "He's doing it to send a message. To show us he can."

"Yeah, well, we still have to answer the call."

Mia nodded grimly as I called upstairs. "Arissa!"

She appeared at the top of the stairs immediately. "Yes Mom?"

"Attack in town. We have to go. Keep Kira upstairs and cover for us if needed."

Understanding flashed in her eyes. "Got it. Be careful. I love you."

"I love you too, Riss," I watched her disappear back upstairs, grateful yet again for my daughter's strength.

"Go time," Mia said, already moving.

"Hunter will meet us there."

"Be careful," Kaya warned from her pillow. "This is almost certainly a trap."

We nodded, exchanging looks. "Got it," Mia acknowledged.

"Saturn Mystic Power!"

"Nemesis Mystic Power!"

"MAKE UP!"

The familiar energy washed over me as we transformed - Sailor Saturn and Sailor Nemesis, together again. Not exactly how I'd planned to spend my afternoon, but duty called.

Main Street was chaos when we arrived - translucent spirits sending civilians running in terror.

"This is undoubtedly a trap," Mia said as we took our fighting stances.

"I know, but we don't exactly have a choice," I summoned my staff, feeling its familiar weight.

Mia sighed, calling her Scythe to hand. "No. We don't."

"How do I fight the dead... or undead?" I asked, watching the spirits swirl around us.

"Follow my lead," Mia's voice carried centuries of death energy knowledge. "Spectral Strike!"

Her attack rippled through the spirits - one of her rare abilities that could affect non-physical enemies. Understanding clicked. "Electric Aura!"

Lightning crackled around me, creating a field of pure energy. Against these spirits, physical attacks were useless, but energy... energy they could feel. My lightning-charged strikes could connect even without solid form to hit.

We worked in tandem, fighting spirits while shepherding civilians into nearby shops. Hunter ninja streaked in already morphed, his Crimson Ranger form materializing beside us.

"They're not physical," I called to him. "Attack with energy. Your Thunder Staff should do the trick."

We had just dispatched the last of the spirits when the blast hit us from behind - a wave of cold, dark energy that sent us flying. We hit the ground hard, though thankfully not hard enough to force us back to civilian form.

"Ugh, I am seriously getting too old for this shit," Hunter groaned, his movie quotes always surfacing in tense moments.

Through the clearing smoke, a figure emerged. The Ranger suit was like nothing I'd ever seen - black and crimson merged in a way that seemed to absorb light rather than reflect it. The helmet, shaped like a skull, sent chills down my spine despite my years of experience.

"Has to be the Death Ranger," Mia's voice carried quiet tension.

"Very good, Nemesis," his voice held that same wrong echo we'd heard in Tomi's nursery. His attention shifted to Hunter, and even through the helmet, I could feel his contempt. "So familiar. My former, weak form, before I learned what real power was. Back when I thought being a Thunder Ninja gave me real power."

"Oh? You think what you have now is real power?" Hunter's voice carried all his Thunder Ninja training. "You're dead."

"Formerly." The word seemed to drop the temperature around us. "But soon you all will be." He turned to me, and I felt that familiar twisted interest. "Except for you, Saturn. You can join me. Take my Empress's place. Together we can rule this universe as The Empress and I once ruled my own."

I pulled myself to my feet, lightning crackling around my staff. "In your dreams. I have my Crimson Ranger... a superior version to you."

"Suit yourself," darkness seemed to pulse around him. "You will die with him."

He attacked first - waves of dark energy that felt like ice against my lightning shield. Hunter and Mia flanked me, our years of fighting together making us move as one unit.

"Spectral Strike!" Mia's Scythe cut through his energy field, but he merely laughed.

"Your death powers can't hurt me, Nemesis. I am death." He deflected her attack back at us, forcing us to scatter.

Hunter charged his Thunder Staff to maximum. "Let's test that theory!" The crimson thunder blast hit the Death Ranger square in the chest, but seemed to be absorbed into his suit.

"My powers, but stronger," he taunted. "Everything you are, but better."

"Lightning Strike Staff!" I channeled everything I had into the attack, my lightning combining with Hunter's thunder. For a moment, it seemed to work - the Death Ranger staggered back.

But then he raised his hand, and our combined energy turned black, corrupted. "Thank you for the power boost."



The blast when he returned our own energy hit like nothing I'd ever felt before. I heard Hunter cry out, saw Mia's Scythe go flying...

"OK, this is so not good," I groaned, struggling to my feet.

"You fucking think?" Mia shot back, blood trickling from her lip.

"We need backup," Hunter's voice was tight with pain.

The Death Ranger's laugh echoed unnaturally. "The other Rangers would never make it in time. You're in Ireland. An island, all by itself. Even if your team ninja streaked, they'd never make it."

Suddenly, two voices cut through the air:

"Sciathán na Sí!"

"Cosaint na Talún!"

Twin blasts of thunder energy - colors I'd never seen before - hit the Death Ranger with devastating force, sending him flying backward.

Through the smoke, two Thunder Rangers appeared. But their colors... Amber and Magenta? I caught Hunter's confused head shake. In all his years at the Thunder Academy, he'd never seen these colors.

"Who the hell are you?" The Death Ranger's voice carried rage.

"The guardians of this land," the female Ranger's Irish accent was clear and commanding. "You do not belong here. Leave and do not return."

"I have no ill will towards you," the Death Ranger's voice turned calculating. "My target is Sailor Nemesis. Do not stand in my way, or you will join her in death."

"Not gonna happen there, mate," the male Ranger's Irish lilt held steel beneath its casual tone. "Your battle affected civilians on our land. We simply can't allow that. And we won't allow you to harm a Sailor Guardian. Not even Sailor Nemesis."

"Hey!" Mia's indignant cry made me raise my hand in warning. These new Rangers might be allies - or not. We couldn't risk alienating them.

"This isn't over," darkness swirled around the Death Ranger. "You may have caught me off guard this time, but it will not happen again." He vanished in a pulse of cold energy.

"Thanks for the assist," Hunter approached carefully. "Who are you?"

"I'm the Amber Thunder Ranger, she's the Magenta Thunder Ranger," the male answered simply.

"Amber and Magenta?" Hunter's voice carried decades of Thunder Ninja authority. "I was head teacher at the Thunder Academy. Those aren't Thunder Ninja colors."

"Maybe you don't know everything about the ways of Thunder," Magenta's tone held ancient knowledge.

"Are you allies or enemies?" Mia demanded.

"To you? Neither." Amber Thunder's voice was firm. "We simply care about protecting Ireland. Beyond that, you're on your own. You drew the Death Ranger here. We just care to ensure he does not harm Ireland or the Irish people."

"I have so many questions," Hunter's voice betrayed his struggle with this revelation.

"I'm sure you do," Amber Thunder replied, "but it's not our role to give you answers. If you're a true Thunder Ninja, you'll figure it out. Let's go, Magenta." They vanished in streaks of their respective colors.

"What. The. Hell." Mia's growl summed up all our feelings.

"Sensei Omino has some explaining to do," Hunter's voice was quiet but intense.

After ensuring Arissa knew we were safe, I drove home, I needed to get home to Hunter. Finding out there were Thunder Rangers he knew nothing about... this was hitting him hard. Really hard.

I found Hunter in the dark living room, brooding with his phone in hand. This was his tell when he felt betrayed - this stillness, this silence. I settled beside him, letting my presence speak first.

"You going to call Sensei?" I asked softly.

Hunter sighed, head dropping. "I'm not even sure what to say."

"Start with 'hey, who the hell are these secret Thunder Rangers? Oh, and by the way, there's a new Death Ranger trying to fucking kill us?'" I offered.

A ghost of a smile touched the corner of his mouth. "Sure."

"Want me to call him? I can start the conversation... I promise to be more tactful than that."

Hunter shook his head. "I have to do this."

"I'm right here," I placed my hand on his knee.

He nodded and put the call on speaker. LeAnn answered, and Hunter asked for Sensei before pausing.

"Hey Le, quick question - do you know of any Thunder Ninja style that ties to the colors Amber or Magenta?"

"Sounds like they'd be counterparts to the Wind Ninja's Orange and Pink..." LeAnn mused.  
"Actually, those are the only Wind colors without Thunder counterparts."

"Not sure that's true. I encountered two Thunder Rangers with those colors today."

"What? Are you sure?" LeAnn's shock was evident.

"Pretty fucking sure," I chimed in.

"Oh! Hi Mich... um, let me get my father."

When Sensei came on, Hunter didn't waste time. "Sensei, it's Hunter and Mich. There's a new threat. A Death Ranger."

"The Death Ranger? Those powers were supposed to be a myth."

"Yeah, well, they felt pretty real when they attacked us. And what was also real were the Amber and Magenta Thunder Rangers that saved our butts. But I don't remember those being Thunder Ninja colors for any of our styles."

The pause that followed was heavy. "You actually saw these Rangers?"

"We did," I confirmed.

"They wouldn't tell me anything about their origins," Hunter pressed, "but I need answers. I know you know something."

Sensei's sigh carried weight. "I've heard an old Thunder Ninja legend, but that's all it ever was. A legend. Those powers don't exist... at least, I didn't think they did."

"Yeah, well, the Death Ranger was supposed to be a myth too. Clearly there's a lot we don't know. I'd like to hear this alleged legend."

"Hunter, I don't know much. I read an incomplete scroll as a Thunder Ninja student."

"What do you know?" I pressed.

"The scroll spoke of Thunder Ninja Power infused with Celtic warrior energy. A subset of the Thunder Academy in Ireland called Ord na Toirín - Order of Thunder in Irish. It was said they received the Amber and Magenta powers... Scorpion and Dragonfly. Many Thunder Ninjas sought to find them, but none succeeded. We assumed it was folklore."

"Clearly it's not folklore," Hunter's voice carried hurt. "Why didn't you ever mention this to me or Le? I was head teacher, she's your successor. Shouldn't we have known about potential Thunder styles, legend or not?"

"If I'd believed for a moment these powers existed, I would have mentioned it. But I truly thought they were folklore."

"OK, well they aren't," Hunter's voice was tight. "Do you have any information on where this subset of the academy was? Anything at all, legend or not?"

"The scroll was damaged, mostly unreadable," Sensei said carefully. "But there was one passage that seemed to be a riddle about its location. I memorized it, though it never made sense:

'Where eloquence bleeds into earth below,  
Past where watchful tower stands row by row,  
In shadows where two villages meet,  
Thunder's ancient heart keeps Celtic beat.'"

"That's it?" Hunter pressed. "Nothing else about where to find them?"

"The rest was lost to time," Sensei admitted. "Many tried to decode it, but Ireland is vast, and Celtic mythology is full of places of power."

I caught Hunter's eye - we both knew Ireland wasn't that vast, not really. And we were already here, where these Rangers had appeared.

"Send me everything you have about this Order," Hunter said. "Every scrap of legend, every partial translation. If these Rangers are real, if they're here in Ireland..."

"I'll have Cam digitize what we have," Sensei promised. "But Hunter... be careful. If these powers have stayed hidden this long, there may be a reason."

After we hung up, Hunter sat in silence for a long time, processing.

"A riddle," he finally said, his voice tight with frustration. "That's all we have to go on. A cryptic poem about somewhere in Ireland."

"Where eloquence bleeds into earth below," I recited. "Could be anywhere. Ireland's full of ancient sites, places of power."

"And 'watchful tower'? How many towers are there in Ireland?" Hunter stood, starting to pace. "Every other castle has a tower. Every village probably had a tower at some point in history."

"We need more information," I said, watching him work through his thoughts. "Historical records maybe? Local legends?"

"These Rangers appeared here, in Cork," Hunter mused. "That has to mean something. But Cork County alone..." he shook his head. "There's a lot of land to hide on."

"And if they've stayed hidden this long, they're not going to be easy to find," I added. "Even if we are looking in the right area."

Hunter's phone buzzed - Cam starting to send through the archived information. "At least we have somewhere to start," he sighed. "Even if that somewhere is basically 'somewhere in Ireland.'"

"What if..." I hesitated, an idea forming. "What if we took the Thunder Ninja part out of the riddle? Present it as just an old Celtic legend to Trevor or Niamh? If anyone knows ancient Ireland's secrets, it's them."

Hunter considered this. "How do we adapt it without giving away the Thunder connection?"

I thought for a moment, then recited:

"Where eloquence bleeds into earth below,  
Past where watchful tower stands row by row,  
In shadows where two villages meet,  
Warrior's ancient heart keeps Celtic beat."

"That works," Hunter nodded slowly. "Actually, Trevor texted earlier - invited us for dinner since Arissa's already over there with the makeup testing."

"Perfect timing," I nodded. "We can ask them over dinner."

Later that evening, Trevor and Amber's house was buzzing with its usual chaos. The Jordans had joined us, bringing Harley along, and Mom had arrived with Tomi. Amber was still upstairs

in her makeup sanctuary with Kira and Arissa, while Trevor had Harley and Kora as his kitchen assistants - discussing something about rock climbing lessons planned for the weekend.

Hunter and Hal had fallen into their usual Formula One discussion, leaving Mia and me somewhat awkwardly making conversation with Kara while Mom and Niamh cooed over Rachel, Tomi, and Tiffany in the living room.

The contrast struck me as I sat between them - Mia, the Goth Queen with Kaya perched regally on her lap, and Kara, the picture of conservative Christian grace. Sometimes I wondered how our friend group had gotten quite this eclectic.

"So, how's work going, Kara?" I asked, trying to bridge the gap. "Enjoying the new position?"

"Yeah, mostly," Kara nodded. "Though they keep putting me on Grayson's show as a panelist, which I could do without. The EU correspondent work is fascinating though, and having my own home studio makes everything easier."

"Grayson's still pushing his usual agenda?" Mia asked, surprising me by engaging. She usually stayed quiet during political discussions.

"Always," Kara sighed. "Though having a European perspective helps me counter some of his more... extreme views. Being away from the American media bubble has been enlightening."

"Food's ready!" Trevor called from the kitchen, saving us from deeper political waters.

As everyone migrated to the dining room, I caught Hunter's eye. He nodded slightly - dinner would be the perfect time to bring up the riddle. Trevor was always more receptive when he was proud of a meal, and Niamh loved sharing Irish history.

"This looks amazing, Trev," I said as we settled around the table.

"The girls were brilliant help with the sauce," Trevor smiled, serving plates.

Once everyone was settled and complimenting the food, Hunter cleared his throat. "Actually, Niamh, we came across an interesting old Celtic riddle today. Wondered if you might recognize it..."

"Oh?" Niamh looked up with interest. "What sort of riddle, Love?"

Hunter recited the modified version we'd practiced, careful to keep his tone casual. "'Where eloquence bleeds into earth below, Past where watchful tower stands row by row, In shadows where two villages meet, Warrior's ancient heart keeps Celtic beat.'"

"Hmm," Niamh considered, while Trevor paused in his serving to listen. "Sounds like it could be about any number of places. Ireland's full of ancient warrior sites."

"The eloquence part is interesting though," Trevor mused. "Makes me think of the Blarney Stone, with its gift of eloquence."

"But there are towers all over Cork County," Niamh added. "And villages... well, half of Ireland is built where two villages meet."

"Could be about the old warrior training grounds," Trevor suggested. "There were several in Cork where Celtic warriors would gather."

I caught Hunter trying not to look too interested. "Really? Where were those usually located?"

"Well," Trevor set down his fork thoughtfully, "there were training grounds near most of the major castles. The warriors needed to be close to defend them."

"Though most records of exact locations were lost," Niamh added. "The British weren't exactly interested in preserving our warrior history."

"The eloquence part is bothering me though," Trevor said. "That's such a specific reference. Like I said, makes me think of Blarney Castle..."

"But that's a tourist trap now," Niamh shook her head. "If there were any ancient training grounds there, they'd have been found."

"Unless they didn't want to be found," Mia spoke up suddenly, making me tense. But her next words were careful. "I mean, if these were warrior training grounds, wouldn't they have ways to keep them hidden?"

"Oh aye," Niamh nodded approvingly. "The old Celts had their secrets. Some say there are still places of power in Ireland that only reveal themselves to those meant to find them."

I caught Hunter's slight shift in posture. We were getting somewhere, even if we weren't sure where yet.

"You mentioned a tower..." Amber looked over. "Does Blarney Castle have a tower? I know there's Tower village nearby - they have that great SuperValu there."

"Blarney Castle has several towers actually," Trevor nodded. "And Tower - or Teamhair in Irish - has its own history. It was one of the old model villages, built up around the time of the railway line to Blarney."

"Past where watchful tower stands row by row," Niamh quoted thoughtfully. "Could be about either place really. The old towers were built within sight of each other, you see. They could signal warnings across the countryside."

"The woods between Tower and Blarney are ancient," Trevor added. "Full of old paths and ruins. Local legend says there are fairy rings out there, places where the veil between worlds is thin."

I tried not to react to that last part, though I felt Hunter tense slightly beside me.

"Fairy rings?" Mia raised an eyebrow, though I caught the careful way she avoided looking at Kaya.

"Oh aye," Niamh's eyes sparkled. "The old stories say the Celtic warriors knew how to use them - paths between worlds, doorways to sacred places."

"That sounds like something out of a fantasy novel," Mom laughed, bouncing Tomi on her knee.

"Many Irish legends have roots in truth," Trevor said seriously. "The British tried to dismiss our history as mere folklore, but there are places in Ireland where you can feel the old power."

"Like the Blarney Stone?" Amber teased her husband.

"Mock all you want, mo ghrá, but there's a reason millions come to kiss that stone," Trevor grinned. "Although I wouldn't. Local teen boys like to wee on that stone for craic. Though the real magic... that's deeper in the woods, away from tourist paths."

"You sound like you're speaking from experience," Hunter said carefully.

"No," Trevor's expression turned thoughtful. "I grew up in County Clare, but I know Ireland. We all know there is more to Blarney than the gift of gab, those woods held secrets. Still do, if you know where to look."

"The old stories say warriors would train in sacred groves," Niamh added. "Places where the ancient power of Ireland still lingered. Some say that's why certain woods remain untouched - they protect themselves."

"Like the woods between Tower and Blarney?" Hunter asked, trying to sound casual.

"Could be," Niamh nodded. "That area's never been fully developed, despite the Celtic Tiger boom. Developers would start projects, then mysteriously change their minds. Some say the land itself refuses to be disturbed."



"Or maybe it's just protected forestland," Mom said practically, making Tomi giggle as she bounced her.

"Maybe," Trevor smiled, but there was something knowing in his expression. "Though there are places in Ireland where both explanations can be true, aren't there, Mam?"

Niamh's eyes twinkled mysteriously. "Indeed there are, love. Indeed there are."

"You Irish sure do like your fairy lore," Amber teased.

Trevor looked at her with a knowing smile. "Oh? Care to tell me about how worried you are about Ráichéal getting 'Ojo' again?"

Amber sat up straighter. "Hey, that is legit."

"Yes," Trevor grinned. "The Mexicans like their lore as much as the Irish. Every culture has its truths hidden in stories, mo ghrá."

"Speaking of stories," Niamh said, glancing at where Ráichéal was sleeping in her bassinet, "that reminds me of an old tale about the woods near Blarney. They say there was a warrior band that protected sacred places - guardians who could command both nature and lightning."

I felt Hunter's slight tension beside me, but his voice remained casual. "Lightning? That's specific."

"Thunder too," Trevor added. "The old stories often mention warriors who could harness storm energy. Some say that's why Ireland has so many thunderstorms - the ancient powers still echo."

"Now you're just trying to spook us," Kara laughed.

"No more than your American ghost stories," Niamh smiled. "Though I suppose every land has its mysteries. Ireland just keeps hers better hidden than most."

I caught Mia's subtle glance my way. Between thunder, lightning, and hidden warriors, this conversation was hitting too close to home.

"Hidden is right," Hal said, reaching for more bread. "Been here a month and I still get lost on these country roads. Especially around those woods."

"The roads do seem to... shift sometimes," Trevor agreed. "Especially at twilight. Even GPS gets confused out there."

"Technology doesn't always work well in old places," Niamh said, her voice carrying the weight of generations of stories. "My own village was so small, so ancient - the old ways lived longer there. We grew up hearing tales of how modern things fail where ancient power lingers."

Mom rolled her eyes good-naturedly. "There's probably just poor cell coverage in the woods."

"Perhaps," Niamh smiled, clearly used to skepticism about her beloved folklore. "Though in the old stories, certain places resist the new world. Places where warriors once trained, where ancient powers still sleep."

Hunter caught my eye briefly. Even if Niamh was just sharing traditional lore, there might be truth hidden in these stories.

"These places," he asked carefully. "They wouldn't happen to be near where those two villages meet, would they?"

"Could be," Niamh mused. "The old tales speak of many such places. Though finding them..." she shook her head. "That's the trick, isn't it? The stories say they only reveal themselves to those who are meant to find them."

"Or to those who know what they're looking for," Trevor added. "The British spent centuries trying to map every inch of Ireland, but there are still places that never made it onto any chart."

"Because they didn't exist," Mom said practically.

"Or because they didn't want to be found," Niamh countered. "Some secrets are better kept hidden, especially from those who wouldn't understand their power."

I watched Hunter absorb this, knowing he was thinking of the Amber and Magenta Rangers. If their academy was hidden in these woods, protected by both Thunder Ninja power and ancient Celtic magic...

"Dessert?" Trevor stood suddenly. "I made apple tart."

"With proper Irish cream, I hope," Niamh smiled, allowing the conversation to shift.

As Trevor and Harley headed to the kitchen for dessert, the talk turned to lighter topics. But I caught Mia's subtle nod across the table. We'd learned more than we'd expected tonight, even if most of it was wrapped in legend and lore.

If there really was a Thunder Ninja academy out there, hidden in the ancient woods between Tower and Blarney, protected by both Celtic magic and Thunder power... well, we'd faced harder challenges than unraveling Irish mysteries.

Though watching Niamh's knowing smile as she shared her stories, I had a feeling finding this academy wouldn't be as simple as following a riddle. Some secrets, as she'd said, only revealed themselves to those meant to find them.

"Sacred Waters"

It was the morning of Rachel's christening. I took Ellie outside for her morning business while Trevor changed the baby's diaper and made our usual morning drinks - my mocha and his Lyon's tea. Everyone was excited for today. I should have been too, but the feelings wouldn't come like they were supposed to.

"You ok?" a voice asked behind me.

I turned to find Mia standing there, looking oddly formal in the early morning light. "I'm great. Just waking up."

"You're full of shit," she said bluntly. "I mean, I get it, it's a whole morning at church. Not exactly the happiest place on Earth."

I laughed despite myself. "A Christening is a big deal in our faith. It's not that."

"If you need to talk," Mia offered quietly, "I'm here."

Before I could respond, I heard Niamh's voice from inside. "Trevor! Where's Ráichéal's christening gown?"

"In our room, Mam!" Trevor called back. "In the preservation box!"

I watched Mia try not to smile at their excitement. "You'd think they were preparing for a royal wedding."

"To them, this is just as important," I said, calling Ellie back inside. "You should see the photos of Trevor in that gown. Niamh's been crying happy tears since we agreed to use it."

"Speaking of Niamh," Mia nodded toward the house, "she's been handling most of the preparations..."

"Thank god for that," I said quickly, then felt guilty. What kind of mother was grateful to hand off her daughter's christening planning?

"Amber," Mia's voice was uncharacteristically gentle. "It's okay to not be okay, you know that right?"

Before I could answer, Trevor appeared at the door. "Mo ghrá? Mam needs you for something with Ráichéal's dress."

I forced a smile. "Coming. Thanks, Mia."

But her concerned look followed me inside.

Niamh was in our bedroom, carefully removing the christening gown from its preservation box. Her hands trembled slightly as she lifted it, and I saw tears in her eyes.

"Oh, look at it," she breathed. "Just as beautiful as the day my Treabhair wore it."

Trevor wrapped an arm around his mother's shoulders, both of them lost in the moment. I should have felt something, watching them share this memory. Instead, I felt... distant. Like I was watching a scene from someone else's life.

"Where's Rachel?" I asked, trying to focus on practical things.

"Here, mo ghrá," Trevor smiled, gesturing to where our daughter lay contentedly in her bassinet. "Ready to wear her Da's christening gown."

"I worked so many extra shifts to buy this," Niamh said softly, touching the delicate fabric. "A young single mother, but determined my boy would have something special for his christening."

I nodded, remembering how touched she'd been when I agreed to use it for Rachel. At least I'd gotten that decision right.

"Amber?" Trevor's voice was gentle. "You okay, love?"

"Perfect," I managed a smile. "Just nervous about getting her to the church on time."

"Well, you go shower and I'll get breakfast ready," Trevor offered, clearly sensing I needed space.

I nodded and escaped to the bathroom, letting the hot water wash over me. Through the wall, I could hear Niamh cooing to Rachel - no, Ráichéal, as she and Trevor called her - probably telling her stories about when her Da wore that gown.

The sound of their joy made my chest tight. I should be out there, sharing in this moment. I should be the one holding my daughter, telling her how special today was. Instead, I was hiding in the shower, grateful for every minute away from expectations I couldn't seem to meet.

"Get it together," I whispered to myself, watching water spiral down the drain. "This is your daughter's christening. Be present. Be happy. Be... whatever kind of mother you're supposed to be."

When I finally emerged, dressed in the peach floral dress I'd chosen for today, the smell of Trevor's cooking filled the house. Niamh had Rachel dressed in a simple onesie, saving the christening gown for the church.

"There's my beautiful girls," Trevor smiled from the kitchen. "Come eat something, mo ghrá. We've got a big day ahead."

I managed a few bites of the breakfast he'd made, though my stomach was in knots. Niamh chatted happily about the ceremony, about how Father Pádraig was so wonderful with babies, about how lovely it would be to have everyone together.

Everyone. Our chosen family. The people who'd moved countries to stay close to us. While my own family...

"Amber?" Trevor's voice pulled me back. "Your coffee's getting cold, love."

"Sorry," I forced myself to focus. "Just thinking about everything we need to do before-"

"It's all handled," Niamh assured me. "You just focus on getting yourself and Raíchéal ready. Everything else is taken care of."

That's what I was afraid of. Everyone else taking care of everything. Everyone else knowing what to do, how to feel, how to be.

After breakfast I retreated to my makeup room. This I could do. This was the only place I felt like myself anymore... among my cosmetics.

I started with my NYX Marshmallow primer. Yes, it was drugstore, but it was holy grail status - better than half the luxury brands I'd tested for my own line. Then I lined up my tools: Too Faced contour stick and bronzer, Huda color corrector, and Urban Decay concealer. It was time to make magic.

This was my sanctuary - where formulas and techniques made sense, where I knew exactly what each product would do, how each brush stroke would transform. Here, I was in control. Here, I understood the rules.

My hands moved automatically through the familiar routine, building each layer with practiced precision. Foundation, color correction, contour... watching my reflection become the polished version of myself I needed to be today.

A soft knock at the door interrupted my highlighter application. "Still okay in there?"

Mia again. She'd been checking on me periodically, trying to be subtle about her concern. "Almost done," I called back. "Just finishing my face."

"No rush," she said through the door. "Though Niamh texted - everyone's starting to arrive at the church."

I added the final touches to my makeup, studying my reflection. At least this part I'd gotten right - the perfect balance of polished and natural, exactly what was expected for the occasion. Now if only I could figure out how to balance everything else...

"We should probably get Rachel into her gown," I said, finally emerging from my sanctuary. "Don't want to be late to our own christening."

"You mean you don't want your CEO reputation ruined by not being precisely on time," Mia tried to lighten the mood.

I managed a small smile. At least someone here wasn't expecting me to be overcome with maternal joy.

The drive to the church was quiet, just the sound of Rachel making soft baby noises from her car seat. Trevor kept glancing at me from behind the wheel, but didn't push conversation. In the backseat, Niamh and Mia flanked Rachel's car seat, Niamh occasionally adjusting the christening gown's delicate folds while Mia pretended not to notice her wiping away tears.

The church parking lot was already filling up - Michelle's purple SUV, Kara's blue Kia, Jeremy's black Sportage. Our chosen family, all here for Rachel. For us.

Trevor parked his orange Lexus, and before anyone could move, Niamh was already leaning over Rachel's car seat. "Oh, look at her, love. Just perfect in her Da's gown."

"Aye, she is," Trevor agreed softly, turning in his seat. "Just like her Da was, right Mam?"

I watched them share another moment over the gown, over traditions, over everything this meant to them. Tried to feel what I was supposed to feel.

"Ready?" Mia asked quietly as we stepped out of the car, understanding in her eyes.

"As I'll ever be," I nodded, straightening my shoulders. Time to be the mother everyone expected me to be.

Michelle and Hunter were already at the church steps with their girls, Arissa holding Tomi in her Sunday dress. The Jordans were just arriving, Kora and Kira helping Tiffy adjust her flower-girl-worthy dress. Jeremy and Liv had the twins surprisingly well-dressed and calm for once.

"There's my goddaughter!" Liv called out, making her way over as Trevor carefully lifted Rachel from her car seat.

"Looking gorgeous, Ráichéal," Jeremy added, though I caught his slight tension at being back in a church. At least I wasn't the only one feeling out of place.

"The gown is beautiful," Michelle said, reaching to squeeze Niamh's hand. She knew the story, knew what this meant to Trevor's mother.

"Isn't it just?" Niamh beamed through fresh tears. "And Ráichéal looks even more beautiful in it than her Da did, if that's possible."

I stood slightly apart, watching our family gather around my daughter. Their easy affection, their natural joy... everything I should have been feeling but couldn't quite reach.

"Everyone ready?" Father Pádraig appeared at the church door, his kind smile taking in our rather unconventional family gathering. "Shall we begin?"

Trevor reached for my hand as we headed inside, Rachel secure in his other arm. The familiar scent of incense filled the air, and I heard Mia trying to suppress a sneeze behind us.

Shay and Kenzie had saved seats for everyone, while Abby and Sosaidh were already settled with Connor. Fionn and Declan sat with James, Pete, Gina, and Áine. This was what family looked like - chosen, mixed, complicated, perfect.

"The godparents will stand here," Father Pádraig directed, and I watched Jeremy try not to fidget as he took his place. Liv squeezed his hand supportively while Mia managed to look both elegant and uncomfortable.

"Mo ghrá?" Trevor's voice was soft. "Ready to present our daughter?"

I nodded, forcing a smile. Three months old, and already Rachel had more people to love and protect her than I'd had in my entire childhood. That had to count for something, right?

"Mo ghrá?" Trevor's voice was soft. "Ready to present our daughter?"

I nodded, forcing a smile. The older girls had already claimed a pew together - Harley, Arissa, Kora, and Kira deep in whispered conversation. Shay and Kenzie sat nearby, while Áine settled cautiously next to James, still finding her place in our unconventional family. Declan and Fionn had chosen seats near the back, equally new to these gatherings.



Father Pádraig guided Jeremy, Liv, and Mia into position, and I watched Jeremy try not to fidget in his suit. The twins were surprisingly well-behaved in the front pew with Michelle and Hunter, while Kara managed to keep Tiffany from turning her dress into a dance costume.

"The holy water's not too cold," Father Pádraig assured us with a knowing smile. "Though she might not appreciate it anyway."

Niamh dabbed at her eyes again, watching Rachel in Trevor's christening gown. All these people - our chosen family, old friends and new additions alike - here to welcome my daughter into their faith. Into their hearts.

I should have felt overwhelmed with joy. Instead, I felt... numb. Like I was watching someone else's perfect family moment unfold.

Father Pádraig began the ceremony, his gentle voice filling the church. Trevor held Rachel securely, beaming with pride as the priest welcomed everyone.

"Today we gather to baptize Ráicheál Ámbar Ó Súilleabháin into God's family..."

"BABY BATH!" Rose's voice rang out excitedly from her spot between Michelle and Hunter. A ripple of suppressed laughter went through our family as Michelle quickly shushed her.

"Indeed, little one," Father Pádraig smiled, taking the interruption in stride. "Though perhaps a bit more sacred than that."

I caught Jeremy's grateful look from his place beside the font - even during his godfather duties, he was clearly amused by his daughter's antics. After that, Rose settled contentedly against Michelle, watching the proceedings with unusual focus for her fairy energy.

The ceremony continued smoothly - the prayers, the promises, the sacred moments. When Father Pádraig poured the holy water over Rachel's head, she barely fussed, just blinked in surprise. Niamh would probably call it a miracle, though I suspected it had more to do with Trevor's soothing presence.

I spoke the responses when required, went through the motions perfectly. CEO precision, even in this. But watching Liv and Jeremy make their promises as godparents, seeing Mia add her own vow of protection... why couldn't I feel what everyone else so clearly felt?

After the final blessing, Father Pádraig presented Rachel to the congregation. "I present to you Ráicheál Ámbar Ó Súilleabháin, newly baptized into Christ's family."

The pride radiating from Trevor was almost tangible. Niamh was crying again - though she hadn't really stopped - and even Mia managed a genuine smile despite her discomfort in church. Liv and Jeremy had moved back to their places, Jeremy immediately scooping up Rose before she could announce any more observations about baby bathing.

As everyone gathered for photos, I found myself slightly apart again, watching the orchestrated chaos. Michelle organizing the children into position, Hunter keeping Tomi from grabbing the christening gown's delicate lace, Kara trying to convince Tiffy that standing still wasn't actually torture.

"Pictures first, then food," Trevor called out, knowing our crowd. We'd reserved the VIP room at the Cantina for the celebration afterward - another detail Niamh had perfectly arranged.

"Amber?" Trevor's voice was soft. "Ready for family photos, mo ghrá?"

Family photos. Right. Time to smile like I knew how to be the mother everyone expected.

Years of modeling kicked in automatically - I knew exactly how to tilt my head, how to smile, how to position my body for the perfect shot. If there was one thing I could do perfectly today, it was look like the radiant new mother everyone expected to see.

"Beautiful," the photographer praised as I adjusted Rachel's gown with practiced grace. "Now with the godparents..."

I watched Mia try to mirror my pose while Liv managed naturally and Jeremy attempted not to look uncomfortable. Then the full family shots - our chosen family filling the church steps in perfectly coordinated groups. The teens managed to look elegant instead of bored, Tiffy actually stood still, and even Rose contained her fairy energy for the moment.

"One more with just the immediate family," the photographer called. "Parents, baby, and grandmother."

Niamh's tears had finally slowed enough for photos as she stood beside Trevor, both of them gazing adoringly at Rachel. I maintained my perfect smile, my perfect pose, my perfect illusion of maternal joy.

At least these photos would show Rachel what everyone expected this day to be. Even if I couldn't feel it myself.

"On to the Cantina!" Trevor announced once the photographer was satisfied. "Fionn's been preparing something special."

The cavalcade of cars made its way through Ballincollig, our orange Lexus leading the parade to the restaurant. The VIP room was transformed - Niamh had obviously been busy with the decorations while we were getting ready this morning.

"The cake is in the kitchen," Kenzie told Trevor as we entered. "Just waiting for your signal."

"You made it?" I asked, remembering she was training as a pastry chef.

"Under Fionn's supervision," she nodded, looking proud but nervous. "Traditional christening cake with a few special touches."

Rachel was being passed around now - everyone wanting to hold her while she was still clean and calm in her christening gown. I watched her go from Niamh to Michelle to Liv, everyone cooing and making faces while she took it all in with those big curious eyes.

"Food and drinks are ready," Fionn appeared, giving Declan's hand a quick squeeze before heading to the kitchen. "Shall we start serving?"

I caught my reflection in one of the room's mirrors - still perfect, still poised, still playing my part. The consummate hostess, even at my own daughter's christening.

The food was perfect, of course - Fionn had outdone himself creating a menu that blended Irish tradition with modern flair. I noticed James actually complimenting the food instead of just inhaling it, while Áine watched him with surprised amusement. Growth, apparently, was possible.

"Time for the cake?" Trevor suggested after the main course. Kenzie practically bounced with nervous energy as Fionn helped her bring it out - three tiers of elegant white and silver, decorated with delicate sugar flowers that matched the ones in Rachel's christening gown.

"It's beautiful," I said sincerely, watching Kenzie's face light up at the praise.

"Wait till you taste it," Fionn added proudly. "She's got real talent."

Shay squeezed her girlfriend's hand while Kara beamed at her cousin. Another piece of our strange family puzzle falling into place.

"Pictures first," Michelle called out, already positioning herself for the cake-cutting shots. Some things never changed - the starlet always knew when a moment needed documenting.

Trevor held Rachel while I cut the first piece, both of us posing perfectly for the camera. CEO and chef, playing our public roles flawlessly. At least that part came naturally.

Throughout the afternoon I played perfect hostess. I smiled, laughed, did everything right. My public persona never wavered - the successful businesswoman, the adoring wife, the proud new mother. But inside... inside I was drowning.

The emotions kept shifting, impossible to grasp. One moment I'd look at Rachel and feel a surge of love so intense it hurt, the next... the next I'd feel this dark, twisting resentment that terrified me. What kind of mother had these thoughts about her own child? What kind of person was I becoming?

"Mo ghrá?" Trevor's voice pulled me back. "Ready to head home? Rachel's starting to fade."

I nodded, grateful for the excuse to end the performance. People were already starting to leave - the Jordans managing their three girls, Michelle and Hunter gathering their crew. Mia caught my eye with that same concerned look she'd had all day, but thankfully didn't push.

"Such a beautiful ceremony," Niamh hugged me, still emotional. "You did wonderfully, love."

Did I? Had anyone noticed how mechanical it all felt? How I was just going through the motions, playing a part I didn't know how to feel?

"Thanks for everything, Niamh," I managed. "We couldn't have done this without you."

The drive home was quiet. Rachel slept in her car seat, Trevor hummed softly to some Irish song on the radio, and I... I stared out the window, wondering when I'd start feeling like the mother my daughter deserved.

At home, Trevor took Rachel to change her and get her settled in her crib. Niamh, emotional and exhausted, retreated to her cottage. I changed into sweats and washed away the perfect makeup, hiding in my sanctuary to do my skincare routine. Ellie curled up in my lap, offering her usual silent support.

"Can I come in?" Mia appeared in the doorway, Kaya in her arms.

I nodded. "Of course. Need help washing the black shit off your eyes?"

"Hey, I kept the makeup minimal for you today," she managed a small laugh.

"I know, and I appreciate it. You actually looked great."

"You did too..." Mia hesitated. "But I'm worried about you, Amber. You keep brushing it off, but I can tell you're not okay."

I sighed, feeling the facade finally crack. "What do you want me to say, Mia? That I'm having trouble bonding with my own daughter? That sometimes I resent her existing? That I never wanted kids? That this wasn't supposed to happen?"

"If that's how you feel, yes," she said quietly.

The tears started before I could stop them. "What kind of person am I?"

"You're a person who's struggling," Mia said simply, settling on the floor beside my chair. "And trying really hard to pretend you're not."

"Everyone else makes it look so easy," I wiped at my tears, smearing expensive eye cream. "Michelle with three kids, Kara with her kids, even Liv with the twins... they all just know how to be mothers."

"You think they didn't struggle?" Mia shifted Kaya in her lap. "You think they don't still struggle sometimes?"

"Not like this," I whispered. "They don't... they don't look at their babies and feel nothing. Or worse, feel resentment. They don't wish they could go back to before..."

"Have you told Trevor?"

I shook my head. "How can I? You should see him with her, Mia. He's such a natural father. And Niamh... after everything she sacrificed as a single mother... how can I tell them I don't know how to love my own daughter?"

"Because they love you," Mia said quietly. "And because maybe these feelings aren't your fault."

"Not my fault?" I laughed bitterly. "I'm her mother. I'm supposed to feel this... this overwhelming love. This instant connection. Instead..."

"Instead you're feeling things that terrify you," Mia finished. "Things you think make you a terrible person. But Amber... what if something's actually wrong? What if this isn't just you failing at motherhood?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean maybe you should talk to Trevor. Or a doctor. Or both." Mia's voice was gentle but firm. "These feelings... they might be more than just adjustment struggles."

"Trevor will hate me," I whispered. "If he knows how I really feel..."

"Trevor adores you," Mia cut me off. "And he's probably more observant than you think. He might already sense something's wrong but doesn't know how to help."

I looked down at Ellie in my lap, avoiding Mia's eyes. "I don't know how to even start that conversation."

"Start with the truth," she said simply. "The way you just did with me. Let him help you, Amber. The way you'd want Rachel to ask for help if she was struggling."

"You know," Mia said carefully, "Trevor's already worried about you."

I looked up sharply. "What?"

"He's noticed, Amber. He sees how you're only really yourself at work. How you... retreat from everything else." Mia stroked Kaya absently. "He wants to help, but he doesn't know how. He's afraid of pushing too hard."

Fresh tears started. Of course Trevor had noticed. He noticed everything - it was part of what made him such a brilliant chef, such a wonderful husband. And here I was, thinking I'd fooled everyone with my perfect CEO performance.

"He said something to you?"

"He's concerned," Mia confirmed. "He loves you, Amber. And he knows something isn't right. Let him in. Let him help you figure this out."

As if summoned by our conversation, I heard Trevor's footsteps in the hallway. He always checked on me after putting Rachel down.

"Now?" I asked Mia, sudden panic rising.

"Now," she nodded firmly, gathering Kaya. "Before you talk yourself out of it again."

"Mo ghrá?" Trevor appeared in the doorway, his voice shifting instantly from casual to concerned when he saw my face. "You've been crying."

Mia stood, Kaya in her arms. "I'll leave you two to talk," she said quietly, squeezing my shoulder as she passed Trevor.

"Amber?" Trevor moved into the room, kneeling beside my chair. "Love, what's wrong?"

I tried to find words, but they stuck in my throat. Trevor waited patiently, one hand covering mine where it rested on Ellie's fur. He'd always known when to push and when to just be present.

"I'm not..." I finally managed, fresh tears starting. "I'm not the mother Rachel deserves. I'm not... I can't..."

"Oh, mo ghrá," Trevor's voice was so gentle it hurt. "Talk to me. Please. I've been watching you struggle, wanting to help but not knowing how..."

"You knew?"

"Of course I knew," he said softly. "You're my heart, Amber. Did you think I wouldn't notice how much pain you're in?"

The gentleness in his voice broke something in me. "I should love her," I choked out. "I should know how to bond with her. And I do love her, Trevor, I do. Most of the time. But sometimes..." my voice cracked. "Sometimes I resent her. Sometimes I look at her and feel... nothing. Or worse than nothing."

Tears were flowing freely now. "I want to give her a better life than I had, but I can't even bond with her. What kind of mother can't bond with her own baby?"

"Mo ghrá," Trevor's voice was thick with emotion. "You went through such a traumatic birth. You need to be gentle with yourself. Give yourself time..."

"You're so good with her," I whispered. "So natural, so sure. You don't... you don't hate me? You're not going to leave?"

"Leave?" The pain in his voice made me look up. "Amber, no. Never. I love you. I'm not going anywhere. But I do think..." he hesitated. "I think maybe you should talk to a doctor."

I looked down at our joined hands. "Maybe. I just... she's so small, Trevor. So fragile. I'm afraid... I'm afraid I'll hurt her."

"You won't, Love," he said gently. "Babies are more resilient than you think. You won't hurt her."

"But if I do..." my voice shook. "You're so protective of her. If I mess up... I don't want you to be mad."

Trevor's sigh was heavy with realization. "Oh Love... I know I've been overprotective. I'm sorry if I made you afraid to try to bond with her. I'm trying to do better. I just... after almost losing you both..."

"I know," I whispered, remembering how terrified he'd been during the birth complications. "But I feel like... like I'm failing both of you. Everyone else makes it look so easy. Your mom is amazing with her, Michelle juggles three kids, even Liv manages twins..."

"Stop comparing yourself," Trevor said firmly. "Their journeys aren't yours. And I guarantee none of them found it as easy as you think. Have you noticed how Niamh never leaves you alone with Rachel for long? How she's always there to 'help'?"

I nodded slowly.

"She's been worried too, mo ghrá. We all have. We've been trying to support you without pushing, but maybe..." he squeezed my hand. "Maybe we've been so afraid of overwhelming you that we've left you feeling alone instead."

"I don't know how to fix this," I admitted. "I don't know how to be the mother she needs."

"Then let's figure it out together," Trevor's voice was steady, grounding. "Starting with talking to someone professional. Someone who can help you understand these feelings."

Fresh tears started. "You really don't think I'm horrible?"

"I think you're the strongest person I know," he said softly. "And I think it's time to let that strength include asking for help."

"Maybe..." I hesitated, a thought forming. "Maybe it will get better when she's older and I know what to do with her. Like with Rose - I know how to do mani/pedis, how to shop for clothes. I understand that."

Trevor's face softened with a small smile. "You can paint Ráichéal's nails too, you know."

"Really?" Something flickered in my chest - hope, maybe. "It's safe?"

"Absolutely," he squeezed my hand. "And I can help you, if you want. Or..." he paused thoughtfully. "Or I can stay out of the way and let it be just a you and her thing. Whatever makes you comfortable."

I nodded, feeling the first real connection to motherhood I'd had in months. "I think... I think I'd like that."

"We could start tomorrow," Trevor suggested carefully. "After her morning nap, when she's usually content. I got her some of those special baby nail polishes - they're water-based, completely safe."

I looked at him, surprised. "You already bought...?"



"I've been trying to think of ways to help you connect," he admitted. "Things that would feel natural to you. The way you are with Rose and the other girls... I knew that maternal instinct was in there somewhere."

Fresh tears started, but different from before. "You've been planning this?"

"Mo ghrá, I've been watching you light up every time Rose wants to do 'beauty time' with her Aunt Amber. I thought maybe..." he shrugged. "Maybe Rachel just needs her own special thing with you too."

"I'm still scared," I whispered. "What if I mess up? What if she cries? What if-"

"Then we try something else," he said simply. "But first..." he stood, pulling me gently to my feet. "Let's get you some sleep. It's been a long day."

I nodded, letting him lead me from my sanctuary. "Trevor? Thank you. For not giving up on me."

That night, for the first time since Rachel was born, I actually slept. Maybe it was the exhaustion from the christening, or the relief of finally being honest with Trevor, or just knowing I wasn't alone in this anymore.

When Rachel's cry came through the monitor at her usual 2 AM feeding, Trevor started to get up, but I touched his arm. "I'll go."

"You sure, mo ghrá?"

I nodded, though my heart was racing. In her nursery, Rachel blinked up at me with those big eyes - Trevor's eyes. I lifted her carefully, the way Niamh had shown me countless times.

"Hey mija," I whispered, my voice shaking slightly. "Tomorrow we're going to try something new. Just you and me. And maybe... maybe we'll find our way together."

I couldn't promise I'd suddenly be the perfect mother. I couldn't guarantee these feelings would magically disappear. But for the first time since she was born, I felt something else beneath the fear and guilt - hope.

It wasn't much. But it was a start.



"Chosen Chaos"

I settled into my tech fairy cave after breakfast, pulling up the latest protocols on my monitors. The house had found its morning rhythm - Jeremy humming while he mixed color for Mrs. Sullivan in the salon, Rose spinning through her latest fairy dance routine in the living room, Killy carefully explaining to his Mario figures why they needed to maintain proper spacing.

"Mummy! Dogs need dance!" Rose called out.

"Inside voice, love," Jeremy and I said automatically.

"But fairy voice is loud," she insisted, though slightly quieter.

"Mummy, code need to be straight," Killy announced from somewhere behind me.

I glanced at my screen, and sure enough, there were characters out of sequence. How my two-year-old could spot pattern deviations in code he couldn't even read continued to amaze and baffle me. "Thanks, sweet boy. Will you go check on Rose?"

Killy nodded solemnly and went to rescue Daisy from his sister's latest choreography attempts.

I did my morning check on Alan's email - a habit I couldn't quite break even though things had quieted down. After the wedding, he'd sent Declan one final message, that bizarre mix of pleading and condemnation that seemed to be Alan's specialty. Declan's response had been clear - he was happy with Fionn, end of story. When Alan tried again, the email bounced back. Looked like Declan had finally blocked him. Good. After everything Alan had put him through, Declan deserved his happiness with Fionn.

Satisfied that particular drama was truly over, I switched to my actual clients. The recent uptick in ransomware attempts had me on high alert - nobody was getting past my security systems.

A crash from the living room interrupted my coding flow.

"I'm okay!" Rose called out immediately.

"Need reorganize," Killy added, already probably straightening whatever his sister had knocked over.

I heard Jeremy's laugh from the salon, followed by Mrs. Sullivan's amused, "Those two are something else, aren't they?"

They really were. Rose's fairy energy somehow perfectly balanced by Killy's need for order. Though lately...

"Mummy! Tiffy coming?" Rose appeared in my doorway, hair wild from dancing.

"After lunch, love. Aunt Kara's bringing her over while she works on her article."

"Need prepare space," Killy nodded seriously, already planning whatever game they'd play.

The doorbell rang - probably too early for Kara and Tiffy. "J?" I called out.

"Got my hands full with foils, love!"

Right then. Time to see who needed saving from Rose's fairy welcome committee.

I opened the door to find Shay standing there, looking exactly like she belonged - which, of course, she did.

"Shay! Hey!" I pulled her into a hug. "Come in!"

My former exchange daughter - though really, she was more like our daughter/little sister now - hugged me back tightly. "What brings you by? Thought you'd be at work."

"Amber's working from home today, gave me the day off," Shay explained. "Figured I'd come see my little sister and brother, if that's okay?"

"Of course it's okay! Shay, this is always your home," I assured her. Sometimes I forgot she still needed to hear that.

"Hey Love!" Jeremy called from the salon.

"Hey!" Shay waved in his direction, grinning.

"SHAY!" Twin voices echoed down the hall as Rose and Killy spotted her, launching themselves into her waiting arms with perfect twin synchronization.

"Fairy dance with me!" Rose demanded, while Killy was already tugging Shay's hand toward his Mario figures.

"Need help organize," he explained seriously.

"How about both?" Shay suggested diplomatically. "We can organize Mario figures while having a dance party."

I watched them settle into their familiar rhythm - Shay somehow managing to satisfy both twins' very different needs at once. She'd always been good at that.

"Tea?" I offered, heading toward the kitchen.

"Please," Shay followed, twins in tow. "Oh, and Kenzie says hi. She's helping Fionn with some new dessert experiment at the Cantina."

"Those two are quite the pastry team," I smiled, putting the kettle on. "How's the new flat?"

"Still unpacking, but it's perfect - close to UCC for fall. Though Aunt Lydia's on my case again about taking a week off for London Fashion Week. She doesn't understand why I don't want to miss classes my first term."

"Shay play Bluey?" Rose asked hopefully.

"After we fix Mario," Killy insisted.

"Your education comes first," I said, pouring the tea. "Though I'm sure Lydia sees networking opportunities everywhere."

"Always," Shay shook her head. "At least working with Amber is actually teaching me about business operations. Speaking of which..." she glanced at me. "Have you noticed anything... off with Amber lately?"

Trust Shay to pick up on that. She'd always been observant. "She's struggling," I said carefully, mindful of little ears. "But she's getting help now."

"Good," Shay nodded, helping Killy straighten a Mario figure while Rose twirled around them. "I've been worried."

"Mummy!" Rose interrupted. "Shay watch fairy show!"

"After Mario," Killy insisted again, his little face serious.

"How about," Shay suggested, "we organize Mario figures while watching Chip agus Práta? That way everyone's happy?"

I smiled into my tea, watching my former exchange student - now honorary daughter - navigate the twins' competing needs with practiced ease.

"Yorkshire," Shay sighed contentedly, sipping her tea. The Yorkshire girl in her still appreciated that I kept her favorite tea stocked.

"Of course. I know what my girl likes," I smiled.

"You always make me feel at home," Shay said softly, something vulnerable flickering across her face.

"This is your home. Always." I meant it with every fiber of my being. After everything Shay had been through - her mum's neglect, losing custody, bouncing between Lydia and Addie before finally landing with us - I knew 'home' hadn't always been a concept she could trust. But here, with us, she'd found it. And we'd found another daughter.

"Shay watch now!" Rose insisted, having given Killy enough time to properly align his Mario figures.

"Inside voice, Roisin," Jeremy called from the salon, somehow always aware of what was happening in the house even while working.

"But fairy-" Rose started.

"Can be quiet," Killy finished firmly, already leading the way to the couch. My practical boy, always looking out for his sister.

"Mrs. Sullivan's about done," Jeremy added. "Then I've got an hour break before Mrs. O'Donnell comes in."

"Daddy watch too?" Rose asked hopefully.

"Course I will, princess. Just let me finish up here."

I caught Shay hiding a smile behind her tea cup, watching our controlled chaos with obvious affection. This was what home looked like - fairy dances and precise arrangements, Yorkshire tea and Irish children's shows, all of us finding our places in this unconventional family.

"How's Kenzie settling into Ireland?" I asked, knowing the transition hadn't been easy for her.

"Good, mostly. We love our flat - it's tiny, but it's ours." Shay's face softened. "And she's really loving her job. I mean, being a prep cook isn't her dream position, but she knows how lucky she is to work under a Michelin star chef. She's learning tons from both Trevor and Fionn." She hesitated. "Having Kara here is... complicated. But she's happy Tiffany's around. Overall, it's been good for her."

I nodded. "And how's working with Amber?"

"Honestly? Business is boring," Shay admitted. "I want to be in the lab. Though Amber's cool about it - lets me spend time with her chemists sometimes. Don't tell Auntie Lydia, but Amber tries to mix it up for me when she can."

"I get it. I know you just want to work in the lab," I said gently. "But to be fair, Lydia is planning to give you a perfume company."

"I know," Shay sighed. "It's a hell of an apology after everything that happened, and I love the idea of formulating my own fragrances. But the business side..." she groaned dramatically. "Ugh."

"I know it seems that way now, but when you finish school and launch Shay James Fragrances, you'll be grateful for the knowledge Amber is sharing with you," I said gently.

"Maybe," Shay conceded. "She is good at what she does, no doubt. I admire her. Amber Nichole is a success and it hasn't even launched yet. Everyone's buzzing about it."

"And someday that buzz will be for your fragrances. Every job has its downsides."

"You're right. I guess I should be more grateful to Auntie," Shay sighed.

"You really should be. Lydia is doing something really nice. And for her to stick her brand out for you... that's love."

"As only Auntie Lydia can express," Shay laughed.

Michelle

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Hunter was packing like he was preparing for a funeral rather than a vacation. Every item went into his suitcase with grim determination. We were leaving for Hawaii in a couple of days - my concert followed by a family vacation. But between the Death Ranger situation and Jon's family joining us, he was less than thrilled.

"You're not going to your execution, babe," I said, watching him methodically fold another shirt.

He looked at me, lips pursed. "Mich, I do not like the idea of leaving Ireland when we have two mysterious Thunder Rangers out there and my evil undead doppelganger is trying to kill Mia."

"I know... but Billy will be here. He'll be around if Mia needs backup, and he'll be setting up the command center under the house - including the teleportation system. That's going to be crucial with me working in Nashville, so I can be here if needed at a moment's notice."

"Billy can do all that with us here," Hunter countered.

"Yes, but he doesn't need to. I have to work, and we've been planning this vacation for months. Mia will be fine, and we need some time to regroup so we can face the Death Ranger fresh."

"I don't like it."

"You don't like that Jon and his family will be there. I'm telling you, it will be fine."

Hunter sighed heavily. "I cannot believe you invited them and didn't talk to me first."

"I'm sorry! It just happened. Jon invited Harley and Arissa to join them on their family vacation, so I invited them all on ours so we could just all go together."

"A week on a beach with your ex. Sounds splendid," Hunter said sourly.

"Hunter," I sighed, sitting on the edge of the bed. "Jon is married. I'm married. We're both happy. This isn't some romantic comedy setup - it's just a family vacation because Harley and Jake are close."

"They're too close," Hunter muttered, still aggressively folding. "The age gap..."

"Is nothing like what you're thinking," I said firmly. "Jake isn't his father. He sees Harley like a little sister."

"And how does she see him?" Hunter challenged, though we both knew the answer. Harley's crush wasn't exactly subtle.

"Jake is married, Hunter. And more importantly, he's not Jon. He wouldn't cross those lines."

"I know," he admitted finally. "I just... with everything else going on..."

"You're feeling protective. I get it." I reached for his hand. "But maybe that's exactly why we need this vacation. A chance to just be a family without Death Rangers or mysterious Thunder powers or any of it."

"Mich-"

"And you know what else?" I cut him off. "Tomi needs this. Some time just being a baby, not wearing power dampeners, not having to hide who she is. We can let her practice with her powers on the private beach. Let her be herself."

That got through to him. His shoulders relaxed slightly as he looked at our daughter's tiny swimsuit.

"Did you have to get her a bikini? What is wrong with a one-piece?" Hunter picked up the purple glittery baby bikini like it had personally offended him.

I laughed. "Baby bikinis are adorable. You can see her chunky squishy tummy."

"She's a baby," Hunter said, as if that proved his point.

"Exactly," I grinned. "Now calm down and finish packing. We have an early flight."

I had just zipped my suitcase when Harley's voice carried from the entryway. "Mom! Uncle Billy's here!"

The excitement in my chest was automatic - some friendships never changed. I rushed out to greet him, throwing myself into a hug that felt like coming home.

"Hi!" I squealed, feeling like a teenager again for a moment. "It's so good to see you."

Billy chuckled, wrapping me in a warm embrace. "Good to see you too, Michelle."

I pulled back, smiling at one of the few people I trusted completely. I really did love him, not like I thought I had back in high school when we dated, but as someone who'd always been there, always would be. Safe harbor in any storm.

"How are you holding up?" he asked, his voice carrying that familiar concern. "I got your message about the 'new' Thunder Rangers."

"I'm okay. Hunter isn't thrilled about leaving, but I told him you and Mia could handle it."

"And if anything comes up that we can't handle, I have several other Rangers on standby," Billy assured me.

"I know. I trust you. And this teleportation system is going to be a game changer. With me working in Nashville, I was so worried about being here if Hunter needed me."

"Well, having a basement built under the house with hidden access was genius," Billy smiled. "I can build you a fully functional command center that will allow you and Hunter to do whatever is needed from here."

"I've been a Ranger long enough to know sometimes hidden rooms are necessary," I sighed.

"I know, Michelle. I get it."

"Anyway, I'll show you the basement in a bit. First, let me show you your room. Oh, and all of Robbie's stuff. Thanks for dog sitting for us too."

"Of course. I'm going to be here anyway. It's no trouble, truly."

"Just remember," I said as we headed upstairs, "Robbie's a bit... enthusiastic."

"Meaning?" Billy asked, always analytical.

"Meaning my Golden Retriever thinks everyone wants to play with him all the time," I laughed. "And he has the energy of ten puppies."

"Sounds perfect," Billy smiled. "I could use the exercise."

I showed him to the guest room. "Hunter's still sulking about Hawaii if you want to say hi."

"Still worried about leaving?"

"That, and..." I hesitated. "Jon and his family will be there."

Billy's eyebrows shot up. "Ah. That explains the extra sulking."

"It's not what you think," I started defensively.

"Michelle," Billy's voice carried decades of friendship. "I know you and Jon... nothing between you two is ever simple and it never ends well."

"That used to be true, I admit. It's different since I married Hunter. I'm faithful now. Honestly, swear on Saturn. Jon and I are just friends," I insisted.

"Does Jon know that?" Billy asked pointedly.

"He is well aware," I nodded. "Harley is friends with his son Jake. Well... maybe it's more of a crush..."

"Jake is twice Harley's age... and married..."

"Yes," I confirmed quietly.

Billy shook his head. "Like mother, like daughter."

I laughed despite myself. "Hope not! Anyway, let me show you where our command center will be before my mom comes over."

"It must be getting harder to hide this all from her with her living on your property."

"Oh, it is," I nodded. "But thankfully she has her own house, so that helps. Come on, this way." I led him to my office where the hidden door to the basement was concealed.

I pressed the hidden panel behind my desk, revealing the entrance to the basement. "Hunter insisted on reinforced walls, though given recent events..."

"Smart thinking," Billy nodded and we went down the stairs, already examining the space with that analytical focus I knew so well. "The teleportation system will go here," he indicated the far corner. "Command console along this wall. We can set up monitors..."

"And the power source?"

"Self-contained. Drawing from the Morphin Grid itself, like the Command Center did. Though..." he hesitated. "With these new Thunder Rangers and the Death Ranger's abilities, we might want to consider additional security measures."

"Whatever it takes," I said firmly. "I need to know my family's protected when I'm in Nashville."

"Speaking of Nashville..." Billy turned to face me. "How are you managing that with everything else going on?"

I shrugged, "Same as I always have. It's not like I've never juggled work and saving the world. This time it's just a series instead of a tour."

"Speaking of Nashville..." Billy turned to face me. "How are you managing that with everything else going on?"

I shrugged. "Same as I always have. It's not like I've never juggled work and saving the world. This time it's just a series instead of a tour."

"'911: Nashville' is getting a lot of buzz," Billy noted. "The network must be pushing for more publicity."

"Don't remind me," I sighed. "They want more press appearances than I'd like. But with the teleportation system... at least I can be here if anything happens."

"And the girls are okay with it?"

"They're used to my crazy schedule by now," I said. "Though Harley's definitely more excited about this Hawaii trip than my shooting schedule."

"Because of Jake?"

"Billy..."

"Just saying."

"I know, I know. But he's not Jon. And she's not me."

"Thank God for that," Billy teased as Hunter came downstairs. Billy was one of the few exes I had that Hunter didn't dislike.

"Hey Billy, thanks for coming," Hunter said, shaking his hand.

"Happy to help."

"You know anything about these Thunder Rangers?" Hunter asked.

Billy shook his head. "Not explicitly, no. Though given the way the Wind and Thunder Academies initially accessed the Morphin Grid, their existence isn't entirely unexpected."

"What do you mean about how the Academies accessed the Grid?" Hunter asked.

"The Academies developed a method of drawing power from the same sector of the Grid, but at different wavelength frequencies," Billy explained, falling into his technical mode. "The Wind Academy accessed the primary frequency spectrum - hence the traditional Ranger colors: Red, Blue, Yellow, Purple, Pink, and Orange. The Thunder Academy, wanting to avoid oversaturating that same sector, tapped into the secondary frequency bands, resulting in Crimson, Navy, Gold, and Violet. Following that pattern, it's not entirely surprising that Amber and Magenta would exist on those same sub-frequencies."

"So there could be more colors we don't know about?" Hunter asked, his tactical mind already working.

"Theoretically," Billy nodded. "The Grid's frequency spectrum is vast, and we've only documented a fraction of its potential manifestations. Especially when you factor in how Celtic magic might interact with the Thunder Ninja energy signatures..."

"Speaking of," I cut in, "what about the Death Ranger powers? How do they fit into this?"

Billy's expression darkened. "That's... different. The Death Ranger powers aren't accessing the Grid's natural frequencies. They're corrupting them, twisting them into something that shouldn't exist."

"Like what Lord Drakkon did?" Hunter asked.

"Similar principle, but potentially more dangerous. Drakkon manipulated existing power sources. The Death Ranger powers seem to be creating their own dark frequency within the Grid itself."

I caught Hunter's concerned look. "Which is why you're setting up additional security measures."

"Exactly," Billy confirmed. "We need to be able to detect and track these energy signatures, especially with you being in Nashville."

"Can you track the Amber and Magenta Rangers too?" Hunter asked.

"If they're using traditional Thunder Ninja frequencies, yes," Billy said, already pulling out some equipment from his bag. "Though given what you've told me about their connection to Celtic power sources..."

"They might be able to mask their signatures," Hunter finished grimly.

"Which might explain why they've stayed hidden so long," I added. "Even from the Thunder Academy."

"Speaking of hiding," Billy glanced at his watch, "isn't your mom bringing lunch soon?"

"Yes, and she can't see any of this," I gestured to Billy's tech. "Though we should head up - she'll want to give us her detailed packing list over lunch."

"Your mother does realize you travel for a living, right?" Billy smiled.

"Try telling her that," I sighed. "Come on, we should get this cleared away before she arrives."

"So," Billy said as we headed upstairs, "Jon's joining your Hawaii trip?"

"Unfortunately," Hunter mumbled.

"Some things never change," Billy muttered, sharing his obvious disdain.

I rolled my eyes as we made it to the kitchen just as Mom was coming in with bags of food.

"Billy!" Her face lit up. "Oh my, it's been so long! So good to see you!" She put down the bags to hug him.

Billy smiled, returning her embrace. "Nice to see you too, Ms..."

"Stop that now," Mom cut him off. "Lea is fine."

Billy laughed. "Okay, nice to see you too, Lea."

"I brought plenty of food."

Once we called the girls in and settled around the table, Billy turned to them. "You two excited about Hawaii?"

Arisa nodded. "I am. Never been there."

"I'm excited to see Jake," Harley sighed dreamily. "It's been so long."

"His wife will be there too," Arissa pointed out dryly.

Harley rolled her eyes.

Mom and Hunter exchanged a loaded look across the table.

"Like mother, like daughter?" Billy asked them.

"Too close for comfort," Mom said as Hunter sighed heavily.

"Jake is nothing like his father," I felt compelled to point out, though the similar looks around the table suggested no one was convinced.

"He's married," Hunter said firmly.

"And twice your age," Mom added, looking at Harley.

"I know that," Harley muttered, pushing her food around her plate. "We're just friends."

"Sure you are," Arissa smirked, earning herself a glare from her sister.

"So Billy," Mom changed the subject, "how long are you staying?"

"Just until they get back from Hawaii," Billy smiled easily. "Dog sitting for them."

"Lovely. So nice of you," Mom smiled warmly. "I'm so happy you and Michelle stayed friends all these years. You always were a good influence on her."

"Unlike some of us degenerates?" Hunter teased.

Mom laughed. "I didn't say that... but you weren't there when I moved Mich to Angel Grove. She was... a different girl then. Billy helped her learn to just be a normal teenage girl."

Billy and I exchanged knowing looks. If Mom only knew how decidedly abnormal life in Angel Grove actually was.

"It's probably for the best you didn't know me in high school," Hunter smiled. "Not sure you would have let me marry your daughter."

"Like I 'let' Michelle do anything," Mom shook her head. "If it were up to me, she wouldn't have gone anywhere near Jon from the start. Even at twelve, I couldn't control her."

I rolled my eyes. "I wasn't that bad."

"Do you really want to go there, Michelle Pauline?" Mom asked pointedly.

I blinked.

"Ooh, the middle name. I'd stop if I were you," Hunter laughed.

"Lea has a point," Billy added, clearly enjoying this. "Remember that time you convinced Trini and Kim to-"

"And that's enough stories from high school," I cut him off quickly. The last thing I needed was Mom hearing about half the things we'd actually gotten up to - even the non-Ranger related incidents.

"Speaking of Angel Grove," Mom turned to Billy, "how's everything at Cranston Tech? I see you in the business news all the time."

"Still growing," Billy smiled modestly, though we all knew his company was revolutionizing the tech industry. "Though sometimes I miss the simplicity of high school."

Hunter barely contained his snort. Simplicity. Right. Nothing simple about a high school that got attacked by monsters weekly.

"Mom was bad in school?" Arissa asked, genuinely curious.

"Your mother," Lea started with that dangerous glint in her eye.

"Was a perfectly average student who made mostly good choices," I interrupted firmly. "Who needs more water?"

"Actually," Mom ignored my attempt at distraction, "your mother was quite the rebel. Though moving to Angel Grove was good for her - that group she fell in with there was much better than her LA crowd."

"We were on the student council," Billy pointed out diplomatically. Though technically, we'd only joined student council as cover for our frequent monster-fighting absences.

"Yes, you were all such good kids," Mom smiled warmly. "You, and Jason... even when you were dating Michelle, you were both such good influences on her."

I caught Billy hiding a smile behind his water glass. If Mom only knew what we'd really been up to...

Amber

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The sound of Ellie barking frantically pulled me from my work. I rushed out of my makeup room to find my tiny dog had somehow cornered Kaya on a shelf, the cat hissing dramatically while Ellie bounced below.

"Ellie, no! Stop!" I scooped up my overexcited dog just as Mia appeared.

"Oh Kaya," Mia sighed, carefully retrieving her cat from the shelf.

"I'm so sorry, Mia. I'm not sure what got into Ellie - she doesn't normally do that."

Mia gave Kaya a knowing look. "Oh, I'm sure Kaya instigated. She's a bad kitty."

I could have sworn Kaya shot her an offended glare.

"Guess our pets aren't going to be besties," I said apologetically.

"Kaya doesn't like anyone except me," Mia shrugged. "And some days that's questionable."

"Well, we'll give you guys some space," I adjusted my grip on Ellie. "I have a doctor's appointment and I'm taking her with me."

Something flickered across Mia's face - concern, maybe. "Doctor's appointment?"

"Yeah," I tried to sound casual. "Trevor... Trevor thinks maybe I should talk to someone. About how I've been feeling since Rachel was born."

"Good," Mia said simply, but I could hear the relief in her voice.

"I'm scared," I admitted quietly, holding Ellie closer. "What if... what if they say I'm a terrible mother?"

"They won't," Mia's voice was firm. "They'll say you're a mother who's asking for help. That's the opposite of terrible."

"Trevor's meeting me there," I added. "Rachel is with Niamh."

"Want me to come too? I can wait with Ellie while you're in there."

The offer surprised me, though it shouldn't have. For someone who claimed to hate people, Mia had become incredibly protective of me.



"You wouldn't mind?" I asked, trying not to sound as relieved as I felt.

"Of course not," Mia adjusted Kaya in her arms. "Though maybe I should leave this one here. Pretty sure the doctor's office has enough drama without adding my demon cat to the mix."

I managed a small laugh. "Probably wise. Do you have room in your purse? If she's in a purse Ellie is perfectly fine."

"Look at you," Mia's voice softened. "Already knowing exactly what your dog needs to feel safe and secure. Sounds pretty maternal to me."

"Dogs are easier than babies," I muttered, but I caught her point.

"Come on," she nudged me gently. "Let's get you to this appointment. And Amber?" She waited until I met her eyes. "I'm proud of you for doing this."

Coming from Mia, that meant everything.

The drive to the doctor's office was quiet, Ellie contentedly settled in Mia's designer purse. Trevor was already waiting in the parking lot when we arrived, and something in my chest eased at the sight of him.

"Mo ghrá," he pulled me into a hug. "You okay?"

I nodded against his chest, though 'okay' felt relative at the moment.

"Dr. O'Connor is supposed to be the best," he said softly. "Niamh recommended her - said she helped a lot of new mothers."

The waiting room was mercifully empty when we walked in. I filled out the paperwork with my usual CEO precision, though my hand shook slightly as I detailed my symptoms. The distance from Rachel. The numbness. The moments of resentment that terrified me.

"Mrs. O'Sullivan?" A gentle voice called. "We're ready for you."

I caught both Trevor and Mia's encouraging looks as I stood. Time to face whatever was wrong with me.

Trev stood with me and took my hand as we were led back to a room to wait for the doctor.

Trevor's hand was steady in mine as we followed the nurse to an office - not an exam room, thankfully. The space was warm, decorated in soothing colors, with comfortable chairs instead of medical equipment.

"Dr. O'Connor will be with you shortly," the nurse smiled kindly.

I sat rigidly in one of the chairs, my CEO posture a defense against my nerves. Trevor didn't let go of my hand.

"You don't have to be perfect here, mo ghrá," he said softly. "That's not what this is about."

"I don't know how to be anything else anymore," I whispered. "Except when it comes to Rachel. Then I don't know how to be anything at all."

Trevor's thumb traced circles on my palm, a gesture so familiar it almost broke me. Before he could respond, there was a gentle knock at the door.

A woman around my age entered - warm smile, professional but approachable demeanor. "Mr. and Mrs. O'Sullivan? I'm Dr. O'Connor."

I nodded stiffly, grateful for Trevor's steady presence beside me.

"Niamh speaks very highly of you," she continued, settling into her chair. "She mentioned you have a three-month-old daughter?"

"Rachel," Trevor supplied when I didn't speak. "Ráichéal in Irish."

"And how are you finding motherhood, Mrs. O'Sullivan?"

The question hit like a physical blow. How was I finding motherhood? I was failing at it. Completely. Utterly.

"I..." my voice cracked. "I don't know how to do this. Any of it. I can run a company, launch product lines, manage a team of employees... but I can't... I can't feel what I'm supposed to feel for my own daughter."

Trevor's hand tightened around mine as the words I'd been afraid to voice finally spilled out.

"Can you tell me more about that?" Dr. O'Connor asked gently. "What do you think you're supposed to feel?"

"Love. Joy. Connection." The words felt bitter. "Everyone else seems to have it naturally. Niamh lights up every time she sees Rachel. Trevor's a natural father. Even Mia, who claims to hate everyone, bonded with her instantly. But I..."

"But you?"

"Sometimes I look at her and feel nothing," I whispered, shame burning in my throat. "Sometimes... sometimes I resent her existence. What kind of mother feels that way?"

"A mother who might be experiencing postpartum depression," Dr. O'Connor said quietly.

The words hung in the air. Trevor's hand squeezed mine again.

"But I'm not sad," I protested weakly. "I'm just... empty. Numb. Except when I'm at work. That's the only time I feel like myself anymore."

"Depression manifests differently for everyone," she explained. "Especially postpartum depression. The numbness you're describing is actually a very common symptom."

"The birth was... complicated," Trevor added softly. "We almost lost them both."

"That trauma alone can trigger PPD," Dr. O'Connor nodded. "Add in the pressure of running a company, launching a new brand..."

"I can handle pressure," I said automatically. CEO voice.

"You can," she agreed. "But you don't have to handle everything alone. Tell me, when do you feel most connected to Rachel?"

I hesitated. "When... when I'm doing her nails. Trevor got this special baby-safe polish. It's the only time I feel like I know what I'm doing with her."

"Because it's familiar," Dr. O'Connor smiled. "It's something you understand, something that makes you feel competent."

"But shouldn't I just... know how to be her mother? Shouldn't it come naturally?"

"That's a myth that hurts a lot of new mothers," she said firmly. "There's nothing 'natural' about suddenly knowing how to care for a new human being. We learn. We grow. And sometimes, we need help while we do that."

"Help like... medication?" I asked hesitantly.

"That's one option," Dr. O'Connor nodded. "Combined with therapy. We can work on strategies to help you bond with Rachel, ways to manage the numbness. But first, I want you to understand something very important."

I waited, still gripping Trevor's hand.

"This isn't your fault," she said firmly. "PPD is a medical condition, like any other. It's not a failure of motherhood. It's not a character flaw. And it's treatable."

"But what if..." my voice caught. "What if even with treatment, I'm not the mother she deserves?"

"Mo ghrá," Trevor's voice was soft but certain. "You already are. You're here, aren't you? Fighting for her? For yourself?"

"Your husband's right," Dr. O'Connor smiled. "Recognizing you need help and seeking it out - that's exactly what a good mother does."

Something tight in my chest started to loosen, just slightly. Maybe... maybe I wasn't completely failing after all.

"I'd like to start you on a low dose of antidepressants," Dr. O'Connor continued, "specifically designed for postpartum depression. And I want to see you weekly for therapy, at least initially."

I nodded, years of business training kicking in. "What about breastfeeding?" Not that I'd been successful at that either.

"You're formula feeding?" When I nodded, she continued. "That actually makes medication choices simpler. And Amber?" She waited until I met her eyes. "Formula feeding isn't a failure either. Every choice that keeps both you and Rachel healthy is the right choice."

"She's gaining weight perfectly," Trevor added supportively.

"The medication might take a few weeks to fully work," Dr. O'Connor explained. "In the meantime, I want you to keep doing those nail painting sessions with Rachel. Find more moments like that - ways to connect that feel natural to you."

"And if I still feel... numb?"

"Then we adjust. We try something else. This is a process, not a quick fix."

"One more thing," Dr. O'Connor said as she wrote out the prescription. "I want you to stop comparing yourself to other mothers. Your journey with Rachel is unique - it's not a competition with Niamh or anyone else."

I almost laughed. Not comparing myself to others? That went against every CEO instinct I had.

"I know it's not easy," she smiled, seeming to read my thoughts. "But try to focus on your own small victories. Like those nail painting sessions - that's a beautiful way you've found to bond with your daughter."

"It's the only time I feel like I know what I'm doing," I admitted.

"Then we build from there. Find other moments that feel natural to you. And Amber?" She handed me the prescription. "You're already a better mother than you think. You're here, aren't you?"

Walking out to the waiting room, I felt lighter somehow. Not fixed - I knew it wouldn't be that simple. But maybe... maybe there was hope.

Mia looked up from her phone, Ellie still contentedly curled in her purse. One look at my face and she nodded. "Ice cream?" she suggested.

"Actually," I managed a small smile, "I think I want to go home and paint Rachel's nails."

Kara

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"Come on, Tiffy," I called from the front door. We were heading next door so she could play with the twins.

"Sorry! I wanted Kayla!" Tiffy's voice carried down the stairs as she appeared clutching her beloved koala plush - Liv's gift that had quickly become her constant companion.

I smiled, grabbing my purse. "It's okay, baby girl. Come on."

Jeremy answered our knock next door. "Kara, hey, come in. Liv's just finishing up some work in her office, and the twins are watching Bluey in the living room. Make yourself at home."

We'd barely made it to the living room when Rose spotted us. "TIFFY!"

"Inside voice, Ro Ro," Killy reminded her firmly.

"Sorry, Tiffy," Rose immediately whispered, and my heart squeezed watching her consciously modulate her volume. She always remembered that Tiffy startled at loud noises - a leftover fear from my uncle's frequent yelling. Thank god they'd let us adopt her. They never should have been parents in the first place.

"Can we play fairy princess?" Rose asked hopefully, still keeping her voice gentle.

"Need proper crowns," Killy added, already moving to get their dress-up box with careful precision.

Tiffy nodded, still holding Kayla close but starting to relax. She always did better with the twins than with most other kids - they somehow understood her needs without being told.

"I'm going to go see Aunt Livvie," I told her softly. "Are you okay playing with the twins?"

Another small nod. At one point in time, she would have clung to me, terrified to let me out of her sight. The progress she'd made since having this stable family around her...

"Got the crowns!" Rose announced in her 'quiet fairy voice.'

"Need straight," Killy muttered, adjusting Rose's slightly crooked tiara.

"I'll be right in Liv's office if you need me," I told Tiffany, but she was already being drawn into the twins' world of fairy princesses and precise crown placement.

I headed to Liv's tech sanctuary, poking my head in. "Knock, knock."

Liv glanced up from her monitors. "Kara, hey love, come on in. I'm almost done."

I settled into a chair, watching her fingers fly across the keyboard at impossible speeds, lines of code appearing like magic.

"Okay, done." She spun her chair to face me, grinning. "So, I saw Grayson was in the news today."

"Please tell me those text message leaks didn't come from you," I said, though part of me hoped they had.

Liv laughed. "Not this time. I wish I could take credit, but no. He really is just dumb enough to have his texts so large any passerby can take photos."

I nodded, remembering the screenshots now circulating online - Grayson's mother berating him for daring to disagree with the president on his show. After everything, including the pardon, apparently anything less than complete loyalty was betrayal in their world. The texts had exposed the Moore family as the president's lapdogs, with his mother making it clear what a disappointment Grayson was. It was deliciously embarrassing.

And it couldn't have happened to a nicer guy.

"Though," Liv's eyes sparkled with that dangerous glint I knew well, "if someone wanted to make sure those texts stayed in circulation..."

"Liv..."

"What? I'm just saying, it would be a shame if they got buried under other news stories."

I couldn't help but smile. Liv's vendetta against Grayson wasn't just about his politics - it was personal after the threats he made against her. "You already can't go back to the US. Maybe let karma handle Grayson. If you were to get caught..."

"Please," she scoffed. "Getting caught is for amateurs. Speaking of articles, how's the piece on EU economic policies coming?"

"Much less exciting than Grayson's family drama," I admitted. "But at least I don't have to interact with him as much. Being the EU correspondent has its perks."

"Even if it means living in Ireland?" Liv's voice softened slightly.

"Yes, even then," I glanced toward the living room where I could hear Tiffany's quiet giggles mixing with Rose's 'fairy voice.' "I know I was scared but we're adjusting nicely. All of us."

"Good," Livvie smiled.

"I would be happy if I didn't have to appear as a panelist on Grayson's show ever again, but I think the network likes to see me and my ex-husband spar over politics. Ratings matter more than journalism," I sighed.

"They're still making you do panels with him?" Liv's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Even after everything?"

"The network thinks our 'dynamic' makes for good TV," I rolled my eyes. "Extremist ex-husband versus moderate ex-wife. Though lately he's been less... radical in his views. His mother's texts made that pretty clear."

"Still," Liv's fingers twitched toward her keyboard. "If someone were to find more embarrassing communications..."

"Liv, seriously. You're already exiled from the US. Let's not make it worse."

"Fine," she sighed dramatically. "But only because I promised J I'd behave. Mostly."

I smiled, hearing Tiffany's laugh again from the other room. "Who would have thought a year ago we'd all be here? Happy, safe, away from all that chaos?"

"Speaking of chaos," Liv nodded toward her monitors, "want to see what else Grayson's been saying when he thinks no one's looking?"

"Liv!"

"I'm just saying," Liv grinned, "for someone who claims to be all about 'traditional family values,' his DMs tell a different story."

"I don't want to know," I said firmly, though part of me was curious. "Besides, his mother's doing enough damage without your help."

"True," Liv conceded. "Though watching him try to backtrack on his more extreme positions has been entertaining. Amazing what a little maternal disapproval can do."

A crash from the living room interrupted us, followed by Killy's immediate, "Need reorganize!"

"We should probably check on them," I started to rise, but Liv waved me off.

"J's got it. Besides, Rose probably just knocked over their fairy kingdom again. It happens at least twice a day."

Sure enough, I could hear Jeremy's voice calmly helping them rebuild whatever had fallen. And more importantly, Tiffy wasn't crying or scared - just giggling at whatever solution Killy was proposing.

"She's really flourishing here," Liv observed softly.

I nodded. "She is. Did great in school last year, actually made friends. She's really excited that we're living closer to Penny now... though I don't think she realizes Scotland isn't exactly next door to Ireland."

Liv laughed. "Speaking of Penny, Shay was here earlier. Said Kenzie's doing well at the Cantina."

I sighed heavily. "I wouldn't know. Kenzie's still avoiding me. I really messed that relationship up."

"Oh Love," Liv's voice was gentle. "You just tried to hang on too tight. You're her cousin, not her mum... and even if you were... Kenzie can't be Kara 2.0, and you were trying to force her to be. She needs to find out who she is."

"I get that now," I admitted. "I just wanted her to be happy and successful."

"And she will be," Liv said firmly. "But her way, not yours."

"At least she's talking to Hal," I said quietly. "And she adores Tiffy."

"Of course she does. That's her sister," Liv pointed out. "And Tiffy's so happy Penny is closer. Even if she doesn't quite understand it's not as close as she thinks."

"Those two are inseparable when they're together," I smiled, remembering how excited Tiffy had been during Penny's last visit. "It's good for her to have a friend her own age who understands... everything."

"Six-year-olds are resilient," Liv said softly. "Look at how well they're both doing now."

Another crash from the living room, followed by Jeremy's laugh. "Fairy kingdom reconstruction attempt number two?" I guessed.

"More like number twenty," Liv grinned. "But at least they're persistent."

"Speaking of persistence, Addie finally agreed to let Penny come stay for a couple weeks," I smiled. "Hal's going next weekend with Shay to pick her up. She'll stay with Shay for a few days, but mostly with us. Tiffany hasn't stopped talking about it since we told her."

"Oh, lovely!" Liv's eyes lit up. "It'll be good for Rose too - having another friend who doesn't like loud noises. Teaching her empathy... and helping with the overall volume of my house."

"Killy's doing a good job teaching Rose about volume control," I observed, hearing him gently remind his sister again about 'inside fairy voice.'

"He's such a protective little brother," Liv smiled proudly. "Even if it's only by two minutes."

A small figure appeared in the doorway - Tiffany clutching Kayla. "Mommy?"

"You okay, baby girl?"

She nodded. "Rose wants to know if we can have dinner soon."

"Need proper dinner time," Killy appeared behind her, checking his Mario watch with careful precision.

"I can make something," Jeremy called from the living room.

"Actually," Liv grinned, "I heard Trevor's testing new kids' menu items at the Cantina today. Could be fun to help him with his research..."

"And maybe see how Kenzie's doing?" I asked hopefully.

"One step at a time," Liv reminded me gently. "But yes, maybe."

I smiled, pulling out my phone. "Okay, let me text Hal."

"I can see if Mich wants to join us too," Jeremy added. "She's leaving for Hawaii tomorrow. Would be nice to see her before she goes."

Liv laughed. "Well then we may as well invite Amber too. Have a full family dinner."

"Not full," I teased. "You didn't mention James or Pete."

"Pete and Gina have plans tonight," Liv sighed, "and I need a break from James."

"James still being... James about the baby situation?" I asked carefully.

"He's just..." Liv shook her head. "He has no idea how to handle it. And Áine deserves better than his panic attacks every time someone mentions the word 'father.'"

"At least he's trying now," Jeremy called from the living room. "Remember how he first reacted?"

"Need dinner plans," Killy interrupted firmly, still checking his watch.

"Right, sorry love," Liv started texting. "I'll message the group chat..."

"CANTINA TIME!" Rose announced excitedly, then immediately covered her mouth. "Sorry Tiffy."

I watched my daughter smile at Rose's consideration, Kayla clutched a little less tightly than before. These moments - watching her feel safe, protected, understood - made everything worth it. Even dealing with Grayson's politics.

"Fionn's working tonight," Liv mentioned as she typed. "So the food will be perfect."

Michelle

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"Billy, I'm telling you, you're going to LOVE the Cantina," I gushed as we drove. "My friend Trevor owns it. He's a culinary visionary - has a Michelin star and everything." Mom was following in her car with the older girls while Billy rode with Hunter, Tomi, and me.

"She's dramatic, but she's also right," Hunter conceded. "Trev is talented."

"And you'll get to meet everyone. If you need anything while we're gone, they've got your back."

"You talk about Jeremy so much I feel like I know him already," Billy laughed.

"He's my best friend," I said simply. "Honestly, the best friend anyone could ask for."

The VIP room was already full when we arrived - the Jordans, O'Sullivans, O'Briens, and Mia all settled in.

"Okay, I'm here, let the festivities begin!" I announced, arms raised dramatically.

Mia rolled her eyes. "Oh, were you missing? Didn't notice."

"I did - it was actually bearable for once," Amber added.

"You guys know you're gonna miss me while I'm away," I said, dropping into a chair.

"As much as I miss laryngitis," Mia countered.

"Whatever. Oh, guys, this is my good friend Billy Cranston," I started the introductions. "Billy, this is Jeremy O'Brien, his wife Livvie and their twins Rose and Killy, Kara and Hal Jordan, their kids Kira, Kora, and Tiffy, Amber O'Sullivan, Trevor's wife, their daughter Rachel, and Trev's mom Niamh. And I think you know Mia."

Billy nodded politely. "We've met briefly. Everyone else, it's so nice to finally meet you all. Michelle has spoken highly of you."

"Nice to finally meet you too, mate," Jeremy smiled. "Mich has told me about you as well."

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

"In the kitchen with Fionn," Amber replied. "They're finalizing the new kids' menu items before bringing them out."

"And Kenzie's helping," Kara added softly, trying to sound casual.

"Speaking of tech wizards," Billy turned to Liv, "Michelle tells me you're quite the cyber security expert?"

"Oh no," I groaned. "Don't get them started on tech talk..."

"Too late," Jeremy grinned as his wife and Billy immediately launched into a discussion about encryption protocols and coding frameworks.

"Need proper testing order," Killy announced seriously as Fionn appeared with the first round of dishes.

"Of course, little man," Fionn smiled. "Everything's properly sequenced."

I watched Billy take in our chaotic family dynamic - Rose explaining fairy principles to Tiffy in her careful 'quiet voice,' Mia and Amber trading snark, Hunter helping Tomi with her high chair while Mom fussed over Rachel. This was what he was protecting while we were away.

"Your security systems are impressive," Billy was telling Liv. "The way you've integrated multiple layers of..."

"Enough shop talk," Trevor appeared with more plates. "Time to test these new recipes. Starting with the mini shepherd's pie bites."

"Which need to be tested in proper order," Killy reminded everyone solemnly.

"Of course, mo stór," Trevor winked. "Everything's properly sequenced."

I watched Billy taking everything in - this chosen family we'd built, all of them completely unaware of the real reason he was here. They just knew him as my old high school friend, coming to dog-sit while we were in Hawaii. They didn't know about the command center being built under our house, the security measures being put in place to protect my family while I was filming in Nashville.

"They're amazing," I whispered to him, knowing he'd understand I meant more than just their cooking opinions.

"I can see why you want to protect them," he murmured back, his eyes on Tomi in her high chair, her bracelets safely in place.

"I finally have something real here," I whispered. "I can't let anything happen to any of them. I need your help to keep them all safe."

Billy nodded subtly. "I promise, Michelle. I'll do everything I can."

"Oh, I saw Grayson made headlines today," Amber changed subjects, grinning.

Kara laughed. "Yes, he did."

"And I had nothing to do with it this time!" Liv announced proudly.

"You best not have, Love. Don't need you on his radar anymore than you already are," Jeremy warned.

Liv rolled her eyes. "He's got nothing on me."

"I think he has bigger issues," Amber smirked. "His mommy is mad at him for betraying dear leader."

"Couldn't have happened to a nicer guy," Hunter muttered.

"At least his texts were large enough for everyone to read," Liv added innocently.

"Livvie..." Jeremy started.

"What? I'm just saying, for someone so concerned about security, you'd think he'd know better."

"Speaking of security," Billy jumped in smoothly, "Michelle mentioned you do consulting work?"

I shot him a grateful look as Liv launched into an explanation of her latest projects, successfully diverting the conversation away from whatever she might or might not have done regarding Grayson's texts.

"Da!" Rose called out, still maintaining her 'quiet fairy voice' for Tiffany's sake. "Need more shepherd's pie!"

"Need proper portions," Killy added seriously.

"Grayson isn't too smart, you see," Hal said, continuing his conversation with Liv.

"Harold!" Kara scolded, gesturing toward Kira and Kora.

Kora rolled her eyes. "It's okay, Mom. We know who our birth father is now. He's a moron and a jackass."

"Kora Lee, language!" Kara warned.

"What? That's what Dad calls him," Kora defended.

Kara shot Hal a look.

"Thanks kid... don't need your help," Hal mumbled.

"Even Kira sees it now," Kora continued.

Kira nodded quietly. "I don't like it, but yeah, I see him for who he is now."

"See? All good," Hal defended weakly.

"Rachel's nails look amazing," Liv noticed as she took the baby from Mom, clearly trying to change the subject.

"Thanks!" Amber smiled, genuine pride in her voice. "I painted them."

"I voted for black," Mia added. "My goddaughter needs some style early."

"Which is exactly why Amber didn't take your advice," I countered.

"Black is a perfectly acceptable nail color," Mia defended.

"For a three-month-old?" Amber raised an eyebrow.

"The purple sparkles were definitely the right choice," Niamh interjected diplomatically. "Though I still say we should have done green..."

"Mam, not everything has to be Irish flag colors," Trevor called from where he was emerging with more food.

"Says the man who painted the Cantina's accent wall green," Amber teased.

"That's different, mo ghrá. That's branding."

I caught Billy hiding a smile behind his water glass, watching our family dynamics unfold. The way Kara subtly checked on her girls after the Grayson discussion, how Liv kept one eye on Rose's volume level while debating nail polish colors, the easy way we all flowed between serious topics and silly ones.

As the evening wound down, I watched my family - chosen and blood - saying their goodbyes. Promises to text while we were in Hawaii, reminders about upcoming plans, hugs that lingered a little longer than usual.

"Text me when you land," Jeremy insisted, pulling me into one of his bear hugs.

"Take care of Billy," I told him. "Make sure he doesn't work too hard on his dog sitting duties."

"We've got everything handled here," Liv assured me, while Rose demonstrated her 'goodbye fairy dance' for Tomi.

I caught Billy's eye as we gathered our things. He understood now, I could tell - exactly what we were protecting, why the command center was so crucial. This wasn't just about keeping my family safe anymore. It was about protecting all of them, this beautiful chaos we'd built together.

Even if most of them had no idea what they needed protection from.







"Hawaiian Harmony"

We'd arrived in Honolulu the day before. As much as I was looking forward to the family vacation part of this trip, work came first. With the show just over twenty-four hours away, I had sound check and rehearsal to complete. Hunter had taken the girls to the beach, and Dot was spending time with her kids, but Jon had insisted on coming to sound check. He hadn't been able to perform in months due to his surgery, and I suspected he needed a taste of it again, even secondhand.

Jon and I arrived at the venue, and I scoped out the dressing room while waiting for stage call to rehearse.

"Like old times... you and me... backstage," Jon smirked.

I nodded. "Yeah. Some things never change. You miss it, don't you?"

Jon's expression fell. "Touring? More than I can possibly put into words."

"Any chance you'll get another tour in?" I asked carefully.

"I'm still hopeful. Doctors aren't sure yet, but I refuse to give up. I need it, Mich. I need to be out there."

My heart ached for him. I understood completely - when this was your life, the stage was home and putting on a show was as essential as breathing. To not be able to perform... it had to feel like suffocating.

"MICHELLE!" My stage manager's voice carried from the hall. "We're ready for you!"

"Coming!" I called back, then turned to Jon. "Want to watch from the booth?"

"If you don't mind," he smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes.

The stage felt alive under my feet - it always did, no matter the venue. As the band started running through the setlist, I caught Jon in the sound booth, that familiar look of longing on his face. He'd given me my first real taste of this life, taught me how to command a stage when I was barely a teenager. Now here we were, decades later, roles reversed.

"Can we run through 'Moonlight' again?" I asked the band. "Something's not quite hitting right in the bridge."

Jon leaned forward in his seat - he'd always had an ear for arrangements. Some things really didn't change.

"Try bringing the guitars down during the second verse," he suggested through the booth mic. "Let your voice carry it."

I nodded, "He's right. From the top."

The band adjusted, and this time the arrangement clicked perfectly. Jon had always known how to make my voice sound its best - one of the many things that had drawn me to him all those years ago.

"Much better," he called through the mic. "Though your pitch dropped slightly on the last chorus."

"Still trying to be my vocal coach after all these years?" I teased.

"Old habits," he shrugged, but I caught that familiar pride in his eyes. The same look he'd had the first time he heard me sing, back when I was just a kid.

"Michelle," my stage manager appeared. "Your stylist is here for the final fitting."

"Right," I nodded. "Jon, you good here?"

"Go," he waved me off. "I'll keep working with the band on that bridge. If that's okay with everyone?"

The band members all nodded - they knew who he was, what he could bring to an arrangement. Even sidelined, Jon could never really stay away from the music.

Lydia had outdone herself with the dress she'd sent - elegant enough for any red carpet, but with an island flair perfect for Hawaii. It fit like a dream, as her designs always did. After going over hair and makeup plans with the stylist, I headed back for a full show run-through.

I switched up the setlist slightly - a trick I'd learned from Jon years ago. It kept the show fresh for me and kept the audience guessing. Every song, every mark, every move felt natural. This was my element, my home. My near-perfect pitch, a blessing I never took for granted, made everything flow seamlessly.

When I finished, Jon nodded from the booth. "Fantastic, as always." "Thanks for the help with the arrangements," I said as we gathered our things. "You've still got the best ear in the business."

"You will sing again," I said sincerely as we headed to the car. "If anyone can beat the odds, it's you."

The drive back was comfortable - it always was with Jon, even after everything. Some rhythms never really changed.

"So, series television," he mused. "Going back to your roots?"

I smiled. "In a manner of speaking... though '911: Nashville' is a far cry from sitcoms."

"You'll be great. You've grown into an incredible actress." He glanced at me. "Hell, watching you is why I started acting in the first place."

"Seriously? How come you didn't stick with it? You were good."

"Figured out it's not as easy as you make it look," he chuckled. "That and music is my domain. It's where I belong. Not all of us can be Michelle Morris and rock both stage and screen equally."

"I am multi-talented," I agreed, noticing Thara shifting in her backpack.

"You take that cat everywhere?"

"If I can, I do. She's my companion."

"Does she... talk?" Jon asked carefully.

I laughed. "No. Only Mia, Mina, and Serena have cats that talk. Thara's just a cat."

"Speaking of Mia," his tone shifted. "I heard she cancelled some tour dates. Is she okay? I still don't understand how she became Arissa's godmother..."

I sighed. "My relationship with Mia is complicated on a good day. Can't say much about her tour except... there's some Sailor stuff happening. Stuff I know you'd rather not know about."

The disapproval was clear on his face. "I thought you retired."

"Hey, I tried. I always try. I want to. But it's a life sentence," I defended. "If there's a threat, I have to step up. I can't just let the world fall."

"What is it this time?" he asked reluctantly.

"I thought you didn't want to know these things."

"I asked."

"Fair," I conceded, explaining about the Death Ranger situation.

"So an evil Hunter from another universe wants Mia dead and you as his replacement Michelle?"

"That's about the size of it."

"You're right. I didn't want to know."

I shrugged, "You asked. And now you know why I needed this vacation," I said as we pulled into the hotel lot.

"Does Hunter know you're telling me all this?"

"Hunter knows you're one of the few people who know both sides of my life. Even if you hate that side."

"I don't hate it," Jon corrected carefully. "I hate what it does to you. The danger it puts you in. The way it follows you no matter how many times you try to walk away."

"Like music follows you?" I couldn't help but point out.

"That's different-"

"Is it?" I challenged. "Some things are just part of who we are, Jon. Being a Sailor Soldier, being a Ranger... it's as much a part of me as performing is."

He was quiet for a moment. "Just... be careful, okay? Evil alternate universe husband sounds like a whole new level of complicated."

"Speaking of husbands," I spotted Hunter waiting in the lobby. "Ready to play nice?"

Jon's expression said exactly what he thought about that.

"How was rehearsal?" Hunter asked as we approached, his arm sliding around my waist in a way that wasn't entirely casual.

"Good," I leaned into him. "Jon helped with some arrangements."

"I'm sure he did," Hunter's voice was perfectly polite, but I felt his grip tighten slightly.

"The girls settled?" I asked quickly.

"Arisa's up in the room working on some music. Harley's..." he hesitated.

"Still sulking about Jake and Millie?"

"Dot took her shopping," Hunter said. "Trying to distract her."

"And Tomi?"

"With your mom at the pool. Those bracelets are waterproof, right?"

I caught Jon shifting uncomfortably at the mention of Tomi's power dampeners. Another part of my life he'd rather not think about.

"I should go check on Steph and Jesse," he said. "See you all at dinner?"

"If you can behave," Hunter muttered under his breath as Jon walked away.

"Hunter," I sighed once Jon was out of earshot.

"What? I'm being civil."

"Barely." I turned to face him. "You know there's nothing-"

"I know," he cut me off. "I trust you completely. It's him I don't trust. The way he still looks at you..."

"Like someone who's known me most of my life?" I challenged. "He's married, I'm married, we're all adults now."

"Adults who share a wall," Hunter's voice dropped lower, something dangerous flickering in his eyes. "Speaking of which..."

"Don't you dare," but I was already fighting a smile.

"Don't I dare what, Mich?" His hands settled on my hips. "Make sure our neighbor knows exactly how happy my wife is?"

"You're impossible," I laughed, but then caught sight of Mom and Tomi coming in from the pool. "And I have mom duties."

"Later then," he promised, his voice carrying heat that had nothing to do with the Hawaiian sun.

"Ma Ma Ma" Tomi reached for me from Mom's arms, her bracelets glinting in the lobby lights.

"There's my baby girl," I scooped her up, feeling Hunter's hand settle protectively on my lower back. "Did you have fun in the pool?"

"She's a natural water baby," Mom beamed. "Though she kept trying to grab at those bracelets."

"They probably feel weird when they're wet," Hunter covered smoothly. "Maybe we should take her up for a nap?"

"Good idea," I agreed. "Thanks for watching her, Mom."

"Of course. Though you might want to check on Arissa - she was working on something in her room earlier. Sounded... intense."

I caught Hunter's concerned look. Arissa's music often reflected her emotions, and lately...

"I'll go," he offered. "You get Tomi settled."

As we headed for the elevator, I saw Jon watching us from across the lobby. The look on his face was complicated - part longing, part resignation, part something else I couldn't quite name.

Hunter's hand tightened on my back again.

Our suite felt more like a luxury apartment - five bedrooms giving Mom and each of the girls their own space. While Hunter went to check on Arissa, I took Tomi to her room where we'd set up the rental crib.

I carefully stripped off her wet swimsuit and diaper, taking extra care with her bracelets. After drying her completely, I secured the bracelets back in place before putting on a fresh diaper and light clothes suitable for a Hawaiian afternoon nap.

"Oh my sweet little love," I cooed as I dressed her, my heart already aching. "I don't know how I'm going to handle working so far away for so long. I'm going to miss you."

She answered in perfect baby babble.

"Oh, I know. I love you too, sweet girl. And now, naptime," I settled into the rocking chair with her, starting the lullaby that always worked.

As Tomi drifted off, I heard the faint sound of Arissa's keyboard from down the hall, mixed with her voice. The melody was haunting - something about shadows and secrets. Her music had taken on a darker edge since the Emperor's appearance.

I carefully laid Tomi in her crib, making sure her bracelets were secure but comfortable.

Hunter appeared in the doorway as I was setting up the baby monitor. "Arisa's okay," he said quietly. "Working on a new song. Something about facing your demons."

"At least she's processing it through music."

"Better than Harley's method of processing," he agreed, then tensed slightly at voices in the hallway - Jake and Millie returning from surfing.

"Hunter..."

"I know, I know. He's not his father. But Mich..." He glanced at our sleeping daughter. "I know you remember what it was like, being that young and thinking an older man's attention meant something special."

"Jake isn't giving her that kind of attention," I reminded him gently.

"No," he agreed. "But she wants him to. Just like you wanted..."

He didn't finish the sentence. He didn't have to.

I sighed. "Jake sees Harley the way Jon should have seen me back then... as a kid. And I do think it's good she has someone to connect with who understands what it's like being the child of a celebrity. It's a different kind of life. You're not famous but your parent is, so you sort of are, but not really. It's complicated."

"I get that," Hunter ran a hand through his hair. "But why did it have to be him of all people? He looks just like Jon did at that age, and Harley's looking more like you every day."

"I'm sorry your son has her first crush," I said carefully, "but like it or not, she is a girl - and almost a teenage one at that."

"Shut your mouth," Hunter pressed a hand to his chest in mock horror. "Don't talk about my son that way."

I laughed as we left Tomi's room, gently closing the door. "Harley will always be a tomboy in some ways, but she is becoming a young woman."

Hunter sighed heavily. "I know. And I hate it."

Arisa's music had shifted to something softer - still intense, but less dark. At least one of our daughters was processing things in a healthy way.

"Speaking of walls," Hunter's voice dropped lower, his hands finding my hips again. "We should probably figure out exactly where our room connects to theirs. For later."

"You're terrible," but I was already smiling.

"No, I'm strategic," he smirked. "Very, very strategic."

A door opened down the hall - Jake and Millie's voices carrying as they headed to the pool. Hunter tensed slightly, then seemed to make a decision.

"You look exhausted. You worked hard this morning. Go take a nap before dinner," Hunter said.

"Join me?" I asked.

He smiled, "I can do that."

We went to our room and got in bed. Hunter was right. Between traveling, waking up early, and rehearsal, I was actually pretty tired. A nap sounded good.

I curled into Hunter's side as we settled onto the bed, his steady heartbeat already lulling me toward sleep. The distant sound of Arissa's music mixed with the ocean breeze through our window - a perfect Hawaiian lullaby.

"Set an alarm?" I mumbled against his chest. "Don't want to miss dinner."

"Already done," he assured me, his fingers running through my hair. "Though knowing our family, someone will come knocking long before then."

He was probably right. Between Mom's planning, the girls' drama, and Jon's family's schedules, quiet moments like this were rare. But right now, safe in my husband's arms with our baby sleeping nearby and our older girls finding their ways... everything felt peaceful.

Several hours later, I woke to baby babbles and Tomi crawling over me. Hunter had put her in bed as the world's cutest alarm clock.

"Ma ma ma ma ma..." Tomi's little voice was insistent.

I smiled sleepily, pulling her into my arms. "Hi baby."

"Tell Mommy it's time to get ready for dinner," Hunter prompted from beside us, his hand warm on my side.

"Tell Daddy I'm working on it," I mumbled into Tomi's hair.



She responded with another string of happy babbles.

"Seriously though, time to get up. I made you some coffee," Hunter said.

"Oh my god, you're the best," I managed, pulling myself upright with Tomi balanced on my hip. I spotted Thara curled regally on a pillow by the window, soaking up the Hawaiian sun. "If I'm up, so are you. Come on."

My cat's expression as I scooped her up with my free arm made it clear exactly what she thought about having her nap interrupted.

"Everyone else up?" I asked, gratefully accepting the coffee Hunter handed me.

"Arisa's getting ready. Harley's back from shopping with Dot - she actually seems in better spirits. Mom's been planning dinner seating arrangements for the last hour."

I groaned. "Please tell me she's not trying to create drama."

"Actually, she's being strategic. Keeping Jake and Millie far from Harley, making sure you and Jon aren't directly across from each other..."

"Making sure you and Jon are as far apart as possible?" I guessed.

"That too," he smiled.

Thara made her displeasure known as I set her down, immediately heading for her favorite spot by the window. Tomi reached for her, but I adjusted her grip. "No pulling Thara's tail, baby girl. She's grumpy enough already."

"Mom does realize no one is going to follow a seating chart?" I asked between sips of coffee.

"I think she's hoping," Hunter smiled.

"If it makes her feel better," I shrugged.

After finishing my coffee, I started getting ready for dinner. The light purple wrap dress was perfect - the dark purple flowers adding just enough contrast, the fabric flowing in a way that was both elegant and island-appropriate. It hugged every curve before tying behind my neck, exactly the right balance of dressy and casual for a nice Hawaiian dinner.

The girls had opted for wrap skirts over their bikinis, clearly hoping for a night swim after dinner. Hunter looked devastating in black cargo shorts and a crimson button-up that made me temporarily reconsider our dinner plans.

"Tomi needs something nice too," Mom appeared in our doorway, already dressed in a flowing tropical print dress. "I bought her the cutest little Hawaiian dress today..."

"Did you buy the whole island for my children?" I asked, though I already knew the answer. Being a grandmother had only amplified Mom's shopping tendencies.

"Just the cute parts," she smiled, producing a tiny white dress with purple hibiscus flowers. "See? It matches yours!"

"Of course it does," but I was already smiling as we dressed Tomi. The dress was adorable, and watching Mom fuss over her granddaughter's first Hawaiian outfit... some battles weren't worth fighting.

"Jon's family is already heading down," Hunter said, checking his phone. "We should probably..."

"Start managing expectations?" I finished. "Make sure everyone remembers this is supposed to be a nice family dinner?"

"I was going to say get a good table before Mom's seating chart becomes irrelevant, but yeah, that too."

The paparazzi were already staked out at the restaurant entrance - just another day in my life. As we were led to our private area, Mom's carefully planned seating arrangement immediately dissolved. Harley managed to claim the seat next to Jake so he was between her and Millie, Arissa gravitated toward Steph and her husband, and somehow Jon and Dot ended up directly across from Hunter and me, with Mom sitting diagonal from Jon.

"Lea, you look lovely tonight," Jon offered, ever the charmer.

"Oh Jon," Mom's voice carried that perfect blend of politeness and ice that only she could manage. "You always did try to be charming."

"Try? I succeeded often enough as I recall."

"With teenagers perhaps," Mom's smile was sharp. "Though I suppose that was your specialty."

Before Hunter could react, Tomi decided to share her cheerios with the table by throwing them.

"No throwing, baby girl," I caught her hand gently.

"She's getting so big," Dot smiled, clearly trying to ease the tension. "Seventeen months already..."

"Going on seventeen years with that attitude," Hunter added proudly as Tomi tried to launch another cheerio.

"Well," Jon's eyes met Mom's, "she comes by that naturally. Her mother was quite the handful at that age."

"Among other ages," Mom's voice could have frozen Hawaii. "Though some of us actually learned to grow up."

I caught Dot hiding a smile behind her menu while Hunter's hand found my knee under the table.

"Speaking of growing up," Dot intervened smoothly, "Jesse's vineyard just won another award."

"That's wonderful," Mom's tone warmed considerably. She'd always had a soft spot for Jon's kids, especially after I'd been their stepmom. "He always did have excellent taste."

"Takes after his mother," Jon smiled at Dot, and I caught something genuine in his expression. Maybe he really had changed.

Hunter's thumb traced circles on my knee, though whether he was trying to comfort me or distract himself from Jon's presence, I wasn't sure.

Down the table, I heard Harley's laugh - that particular one she used when trying to impress someone. Jake seemed oblivious, deep in conversation with Millie about their surfing adventures.

"The waves here are incredible," Jake was saying. "We should all go out tomorrow after Michelle's concert."

"Some of us actually know how to surf," Hunter muttered under his breath, just loud enough for Jon to hear.

"Like mother, like daughter," Dot said, her tone striving for light but carrying an undercurrent of old pain. The implication was clear - she saw Harley's crush on Jake and remembered another young girl who'd disrupted her marriage.

"Harley's nothing like I was," I said quietly, meeting Dot's eyes. "And Jake's nothing like Jon was."

Mom cleared her throat. "The fish here is supposed to be excellent."

"It is," Hunter jumped in, his hand squeezing my knee supportively. "Trevor recommended the mahi-mahi specifically."

I caught Millie watching our exchange with confusion - clearly, there were parts of the family history she didn't know. Just as well.

We ordered our food and kept the conversation as light as possible, though the underlying tensions remained just below the surface.

"Mom!" Harley's voice carried from the other end of the table. "Jake said he would give me surfing lessons tomorrow if it's okay with you and Dad."

I bit back a smile, shaking my head. "Of course, Harley."

"But Harley," Hunter's voice carried that particular dad tone that meant he was about to embarrass her, "didn't Aunt Tori teach you to surf? You're pretty good at it."

"DAD!" Harley's face flushed. "That was a long time ago! I was little. I forgot! I need to learn again."

"Oh really?" Arissa grinned, clearly aware of what she was doing but too kind to call her out. "Because you taught me how to surf in Australia last summer."

"That was... different," Harley mumbled while Millie tried to hide her smile.

"Speaking of surfing," Jon cut in, "remember that time in Hawaii when-"

"When Michelle nearly drowned because someone, who shouldn't have even been on set, thought it was a good idea to take a thirteen-year-old out past the break line?" Mom interrupted sharply.

The temperature at our end of the table dropped several degrees. Hunter's hand tightened on my knee.

"Actually," I said carefully, "I think he was going to mention the time Tori taught me to surf properly. At the appropriate depth. With proper supervision."

Dot shot Jon a warning look before he could respond.

"The paparazzi are getting bolder," Romeo noted, nodding toward the windows where camera flashes were becoming more frequent. "They're really milking the 'Michelle and Jon reunited in Hawaii' angle."

"Nothing sells like old scandal," I sighed, adjusting Tomi in her high chair. "Even if it's ancient history."

"Speaking of history," Steph smiled, clearly trying to lighten the mood, "remember when Michelle used to do my hair before school? Those chunky highlights were everything in the early 2000s."

"You were the most stylish kid in school," I smiled back, grateful for the shift.

"And now she's doing Tomi's hair," Dot added softly. Something in her tone made me look up - there was understanding there, maybe even forgiveness.

"When Tomi lets anyone near her hair," Hunter chuckled. "She's got her mother's independence."

"And her father's stubbornness," I countered, just as Tomi decided to demonstrate both traits by launching her sippy cup across the table.

"Marshmallow, you're going to want your drink," Arissa retrieved the cup, ever the protective big sister.

"I have to say Michelle," Dot's voice was thoughtful, "I never imagined you as a mom. Then again, I guess I'll always see you as the little girl with the big voice."

"Yeah, I'm not twelve anymore," I met her eyes steadily. "I grew up... have a family of my own... one I want to protect now. I understand things I never did at twelve."

Dot nodded slowly, the weight of unsaid things hanging between us. She understood what I was really saying - about choices, about consequences, about protecting our children from the mistakes we'd made.

"Speaking of tomorrow," Jake said, clearly trying to ease the tension, "what time's the concert, Mich?"

"Eight," I smiled gratefully at the subject change. "Though I need to be there by six for final prep."

"We have a sky box at the venue," Hunter added. "Away from the general admission crowd."

"And the press," Mom noted, eyeing the persistent paparazzi through the windows.

"Though they're getting quite creative with their long-range lenses," Jon observed, nodding toward another flash.

"They'll have better luck tomorrow," I sighed. "At least then they'll be getting shots of me actually performing instead of just trying to create drama out of a family dinner."

Tomi chose that moment to try launching her cup again, but Arissa caught it mid-flight. "Nice try, Marshmallow."

"Tomorrow night's going to be incredible," Dot said, clearly trying to keep conversation neutral. "The venue looks amazing from what we saw driving past."

"I still remember the first time I saw you perform," Jon said quietly. "You were already a star then."

The table's atmosphere shifted slightly at the memory - I'd been far too young when Jon first saw me on stage.

"The sound check went well today," I redirected, just as Tomi made another attempt at cup launching.

Arissa caught it mid-flight again. "Marshmallow, what did we say about throwing things?"

After dinner, we walked straight into the waiting paparazzi mob. The headlines tomorrow were going to be ridiculous no matter what, so...

"Hey boys!" I called out, dramatically throwing an arm around Jon while pulling Hunter closer with my other hand. "Getting all the shots you need of my scandalous harem? Make sure you get my good side - though let's be real, they're all good."

Hunter tried not to laugh while Jon looked caught between amusement and alarm. Mom's eye roll was practically audible.

"Michelle!" One photographer called out. "Any comment on-"

"On my obviously torrid love triangle? Or is that a rectangle? Did you get quotes from my boyfriend in Ireland? You all do so love dragging him into the story. Though feel free to make up whatever you want - you usually do anyway!"

"Is it true that-" another reporter started.

"That Jeremy and I are planning to run away together? God, I hope Liv and Hunter know about that plan," I grinned. "Though you might want to update your storyline - according to last week's tabloids, I'm actually having Trevor's baby. Which will be quite the surprise to Amber."

Hunter's shoulders were shaking with suppressed laughter while Jon looked increasingly bewildered by my performance.

"Just remember," I called over my shoulder as we headed for the cars, "whatever story you run, make sure you mention my concert tomorrow night. Gotta get those ticket sales!"

"You do realize," Mom sighed once we were safely away from the cameras, "that you're only encouraging them."

"Please," I adjusted Tomi on my hip. "They're going to write whatever they want anyway. Might as well give them a show."

"Always did know how to work a crowd," Jon muttered, though I caught his smile.

"Though seriously," I added as we reached the hotel entrance, "if any of you see a headline about me and Jeremy, please send it to Liv. Her responses in the group chat are always epic."

"Alright," Dot intervened smoothly, "who's up for drinks by the pool?"

"Actually," Hunter's hand found my lower back, his voice dropping slightly, "I think we need to get Tomi to bed."

The look he gave me suggested bedtime routines weren't his only priority.

"I'll take her," Mom offered, clearly eager for an excuse to escape Jon's presence. "You guys go have fun."

"Thanks Mom!" I handed Tomi over, and we headed to the pool area.

Harley, Arissa, and Jon's adult children - though they'd always be kids to me - immediately hit the water. Hunter, Jon, Dot, and I claimed some lounge chairs and ordered drinks. I slipped off my wrap dress, revealing the purple bikini underneath, and settled into my chair with a strawberry daiquiri. The Hawaiian night air was perfect, even if the company was complicated.

I felt both men's eyes on me - Hunter's heated appreciation and Jon's quickly diverted glance that suggested he was trying very hard not to look. Dot's fingers tightened slightly around her mai tai.

"The kids seem to be having fun," I said lightly. The pool echoed with splashing and laughter.

"They always did love the water," Jon replied, his voice carefully neutral. I caught Hunter's subtle shift closer to my chair, his hand casually resting on my bare shoulder.

The tension thrummed under the surface of polite conversation - decades of history packed into every gesture, every careful glance, every deliberate touch. Hunter's thumb traced small circles on my skin, a clear message to everyone present.

"Beautiful night," Dot observed, though her eyes were on Jon watching Hunter's possessive display.

I took another sip of my daiquiri, well aware of how the movement drew attention to the curves my bikini barely contained. Hunter's hand tightened slightly on my shoulder.

"Mom!" Harley called from the pool. "Come in!"

"Maybe later, baby," I called back, though I knew exactly what I was doing as I stretched languidly in my chair. Hunter's hand slid from my shoulder down my arm, leaving goosebumps in its wake.

Jon suddenly became very interested in his drink, while Dot's expression suggested she was remembering every bikini-clad pool scene from our shared past. The air felt charged despite the casual setting.

"The waves should be perfect tomorrow," Jake said, pulling himself out of the pool. Water ran down his chest as he grabbed a towel, and I caught Harley trying not to stare.

"Speaking of tomorrow," Hunter's voice carried that edge that meant he was done sharing space with Jon, "we should probably turn in early. Sound check's at six."

His fingers traced up my spine as I sat up, the touch deliberate, claiming. Jon's jaw tightened slightly.

"Early night sounds good," I agreed, standing slowly. "Lots to do tomorrow."

"Yeah, we should all get some rest," Jon agreed.

We left the "kids" to their swimming, the four of us heading back inside. The elevator ride was thick with unspoken tension - Hunter's hand never leaving my lower back, Jon and Dot carefully avoiding eye contact with anyone.

Back in our room, I headed for the shower while Hunter moved around with suspicious purpose. When I emerged in my pajamas, I found him studying the wall we shared with Jon and Dot's room with entirely too much interest.

"Really?" I tried not to smile.

"Just making sure the acoustics are... optimal," he smirked, pulling me close. "For science, of course."



"Of course," I rolled my eyes, but his lips were already finding that spot on my neck that made thinking difficult. "You're terrible."

"No," his voice dropped lower, "I'm thorough."

His hands slid down my sides, pulling me closer. "You know," he murmured against my neck, "you looked absolutely incredible tonight."

"Did I?" I smiled, knowing exactly where this was going.

"Mmhmm," his lips traced my jaw. "Though I think Jon might have had trouble appreciating the view properly. Too busy trying not to get caught looking."

"Hunter..."

"What?" His innocent tone was betrayed by the way his hands were moving. "Just making observations. Scientific ones. About acoustics. And angles."

"You're ridiculous," but I was already melting into him.

"No," he pressed me gently against the shared wall. "I'm making a point."

And then his mouth was on mine, and any thoughts of Jon, or tomorrow's concert, or anything else disappeared entirely.

Clothes fell away as we lost ourselves in each other. I knew exactly what Hunter was trying to prove, but I couldn't bring myself to care - not when he was making me feel like this.

I tried to stay quiet, but when he found that particular spot... all control vanished.

"Oh god, Hunter!" The cry escaped before I could stop it.

Later, curled against his chest, I couldn't help but laugh softly. "Did you get what you wanted?"

"You screaming my name?" His satisfaction was evident in his voice. "I always want that."

"You're impossible," I traced patterns on his skin. "Though I suppose you made your point."

"Several points, actually," he pulled me closer. "Very thoroughly."

A comfortable silence fell, broken only by the distant sound of waves through our window. Tomorrow would bring its own challenges - the concert, more press, more complicated family dynamics. But right now, safe in my husband's arms...

"I love you," I murmured, already drifting toward sleep.

"Love you too, Mich," he kissed my hair. "Even if you did encourage the paparazzi tonight."

"Please, that was quality entertainment."

Hunter sighed contentedly and kissed my head as we drifted to sleep.

The next morning, Hunter and I met Jon and Dot for breakfast before I had to head to the venue. The moment we sat down, Jon's carefully averted gaze and slightly tense posture told me exactly what I'd suspected - Hunter's point had been very clearly received last night.

"Sleep well?" Hunter asked innocently, though his hand on my knee suggested nothing innocent about the question.

"The waves were quite loud," Dot offered diplomatically, though her pointed look at Jon said everything.

"Really?" I sipped my coffee. "I hardly noticed them over... other sounds."

Jon suddenly became very interested in the breakfast menu.

"What's wrong Jon?" Hunter prodded, his voice carrying that edge of satisfaction.

"Just... considering my options," Jon replied carefully, still not looking up.

"The walls are quite thin, aren't they?" Hunter's thumb traced circles on my knee. "Something to keep in mind."

"Hunter," I warned softly, though I couldn't help but smile. My husband had made his point - several times, actually - but there was such a thing as overkill.

"The waffles here are supposed to be excellent," Dot cut in smoothly, though her expression suggested she was caught between amusement and exasperation.

"They are," Hunter agreed. "Very... satisfying."

I kicked him under the table while Jon's knuckles whitened around his menu.

"Alright," Jon finally set down his menu, meeting Hunter's eyes. "You've made your point. Very... thoroughly."

"Have I?" Hunter's voice was deceptively light.

"She's your wife. I get it. Message received." Jon's jaw tightened slightly. "Though I'm not sure what exactly you're trying to prove here."

"Nothing that wasn't already obvious," Hunter's hand squeezed my knee. "Just making sure everyone's clear on the current situation."

"Trust me," Jon's voice carried an edge now, "I'm quite aware of who Michelle chose."

"Are you?" Hunter challenged. "Because sometimes your looks suggest-"

"Boys," I cut in firmly. "Enough. We're all adults here."

"Are we?" Dot muttered into her coffee.

"Look," Jon leaned forward slightly. "I know my history with Michelle is... complicated. But I'm not trying to-"

"To what?" Hunter's voice was dangerously calm. "To remind her of old times? To keep that connection?"

"Hunter," I warned quietly.

"No, let him finish," Jon's eyes narrowed. "Tell me exactly what you think I'm doing."

"I think you're having trouble accepting that she's actually happy without you."

"Boys," Dot's voice carried that particular tone that had managed four children. "This is neither the time nor the place."

She was right - the restaurant was starting to fill, and the last thing we needed was the press catching wind of this particular conversation.

"I have sound check in an hour anyway," I said, standing. "And this conversation is done."

Hunter and I walked to the waiting car in tense silence. The moment we were in the backseat, I turned to him.

"What the fuck was that?"

"He needed to hear it," Hunter's jaw was still tight.

"Hear what exactly? That you can make me scream your name? That I chose you? He knows all that, Hunter. He's known that for years."

"Has he? Because the way he looks at you sometimes..."

"Is with regret," I cut him off. "Regret for what he did when I was young. Regret for choices he made. But that's all it is."

"Mich-"

"No, listen to me. I love you. I chose you. I'm happy with you. And Jon knows that. So this macho display of dominance? It needs to stop."

Hunter was quiet for a moment, staring out the window. "You didn't see his face when you were in that bikini last night."

"Hunter..."

"Or the way he watches you with Tomi. Like he's imagining what could have been."

"Stop," I turned his face toward me. "What could have been doesn't matter. What is - this life, our family, us - that's what matters. And Jon's not a threat to that."

"I know," he sighed, catching my hand. "I know that. I just... seeing him with you, knowing what he did when you were so young..."

"And now look at me," I squeezed his hand. "All grown up, with a husband who apparently likes to torture my exes with his sexual prowess."

That got a small smile. "It was pretty impressive prowess."

"You're impossible," but I was already leaning in to kiss him.

I spent the rest of the ride curled into Hunter's side, his steady presence grounding me. When we pulled up to the venue, Holly was waiting - clipboard in hand, already in full manager mode.

"Hey Mich," she fell into step beside us as we headed toward the back entrance. "Full day ahead. Sound check first, then press conference at eleven. You've got the record store appearance at two, then a break before pre-show prep starts at six."

I nodded, shifting into professional mode. "Typical concert day. Let's do this."

"The press is already asking about last night's dinner," Holly warned as we walked through the backstage corridors. "Your little performance with Jon outside the restaurant is trending."

"Of course it is," I grinned. "Did they at least get my good side?"

"Michelle..." Holly's tone carried fond exasperation.

"What? If they're going to make up stories anyway, might as well give them quality material."

Hunter snorted behind me while Holly checked her tablet. "The band's ready when you are. And wardrobe wants to do a final fitting for tonight's costume changes."

"Any word from the network about Nashville?" I asked, following her into the main stage area.

"They loved the pilot footage," Holly continued. "Though they're asking about your availability for additional press..."

"One thing at a time," I surveyed the stage setup. "Let's get through tonight first."

Sound check was the easy part - muscle memory and professional instinct taking over as we fine-tuned every element. But as Holly ushered me toward the press conference, I could feel the energy shift. Between my theatrical display with Jon last night and the Backstreet Boys' Vegas residency opening tonight - with Howie- inevitable questions that would follow - I knew the vultures would be circling.

Good thing I'd had decades of practice handling them. Let them come - I was ready.

Holly led me into the conference room where the press was already assembled. I could practically feel the energy - they'd been waiting for this after last night's performance outside the restaurant.

"Good morning everyone," I smiled, settling into my chair. "I assume you all got my good side in those photos last night?"

A ripple of laughter - exactly what I wanted. Set the tone early.

"Michelle!" A reporter from People raised his hand. "Can you tell us about tonight's show?"

"Absolutely. We've put together something special for Hawaii - a mix of classics and new material. The venue's gorgeous, and the energy here is incredible."

"Daily Mail," a voice called out. "Speaking of energy, you and Jon seemed quite close last night..."

"Oh honey," I grinned, "if you think that was close, you should've seen the seating chart my mom tried to enforce at dinner. Though I have to say, your photographer's timing was impeccable - did you hire former paparazzi or actual ninjas?"

"TMZ," another reporter jumped in. "With BSB's Vegas residency opening tonight, and Millennium 2.0 dropping earlier this week, any comment on the timing of your Hawaii show?"

"Pure coincidence," I kept my tone light. "Though I wish them all the success in the world. Those guys worked hard on that album. It does take me back, as I'm sure it does all of you. I'll be enjoying it with the rest of the world."

"E! News here - sources say some of the new songs on Millennium 2.0 might be about-"

"Sources?" I raised an eyebrow. "Let me guess - unnamed ones? Look, I haven't heard the new songs album yet, but knowing those guys, every song will be incredible. Let's focus on that instead of playing guess-the-inspiration, shall we?"

"Entertainment Weekly," a familiar face I trusted. "Can you tell us anything about your role in '911: Nashville'?"

"Other than that my character has an amazing firefighter son?" I smiled. "You'll have to wait and see. Though I will say, the scripts are incredible, and the cast..." I shook my head appreciatively. "You're all in for something special."

"Us Weekly," another reporter stood. "Last night's dinner seemed like quite the family reunion. How do you manage to keep things civil with-"

"Civil?" I laughed. "Have you met my mother? Trust me, she keeps everyone in line. Though I have to say, watching her try to enforce a seating chart was entertainment all on its own."

"People Magazine," a voice I recognized. "Your concert tonight is completely sold out, even after the venue upgrade. What can fans expect?"

"Magic," I smiled genuinely. "We've put together something really special for Hawaii. The venue, the energy here... it's going to be incredible."

"Daily Mail - speaking of energy, sources say there was quite a bit of tension at dinner, especially between-"

"The only tension I noticed was when my youngest tried to launch her sippy cup across the table," I cut in smoothly. "Though I suppose that doesn't make for quite as exciting a headline, does it?"

"Page Six, is there any truth to the rumor you see Howie as 'the one that got away'?"

I sighed, looking directly at the reporter. "You all aren't gonna let that one go? Okay, look - did any of you date someone in your 20s and look back fondly but realize you're a different person in your 40s and that ex from your 20s seems like a lifetime ago and wouldn't fit who you are now? Then you get it. I adore Howie. He's a great guy, and I'm so happy to see his career success and I'm equally thrilled he has a loving marriage and two wonderful sons. I wish him happiness and hope he's as happy as I am with Hunter. We all have a past. We all just aren't asked to relive it constantly."

"Access Hollywood here - speaking of the past, with both BSB and you performing tonight, albeit in different cities, social media is buzzing about the 'Millennium era.' Any thoughts on revisiting that time period?"

"Y2K fashion was definitely something," I smiled. "Though I notice butterfly clips are making a comeback. Everything old is new again, right?"

"Daily Mail again - about last night's dinner, sources say-"

"Oh, are these the same sources that swore I was moving to Mars last month?" I cut in. "Or the ones convinced Jeremy and I are having secret rendezvous in Cork cafés? Your 'sources' need better fact-checkers."

"Entertainment Tonight - can you tell us anything about the setlist for tonight?"

"We've got some surprises planned. Hawaii deserves something special, and we're definitely delivering."

"Billboard - When can we expect a new album?"

I laughed. "Between filming a TV series and raising three girls? Let's just say I've got multiple albums in various stages of development. The music's coming - just don't ask me to commit to a timeline right now."

"The Boot here - your performance at the ACMs a couple months ago created quite a buzz. It seems country music is ready to welcome you back. How does that feel?"

I kept my expression neutral. "That performance was incredible - the energy in that room was magic. But look, I've never made music seeking anyone's approval. If country radio plays it, fantastic. If not? My fans know where to find me, and the music's not stopping either way."

"Sky News - There's speculation about Jessica Simpson writing songs about Hunter and attempting to reconnect. Any response?"

This time I didn't hide my eye roll. "I can't speak to anyone else's songwriting inspiration. And I certainly can't speak to whether Jess regrets letting Hunter go. What I can tell you is I'm secure enough in my marriage not to worry about song lyrics."

"Hollywood Reporter - with filming starting soon in Nashville, how are you planning to balance family life with your music career and now acting?"

"Very carefully," I smiled. "But seriously, we've got a good support system in place. The show's schedule actually allows for more stability than touring, and-"

"Daily Mail cutting in - speaking of family, how does Hunter feel about Jon being so present in your life?"

"How does my husband feel about my daughter's friend's father being at a family dinner?" I raised an eyebrow. "I think he managed to survive the trauma. Though if you're really concerned about family dynamics, I've got some great stories about Tomi's ongoing sippy cup rebellion."

"People Magazine - What attracted you to this role in '911: Nashville'?"

"The scripts are incredible, first of all. And getting to work with this cast..." I shook my head appreciatively. "Plus, filming on location in Nashville gives the show such authenticity. You can't fake that energy."

"TMZ - Back to Jon for a moment. Those photos from last night looked pretty cozy. Hunter seemed tense..."

"Did you actually see the photos, or are you just reading from someone else's narrative? Because I distinctly remember my husband laughing at my paparazzi performance."

"Star Magazine - Sources say Jessica's new single is about trying to win Hunter back..."

"Oh honey," I couldn't help but laugh. "If you're going to try to create drama, at least make it current. Jess had her chance. But please, keep writing songs. Lord knows I've made a career out of mining my past relationships."

"Daily Mail - Speaking of past relationships, Howie's recent interview suggested-"

"Let me stop you right there. Are we talking about an actual interview, or another one of your famous 'sources'? Because Howie and I actually do talk, and somehow these 'revelations' always seem to surprise both of us."

"US Weekly - But with both Jon and Howie's careers intersecting with yours this week-"

"Is there a question in there somewhere? Or are we just playing Six Degrees of Michelle's Exes?"

"Page Six - With all these complicated relationships, how do you manage to-"

"Keep everyone straight?" I grinned. "Easy. I just follow your relationship charts. Though you might want to update them - according to last week's coverage, I'm apparently having an affair with half of Ireland."

Holly stepped forward, signaling last question.



"People Magazine," a familiar voice called out. "Your show tonight is being called one of the most anticipated of the summer season. What can fans expect?"

I smiled genuinely, grateful to end on an actual professional note. "They can expect everything they've come to know from my shows, plus some surprises we've been working hard on. Hawaii deserves something special."

Standing to leave, I couldn't resist one final comment. "And for those still writing their relationship drama stories - try to keep up with which ex I'm supposedly pining for this week. It gets confusing when you all pick different ones."

"Enjoy the show?" I asked, accepting the coffee he held out.

"The Jessica questions were my favorite," he shook his head as we walked toward my dressing room. "Though I have to say, apparently I was 'tense' at dinner last night. Who knew?"

"Please, you were the picture of calm. Well, mostly." I nudged him playfully. "You know," I settled onto the couch, "for people so obsessed with my past relationships, they really missed the obvious story - my torrid affair with Jeremy. I'm disappointed in their investigative skills."

"Don't give them ideas," but he was laughing now. "Though I have to admit, watching you handle the Howie questions... you've gotten good at that."

"Years of practice," I sighed. "Though I could do without the constant rehashing of ancient history."

"Says the woman who gave them a show outside the restaurant last night."

"That," I pointed at him, "was quality entertainment. And you know it."

The rest of the day flowed much more naturally. The record store appearance was one of my favorite parts of any show day - just me and the fans, no agenda, no loaded questions. These were the people who'd stuck with me through every tabloid drama, every career shift, every reinvention.

Teenagers clutching vinyl records mixed with women my age who'd grown up with my music. A little girl, probably around seven, shyly asked if I'd sing something from her favorite movie soundtrack. A group of college students wanted to know about songwriting. This was the real stuff - the connections that mattered more than any headline or 'source' could touch.

Hunter watched from the corner, that soft smile on his face that always appeared when he saw me with fans. He knew this was my element - not the manufactured drama of press conferences, but these genuine moments with people who actually cared about the music.

"Can you sign this?" A woman about my age held out a worn copy of one of my early albums. "I've had this since I was fourteen. Your music got me through some really rough times."

These were the moments that made everything worth it. "What's your name?"

"Sarah. And this," she nudged a teenage girl forward, "is my daughter Emma. She grew up listening to you too."

I smiled at Emma. "Following in your mom's footsteps with good taste in music?"

"Actually," Emma grinned, "I found your stuff on my own before Mom told me she was a fan. Your new songs are incredible."

This continued for over an hour - each fan with their own story, their own connection to different parts of my career. No questions about exes or drama, just pure love of music.

"One more song before you go?" someone called out.

I glanced at Holly, who nodded. We had time.

"Any requests?"

The response was immediate and overwhelming - decades of songs called out at once. I caught Hunter's eye and smiled. This was what really mattered.

After the record store appearance, I finally had two blessed hours to decompress at the hotel before show prep. All I wanted was to hold my baby girl and just rest for a bit.

Mom had Tomi in the suite's living room, both of them sprawled on the floor with blocks scattered everywhere. My daughter's face lit up when she saw me, her little arms reaching up immediately.

"There's my sweet girl," I scooped her up, breathing in that perfect baby smell. "Were you good for Grandma?"

"She's been an angel," Mom smiled. "Though she did try to redecorate the room with her juice earlier."

"Of course she did," I settled onto the couch with Tomi in my lap. "She's developing quite the artistic vision."

"So, you and Hunter ready to play host in the sky box to Jon and his family tonight?" I asked my mom innocently.

The look she gave me could have frozen Hawaii. "Michelle Pauline, you know perfectly well I'm not thrilled about spending three hours in close quarters with that man."

"At least Hunter will be there to maintain peace," I offered, though we both knew that might not help matters.

"Your husband," Mom said carefully, "is many wonderful things. But expecting him to play gracious host to Jon..."

"Hey, he managed dinner last night."

"After which he apparently felt the need to make quite a statement about territory," she gave me a pointed look. "These walls aren't as thick as you might think."

I felt my face flush while Tomi chose that moment to offer her grandmother a block, completely oblivious to the tension.

"Just... try not to start any international incidents in my sky box?" I pleaded.

"No promises," Mom said flatly.

"Hunter has hosted him before. He did it at my last New Jersey concert," I reminded her.

Mom looked at me pointedly. "I don't know why he tolerates you forcing him to be friendly to that man."

"He's not forcing anything. He's being professional. And he knows Jake is Harley's friend." I adjusted Tomi as she tried to launch another block. "Besides, Hunter's secure enough in our marriage to handle a few hours with my ex."

"After last night's... demonstration, I'd say he's more than just 'handling' it," Mom muttered.

"Mother!"

"What? Like I said - these walls aren't soundproof."

I groaned, burying my face in Tomi's hair while Hunter, returning from ordering lunch, tried very hard to look like he hadn't heard any of this conversation.

"Food's on its way," Hunter announced, clearly eager to change the subject. "Though we might want to put Tomi down for a nap soon if we want any chance of her making it through the show tonight."

"Good luck with that," Mom smiled as our daughter launched another block with impressive accuracy. "She's been fighting sleep all day. I think she knows something exciting is happening."

"Speaking of excitement," Hunter settled into a chair, "Harley texted. Apparently Jake and Millie are taking her surfing after all."

"Of course they are," I sighed. "At least Arissa's with them."

"Keeping an eye on her sister or working on new music?" Mom asked knowingly.

"Probably both," I smiled, watching Tomi's eyes finally start to get heavy despite her best efforts.

"She's good at multitasking."

"Unlike some people," Mom gave me another pointed look, "she actually thinks things through."

"Really? We're doing this now?" daughter's ability to think before she acts."

"Mom," I shifted Tomi, who was finally drifting off despite her determination to stay awake, "can we not do the lecture thing right now? I have a show in a few hours."

"Fine," she conceded. "But speaking of the show, what time do you need me to bring Tomi to the venue?"

"Holly's arranged for a car to take you all over at seven," I said, grateful for the subject change. "The sky box has everything set up for her - playpen, supplies, sound-dampening headphones..."

"I should probably get her down properly," I stood carefully with my sleeping daughter. "I've got hair and makeup in an hour."

After getting Tomi settled in her crib, I managed a quick lunch and collapsed for twenty precious minutes of rest. Mom would bring all the kids at showtime, which meant Hunter could stay with me until he had to play host in the sky box. These pre-show moments with him always helped center me.

The arena was already buzzing with energy when we arrived. I settled into the makeup chair, ready to transform from mom-mode to showtime.

"The place is already packed," Holly reported, appearing with her ever-present tablet. "Social media's blowing up - apparently some fans spotted Jon and his family checking into the sky box early."

"Of course they did," I rolled my eyes while my makeup artist started work. "Heaven forbid we have one show without relationship drama trending."

"Speaking of drama," Hunter leaned against the doorframe, "Harley just texted. They're on their way. Apparently the surfing lesson was... educational."

Something in his tone made me look up. "Define educational."

"Let's just say our daughter's crush isn't quite as subtle as she thinks it is. Though Jake and Millie are being incredibly patient about it."

"Unlike some people in sky boxes," Holly muttered, earning herself a look from Hunter.

"I heard that."

"You were meant to."

"At least Arissa's keeping an eye on things," I said as my hair stylist started working. "Though knowing her, she's probably writing a song about the whole situation."

"Better than writing one about killing her sister's crush's wife," Hunter muttered.

"Hey," I caught his eye in the mirror, "she's not me at that age. And Jake's not..."

"I know," he sighed. "Trust me, I know. Doesn't make it easier to watch."

Holly cleared her throat. "Thirty minutes to showtime. The band's ready when you are."

"And I should probably head up to start playing nice," Hunter pushed off the doorframe. "Try not to give the tabloids too much material tonight."

"Me? Never," I grinned. "Though if you really want to give them something to talk about..."

"Behave," but he was smiling as he leaned down to kiss me. "See you after the show."

Showtime was my time. The moment I heard the opening notes of 'One Way Ticket' and walked onto that stage, everything else disappeared. No drama, no complications - just me, the music, and the energy of the crowd.

Hunter

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The things we do for love. Like playing host to Jon and his family in my sky box - easily one of my least favorite duties as Michelle's husband, but one I did without complaint. Because it mattered to her.

I arrived to find Lea already settling Tomi in with her ear protection while Harley and Arissa took their usual spots. They were veterans of these shows by now, knew exactly how to handle themselves in a sky box.

"Welcome!" I gestured to the elaborate spread Holly had arranged. "Please, help yourselves to anything. Food and drinks are on us."

Jon nodded his thanks while his kids made their way to the food. Dot was carefully avoiding eye contact with Lea, who was focusing intently on adjusting Tomi's headphones.

"Great view up here," Jake commented, clearly trying to ease the tension. "You can see the whole stage setup."

"Michelle always makes sure the sight lines are perfect," I replied, keeping my tone professionally pleasant. "Speaking of which, how was surfing?"

I caught Harley's slight blush as Jake launched into a detailed description of the waves. Millie, bless her, was handling my daughter's obvious crush with remarkable grace.

"Dad," Arissa appeared at my elbow. "Is Mom doing 'Spaceship' tonight? Because if she is..."

"You know she never reveals the setlist," I smiled, grateful for the distraction. "Even to us."

The opening notes started to fill the arena, and despite everything - despite Jon's presence, despite the complicated dynamics - I couldn't help but feel proud. This was my wife's moment.

The crowd erupted as Michelle appeared on stage. Even from up here, her energy was magnetic - she had that ability to make every person in the arena feel like she was performing just for them.

"She's amazing," Steph said softly, and for once I found myself agreeing with one of Jon's kids.

"Always has been," Jon replied, and something in his tone made me tense slightly.

Lea caught my eye, giving me that look that clearly said 'behave yourself.' As if I was the one who needed watching. Though after last night's... statement... maybe I did need to dial it back a bit.

Tomi was bouncing in her seat, even with the sound dampeners. At seventeen months, she already knew her mom's music, already responded to the energy of a show.

"Just like her mother," Dot smiled, and I appreciated the attempt at normalcy.

"Michelle has a stage presence that you can't learn. You have it or you don't. Michi has always had it," Jon smiled with a pride that made my skin crawl. He had no right to that pride, no right to that nickname.

"Yeah, since she was a kid," Lea's voice could have cut glass. "Then again, you'd know. You knew her when she was a little girl."

The tension in the box suddenly became thick enough to choke on. Jake and Millie became very interested in their drinks, while Steph and Jesse exchanged uncomfortable looks. Romeo pretended to be fascinated by his phone.

"Grandma," Arissa said quietly, a warning in her voice. She might not know the full history, but she knew enough.

Dot touched Jon's arm lightly - whether to restrain or comfort him, I couldn't tell. I focused on Tomi, on the show, on anything but the urge to revisit last night's territorial display.

The tension in the box ratcheted up several notches when the opening notes of "Borrowed" started. The irony wasn't lost on anyone - a song Michelle had written about her affair with Jon, though she'd told me recently that now when she performed it, she thought about our own affair, back when I was with Ronny.

Time to be the professional my wife needed me to be. Time to defuse this situation before it exploded.

"Anyone need drink refills?" I managed to keep my voice steady. "The catering staff brought up some excellent local selections."

"I'd love one," Steph jumped in, clearly grateful for the distraction. "And Dad, didn't you want to try that local beer they mentioned?"

Jon nodded, taking the olive branch for what it was. "Thanks."

Lea was still radiating disapproval, but at least she'd stopped making pointed comments. Tomi chose that moment to start her own performance - singing along in baby babble to her mom's voice.

"She's getting her mother's pipes," Jake smiled, and this time the pride in someone's voice didn't make me want to throw them over the balcony.

"And her father's timing," Dot added kindly. "Always knows how to break tension, doesn't she?"

I caught her eye, appreciating the effort. Whatever complicated history existed between all of us, at least some of us were trying to make this work. For the kids. For Michelle.

I'll try to refine and continue from Hunter's POV:

Even if part of me still wanted to make sure the whole arena could hear exactly who Michelle went home to these days.

Once everyone was settled comfortably watching the show, I made my way over to Jon.

"Can I have a word? Privately?" I kept my voice low, professional. This needed to happen - not just for my sake, but for everyone's. Time to clear the air.

Jon studied me for a moment before nodding. We stepped out into the private hallway, far enough from the box that our families couldn't hear, but close enough to maintain propriety.

"Look," I started, keeping my voice measured. "We need to figure out how to handle this situation. For Michelle's sake. For the kids."

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"Look," I started, keeping my voice measured. "We need to figure out how to handle this situation. For Michelle's sake. For the kids."

"The kids?" Jon's expression was guarded. "Or is this about last night's... acoustics demonstration?"

"This is about all of it," I met his eyes steadily. "The way you look at her, the comments, the pride in your voice when you talk about her past - a past that shouldn't have involved you at all, given her age."

"You weren't there," he started.

"No, I wasn't. And thank god for that, because I would never have looked at a child the way you did."

Jon's jaw tightened. "You think you understand what Michelle and I had? What we still-"

"Choose your next words very carefully," I cut him off, my voice low but deadly serious. "Because if you're about to suggest you still have anything with my wife..."

"Your wife," he laughed quietly. "Do you know how many men have thought they could keep her? How many thought they were different?"

"I'm not keeping her," I stepped closer. "She chose me. She stays because she wants to. And unlike you, I've never had to prey on a child to get her attention."

"You really think it was that simple?" His eyes narrowed. "That I just-"

"I think you're lucky I wasn't around back then," I said evenly. "And I think you need to start showing more respect - not just to my marriage, but to the woman Michelle has become. The woman who's moved beyond her past. Beyond you."

"I do respect Mich, more than you can imagine, but she's never been able to stay away. You know she was fucking me still before she married you," Jon said.

I nodded. "She told me. And she also told me she broke it off with you before we said our vows and I know she hasn't touched you since."

His expression shifted slightly - surprise, maybe, that Michelle had been so honest with me. That's what he never understood. She didn't need to hide anymore, didn't need to play games or keep secrets. Not with me.

"She's different now," I continued. "Stronger. More sure of who she is. And if you actually respected her like you claim, you'd stop trying to remind her of who she used to be."

"You think you know everything about us," Jon's voice hardened. "About our history-"

"I know enough," I cut him off. "I know she was a child who needed protection, not seduction. I know she spent years trying to be what everyone wanted instead of finding out who she really was. And I know that every time you're around, you try to pull her back into that past."

"She's not exactly fighting it," he smirked. "Or did you miss how she played up our 'reunion' for the cameras last night?"

"That's because she's finally comfortable enough with who she is now that she can joke about who she was then," I stepped closer. "She's not hiding anymore, Jon. Not from me, not from herself, and certainly not with you."

The music from the arena shifted - Michelle's voice soaring through one of her newer songs. One she'd written about finding herself, about breaking free from old patterns.

"That woman in there?" I nodded toward the stage. "She's not your Michi anymore. She's not anyone's but her own. And the sooner you accept that, the easier this will be for everyone."

"You really believe that?" Jon's voice was quiet. "That she's completely moved on?"

"I know it. Because unlike you, I don't need her to be anyone but exactly who she is."

"And who is that, exactly?"

"A woman who's finally stopped running from her past," I met his eyes steadily. "Who's strong enough to face it without falling back into it. Who chose to build something real instead of living in memories."

He was quiet for a moment, studying me. "You know, Howie used to give me speeches like this too."

"Difference is, she's not 20, she's 45 and I'm not trying to convince myself," I said. "I'm trying to get you to understand - for everyone's sake - that things need to change. The way you look at her, the comments, the 'memories' you keep trying to drag up... it stops now."

"Or what?"

"Or next time, I won't be so subtle about marking my territory. And trust me, these walls can get a lot louder."

Something shifted in Jon's expression - maybe recognition that this wasn't like his past confrontations with Michelle's other husbands. This was different. I was different.

"You're not saying anything I haven't heard before," he said finally. "Everyone's had an opinion about Michelle's age since the story broke."

"Then maybe you should have started listening years ago." My voice stayed steady, but the anger underneath was clear. "Instead of trying to justify it."

"I loved her," he said quietly.

"No. You wanted to own her. There's a difference." I glanced back toward the sky box. "And now I'm watching my daughter look at your son the way Michelle once looked at you, and it terrifies me. Because I know exactly what that kind of age gap can do to a young girl."

"Jake's nothing like me," Jon's voice hardened. "He'd never-"

"No, he wouldn't. Because he's a better man than you were. But that doesn't make watching history echo any easier."

"We're done here," I said, turning back toward the sky box. "Go back in, enjoy the show, play nice with our families. But understand something - I'm not Howie, I'm not Rocky, and I'm damn sure not RJ who couldn't protect her from you. I will shut down any attempt to drag Michelle back into old patterns."

"You really think she needs your protection?" There was something bitter in his laugh.

"No. She doesn't need anyone's protection anymore. But that doesn't mean I won't give it. Just like I'll protect my daughter from falling into the same patterns her mother did."

"By letting her hang around Jake?"

"By trusting that your son is nothing like his father," I met his eyes one final time. "And making damn sure everyone knows exactly where the boundaries are."

Michelle's voice soared through another song as we walked back into the box. Lea gave me a questioning look, but I just shook my head slightly. Some conversations needed to stay in the hallway.

The rest of the concert flowed easier after that - everyone falling into their roles like a well-rehearsed play. Harley tried (and failed) to be subtle about watching Jake, while he and Millie managed that delicate balance of kindness and clear boundaries with her. Lea and Dot found common ground in doting on Tomi, while Arissa held court with Steph, her husband, and Romeo, talking music and performance. Jon settled in with Jesse and his wife, focusing on the show instead of old history.

And I played the perfect host, like Michelle needed me to be. Like I'd promised her I would be.

Once the show ended, I guided our entourage backstage to Michelle's dressing room. This was her post-show ritual - a quick shower to wash away the stage, then holding court while she came down from the performance high. She loved these moments, surrounded by people sharing their reactions to the show while she slowly transitioned from performer back to herself.

Later, after everyone left, we'd head back to the hotel where I'd help her find that quiet space between adrenaline and sleep. But for now, I'd keep playing my part - the supportive husband managing the delicate balance of family, friends, and complicated history in her sanctuary.

Michelle

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The post-show high was still buzzing through me as I emerged from my quick shower, trading my Lydia James performance dress for comfortable jean shorts and a purple t-shirt. My dressing room was full of familiar faces, all waiting to share the energy of the night.

"Mom, that was so good!" Arissa rushed forward to hug me.

"Thanks sweetie," I hugged her back before taking Tomi from Mom's arms, needing to hold my baby after being away from her all day.

"She's right," Mom beamed. "You're always fabulous, but tonight you just lit up the whole arena."

"The new arrangement on 'Moonlight' was incredible," Steph added. "The way you changed up the bridge..."

"That was actually your dad's suggestion during sound check," I said without thinking, then felt Hunter tense slightly beside me. "He's always had an ear for arrangements."

"Speaking of arrangements," Jake jumped in smoothly, "that Hawaiian remix of 'Life Goes On' was perfect for this venue."

Tomi chose that moment to start babbling, making everyone laugh. The tension eased as she commanded attention the way only a toddler could.

"Just like her mama," Dot smiled warmly. "Always knows how to work a room."

"Though hopefully with better timing than I had at her age," I caught Mom's eye, knowing we were both thinking of my early start in the industry. The weight of unspoken history hung in the air for a moment before Harley launched into an enthusiastic review of every song choice.

The post-show visit lasted about an hour before everyone started filtering out. Mom herded the girls back to the hotel while Jon's family made their goodbyes. Finally, it was just Hunter and me in the quiet of my dressing room.

"You ready to start this vacation for real?" He pulled me into his arms, and I felt the last of the show's adrenaline start to fade into something softer.

"So ready," I murmured, resting my head against his chest, letting his steady presence ground me.

He tilted my chin up for a kiss. "Me too... let's go."

The hotel room was quiet when we finally made it back, just the distant sound of waves through our window. I could hear Tomi's soft breathing through the monitor, Thara's contented purr from her spot by the window, the steady rhythm of Hunter's heart under my ear.

"You were amazing tonight," he murmured, his fingers running through my hair in that way that always helped me come down from a show.

"So were you," I smiled against his chest. "Playing perfect host can't have been easy."

"Worth it," he pulled me closer. "Though I did have an interesting conversation with Jon in the hallway."

"I figured you might." I traced patterns on his skin. "Thank you for handling everything so I could just focus on the show."

"Always."

The drama of the day - the press conference, the family dynamics, the complicated history - it all felt distant now. Tomorrow we'd wake up to actual vacation. No interviews, no performances, no carefully managed relationships. Just us, our girls, the beach...

"Stop thinking so loud," Hunter kissed my hair. "Show's over. Family drama's handled. Time to rest."

He was right. Everything else could wait. Right now, safe in my husband's arms with our daughter sleeping peacefully nearby, I had everything I needed.



"Quantum Connections"

11 July, 2025. My 43rd birthday.

I'm not sure how Jeremy pulled it off, but he actually managed to let me sleep in. When I finally woke around 9 AM, the usual soundtrack of Rose's morning fairy calls was notably absent.

Padding downstairs, I found my family curled up watching *Chip agus Práta* together. Their faces lit up the moment I appeared in the living room doorway.

"Mummy! Happy Bir-day!" Rose called out as she and Killy launched themselves at me.

I laughed, scooping them both into hugs. "Thank you, my little loves."

"Happy Birthday, mo chroí," Jeremy pulled me into his arms, pressing a kiss to my temple. "Sit, I'll get you a cuppa."

I settled onto the couch while Jeremy headed for the kitchen. The normalcy of this moment - just us, no clients, no codes to crack, no security protocols to maintain - felt like the best gift already.

"Mummy, fairy birthday dance. Look," Rose announced importantly while Killy climbed into my lap, seeking his usual morning cuddles.

"I'm looking, baby," I smiled, holding Killy close while Rose started her performance.

Rose twirled and spun in her special fairy way while Killy watched with his usual serious expression, occasionally muttering "need proper spin" when his sister's movements weren't precise enough for his liking.

Jeremy returned with my coffee - perfectly made, as always. "I've got a client at ten, but after that, the day is ours. Amber's coming by later with Rachel."

"How's she doing?" I asked quietly, though the twins were too absorbed in Rose's dance to notice our conversation. Amber had been struggling more than usual lately, even with the therapy and medication.

"Better, I think. The nail painting seems to help. Though Mia's still hovering like a particularly gothic guardian angel."

I smiled into my coffee. Mia's version of support might be unconventional, but her heart was in the right place. Even if none of us quite understood why she was spending so much time in Ireland lately.

"Good, I worry about her," I said softly.

"Aye, me as well, but I think she's got this. She's strong and she has Trev and all of us," Jeremy replied, then his expression brightened. "So, do you want your gift now or tonight?"

I laughed. "Now, I guess?"

"Now is good. Tonight I have other plans for us," his smile held promise.

"Oh? Do I get to know?"

"Nothing over the top. Niamh agreed to keep the twins tonight. I'll take you to dinner, we can see the new Superman film at the cinema, and then we can come home and enjoy having the house all to ourselves."

"Oh my god, that sounds bloody brilliant. I love it!"

"Present first," Killy announced solemnly, climbing off my lap. "Need proper order."

"Of course we do, love," Jeremy grinned, disappearing into his salon for a moment before returning with a carefully wrapped package.

Rose bounced excitedly. "We helped wrap!"

"Very fairy sparkly," I noted, admiring the liberal use of glitter on the paper. The twins beamed with pride while I carefully opened it, making sure to preserve their decorative efforts.

Inside was a collection of Switch 2 accessories - a pro controller, protective case, and a second dock. Perfect for setting up gaming in my office when I needed a break from code.

"The twins helped pick the colors," Jeremy explained, nodding to the green and black themes. "Though Killy insisted everything had to match properly."

"Need proper gaming setup," Killy nodded seriously.

"It's perfect," I grinned, already imagining late-night gaming sessions in my tech fairy cave. "Though I suspect this might have been as much for you lot as for me."

"Family game time!" Rose declared, doing a little fairy spin.

"Need proper teams," Killy added.



"Later loves," Jeremy smiled. "Mummy needs her coffee first, and I've got Mrs. O'Kane coming in for a cut and color soon."

"Speaking of work," I sipped my coffee, "I should probably check on that security update I was running for the government's systems."

"No work!" Rose protested. "Birthday!"

"Just a quick check, fairy girl," I promised. "Then maybe we can set up the new dock and have a proper Mario Kart tournament before Aunt Amber comes over."

"Need practice first," Killy said seriously. "Learn new controller."

Jeremy caught my eye over the twins' heads, his smile soft. "Happy Birthday, mo chroí."

After a quick crumpet, I retreated to my tech fairy cave for morning security checks. Everything looked solid across my networks - all the various scans running smoothly, monitoring for potential breaches. The increasing prevalence of cyber warfare might be concerning for the world, but it definitely kept my job interesting.

Once satisfied that none of my clients' systems had been compromised overnight, I headed upstairs to get dressed. My usual outfit - black jeans, green sports bra, and cropped green jacket. The Irish might still give me sideways looks for treating a sports bra as a shirt (definitely not in Australia anymore), but their opinion on my wardrobe choices ranked pretty low on my priority list.

Quick makeup, a spritz of Mango Skin, and I was heading back downstairs just as Jeremy's client was leaving the salon.

"Perfect timing," Jeremy smiled, pulling me into a quick kiss. "Though we should probably set up that dock before the twins decide to 'help' organize the cables."

"Need proper setup!" Killy called from the living room, as if on cue.

A knock at the door interrupted us. Amber stood there with Rachel in her carrier, Mia and Billy flanking her like protective shadows. She looked... better, maybe. Not great, but better than last week.

"Happy Birthday!" she managed a small smile. "Sorry we're early. I just... needed to get out of the house for a bit."

"Never apologize for that," I pulled her into a hug while Jeremy went to wrangle the twins, who were already excited about visitors. "Come in, all of you. Though fair warning - Rose is in full fairy performance mode today."

"When isn't she?" Mia muttered, but there was affection in her voice.

"Billy, good to see you again," I smiled. After meeting him at dinner the other night, I was still slightly starstruck - not because he was Michelle's ex, but because his work at Cranston Tech had revolutionized the industry. The innovations he'd created were brilliant, though it was hard to reconcile this tech genius with someone who'd dated Michelle in high school.

"Nice to see you too, Livvie," he replied warmly.

"What brings you by?"

"Mia insisted I get out of Michelle's house and see some of Ireland," Billy explained.

"No one should be locked on that compound for that long," Mia declared.

Jeremy laughed. "Mich would insist it's not a compound, it's an estate."

"It's so a compound," Amber rolled her eyes.

"FAIRY DANCE!" Rose announced, spotting our visitors. "Aunt Mia watch!"

"Inside voice, Ro Ro," Killy reminded her automatically.

"Need quiet fairy dance for baby Rachel," Rose corrected herself, already starting to twirl.

"That's very considerate, love," Jeremy smiled, while Amber settled on the couch with Rachel. The baby seemed more alert today, watching Rose's careful movements with interest.

"So," Mia settled into an armchair like it was her throne, "what's the birthday plan?"

"Nothing too elaborate," I started, but Billy's attention had shifted to my multi-monitor setup visible through my office door.

"Is that a custom security protocol?" he asked, professional interest clear in his voice.

"Oh god, now you've done it," Jeremy teased. "She'll talk tech all day if you let her."

"My setup has to be state of the art - comes with having government agencies as clients. Want to see?" I couldn't hide my enthusiasm at showing my systems to someone who'd actually understand them.

"Absolutely," Billy followed me to my tech fairy cave while the others settled in the living room, Rose already planning her next fairy performance for Rachel.

My office was my pride and joy - four monitors displaying various security protocols, custom-built systems, and enough processing power to make most tech companies jealous. I'd designed every aspect of it myself, making sure nothing could be traced or compromised.

"This encryption method," Billy studied one of my screens, "it's unlike anything I've seen. You developed it yourself?"

"Had to. Standard protocols weren't cutting it anymore, especially with the increase in state-sponsored attacks."

"The way you've layered the security measures," Billy leaned closer to one monitor, "it's brilliant. Almost like..."

"A fairy web?" I grinned. "Rose might be rubbing off on me. But yeah, each layer connects while maintaining independence. If one part's compromised, the others stay secure."

"And this," he gestured to another screen, "monitoring government systems?"

"Irish government mainly. Though I keep an eye on various European agencies too. Have to stay clear of anything US-related these days."

"Because of the Grayson situation?"

I nodded. "Better to avoid poking that particular bear, even if it's tempting sometimes. Besides, plenty of work here without crossing the Atlantic digitally."

From the living room, I could hear Rose explaining fairy principles to Rachel while Killy insisted on "proper baby positioning."

"Have you considered quantum encryption for these government protocols?" Billy asked, his eyes lighting up with possibilities. "Cranston Tech has been developing some interesting applications..."

"I've been following your research," I nodded, pulling up some of my own code. "Actually, I've been working on something similar, but with a distributed neural network approach. Here, look at this..."

We fell into rapid technical discussion, building off each other's ideas. This was the kind of conversation I rarely got to have - someone who not only understood my work but could elevate it.

"If we combined your neural mapping with our quantum protocols..." Billy was practically vibrating with excitement.

"The security would be nearly unbreakable," I finished. "And the processing speed would be incredible. Look, if we adjusted this algorithm here..."

"And integrated it with this framework..."

We were so absorbed in the possibilities, we didn't notice Mia in the doorway until she cleared her throat. "As fascinating as I'm sure this tech foreplay is, Amber's asking about lunch plans."

"Right, lunch," I blinked, pulling myself out of code mode. "Though Billy, we should definitely continue this discussion later. The applications for this combined approach..."

"Could revolutionize cyber security," he agreed, looking as reluctant as I felt to leave the technical possibilities. "I'd love to show you some of our beta testing results."

"If you two are done plotting world domination through better firewalls," Mia drawled, "Jeremy's ordered from that new diner you like, Liv."

Back in the living room, Rose was performing what appeared to be a very careful "feeding time fairy dance" while Amber helped Rachel with her bottle. Killy supervised the proper arrangement of everyone's seating positions.

"Did you solve all the world's tech problems?" Jeremy asked, pulling me close.

"Only about half of them," I grinned. "Though Billy's quantum encryption ideas might actually..."

"English, mo chroí," he kissed my temple. "It's your birthday. Save the tech revolution for tomorrow."

I smiled apologetically. "Sorry. You know how I get when someone actually speaks my language."

The food arrived just as Rose was teaching Rachel a "lunch fairy dance". We settled into an easy rhythm - Amber looking more relaxed than she had in weeks, Mia's sardonic comments making everyone laugh, Billy and I occasionally slipping into tech talk until Jeremy or Mia would redirect us.

"We should do lunch tomorrow," Billy suggested as they were getting ready to leave. "I'd love to show you those test results."

"Perfect," I agreed. "As long as you don't mind me picking your brain about quantum computing."

After they left, Jeremy and I managed to convince the twins it was naptime - though only after Rose performed a "sleepy fairy dance" and Killy ensured their stuffed animals were properly arranged.

Mia

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The drive back to Michelle's compound was quiet after dropping off an exhausted Amber. She'd let me borrow her car to take Billy back.

"Any news about the Death Ranger?" I asked once we were safely out of earshot of civilian life. The question had been burning since we left Livvie's.

"Nothing good," Billy's voice was grim. "That power simply shouldn't exist. It does, obviously, but I'm concerned it will eventually collapse the Grid if we don't find a way to contain it."

"As much as a Grid collapse would suck," I kept my eyes on the winding Irish roads, "I'm a bit more concerned with the Death Ranger's plans to end my life."

"The command center should be fully operational within a few days," Billy assured me. "The security measures I'm implementing should at least give us early warning if he tries to breach this dimension again."

"If being the operative word," I muttered, taking a curve maybe a little faster than necessary. "And what about these mysterious Thunder Rangers?"

"That's... complicated." Billy's hesitation made me glance at him. "The energy signatures are legitimate Thunder Ninja frequencies, but there's something else mixed in. Something older."

"Older than the Morphin Grid?"

"Different. More... localized to this region. Almost like..." he paused. "Have you noticed anything unusual about the ley lines here?"

I snorted. "Besides the fact that half my friends somehow ended up living along them without realizing it? No, nothing unusual at all."

"That's not coincidence," Billy leaned forward slightly. "Michelle and Hunter's property, Amber and Trevor's place, even where Livvie and Jeremy ended up... they all align with ancient Celtic power points."

"Great. So not only do I have an evil alternate-universe Hunter wanting me dead, but now we're dealing with ancient Celtic magic mixing with Thunder Ninja powers?" I took another curve sharply. "Anything else you want to add to my impending doom?"

"The Celtic influence might actually help," Billy mused. "If we can figure out how it's integrating with the Thunder powers..."

"And how exactly are we supposed to do that?" I glanced at him. "It's not like we can ask the locals about their ancient magical traditions without raising suspicions. We're already keeping enough secrets from everyone."

"Michelle might have some insights. She's been here longer, might have noticed patterns we're missing."

"Yeah, well, Michelle's in Hawaii right now, trying to have a normal family vacation. Which is all any of them should have to worry about."

"Speaking of normal," Billy noted as we approached the gates, "Livvie's quantum encryption theories could be useful for the command center's security protocols."

"But we can't tell her why we need them," I sighed. "Though I suppose you could always hire her as a consultant for Cranston Tech. That would give you access to her expertise without raising suspicions."

"Already considering it," he nodded. "Her work is impressive, even without knowing what we're really protecting against."

"At least Michelle's security system will alert us if anything happens while she's in Hawaii," I pulled through the gates. "Though I still hate that she's so far away right now."

"Hunter's with her," Billy reminded me. "And they both know how to handle themselves. Right now, we need to focus on understanding these Thunder Rangers and their connection to the Celtic power points."

We'd barely made it inside when the newly installed alert system screamed to life. Billy's hands flew across the command center's controls, bringing up a holographic display of the disturbance.

"Well, at least we know the detection grid works," Billy's voice was grim. "Death Ranger's energy signature just appeared in..."

"Let me guess," I cut in. "A quarry? Because apparently evil is allergic to literally any other location."

"It's obviously a trap."

"When isn't it?" I flexed my hands, already feeling the familiar surge of power. "But we can't exactly ignore him."

"Ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

"It's Morphin' Time! Triceratops!"

"Nemesis Mystic Power, Make Up!"

The familiar rush of transformation washed over us both. Seconds later, we materialized in the quarry to find the Death Ranger waiting, his corrupted power signature making the air itself feel wrong.

"Just the two of you?" Death Ranger's distorted voice carried across the quarry. "Where's my dear wife? Still playing pop star in Hawaii?"

"She's not your wife," I snarled. "And she never will be."

"No? Tell me, Mia, how many times has Michelle chosen darkness? How many times has she been drawn to power?" He took a step forward. "In every universe, in every timeline, she eventually embraces who she truly is."

"You don't know her," Billy shifted into a defensive stance. "Not this version."

"I know every version," Death Ranger's laugh sent chills down my spine. "And I know exactly how this ends."

The corrupted power rolling off him made my skin crawl. This wasn't just Hunter's abilities twisted dark - this was something else, something that shouldn't exist.

"Enough talk," I summoned my staff. Whatever he was planning, we needed to end this before those mysterious Thunder Rangers showed up to complicate things further.

He moved faster than should have been possible, even for a Ranger. One moment he was across the quarry, the next he was right in front of me, his corrupted power clashing against my own.

"You're the only thing standing between me and her," his distorted voice was almost conversational as he blocked my staff strike. "Remove you from the equation, and she'll have no choice but to embrace her true nature."

Billy's blast caught him in the side, forcing him back. "Your math's a little off there. She's got an entire family protecting her."

"Family?" Death Ranger laughed, the sound wrong through his helmet. "You mean those civilians playing house? The ones who don't even know what she really is?"

"They know exactly who she is," I launched another attack. "That's why she chose them. That's why she'll never choose you."

His next strike sent me flying into the quarry wall. Hard.

"She chose me in every other timeline," he advanced on me. "What makes this one so special?"

I grunted and pulled myself up, "She already has her Hunter and it's ain't you sunshine."

His laugh was cold, even through the distorted helmet. "That pathetic version of me? The one who lets her play normal? He doesn't understand her true potential. The power she could wield..."

Billy's attack interrupted whatever he was about to say next, giving me time to regain my footing. We fell into a rhythm - Billy providing cover fire while I engaged in close combat, but the Death Ranger's corrupted power gave him an edge we couldn't match.

"You know what you don't understand?" I managed to land a solid hit. "She doesn't want power. She wants her family. Her life. Her choice. And that kills you, doesn't it? That she chose happiness over whatever twisted version of love you're offering."

His next strike carried enough force to crack the ground where I'd been standing moments before. The corrupted energy rolling off him felt even stronger than before - like his rage was feeding it.

A flash of amber and magenta light cut through the quarry. Two figures landed between us and the Death Ranger - their Thunder Ninja energy signatures intertwined with something older, something that felt tied to the Irish earth itself.

"This ends now," the Amber Ranger's voice was deep, male, carrying the weight of ancient authority. His carved staff held ready, his stance grounded like the stones themselves.

"Your presence here threatens more than you understand," the Magenta Ranger added, her twin whip-blades moving like living things.

Death Ranger's attention shifted to the new arrivals. "The Celtic Thunder Rangers. Still hiding in shadows? What are you protecting?"

"Something far older than your corrupted power," Magenta's response carried centuries of history.

Billy moved closer to me. "That energy signature... it's Thunder Ninja but there's something else. Something woven into the land itself."

"Yeah, well right now I'm just glad they're on our side," I muttered, though I couldn't shake the feeling we were witnessing something far more ancient than typical Ranger powers.

Death Ranger shifted his stance, clearly reassessing the situation. The corrupted energy around him seemed to react to the Celtic Thunder Rangers' presence - like two opposing forces meeting.

"Your ancient powers can't stop what's coming," he growled. "This land, its energy - it will all serve a greater purpose."

"You understand nothing of these powers," Amber's voice was steady, but carried a warning. His staff began to glow with symbols I didn't recognize.

Magenta's whip-blades traced patterns in the air, leaving trails of energy that felt older than any Ranger power I'd encountered. "The ancient ways are not yours to corrupt."

They moved in perfect sync - clearly long-term partners. While Billy and I had been barely holding our own, their fighting style was something else entirely. Thunder Ninja techniques, yes, but woven with movements that seemed to draw power from the Irish earth itself.

The Death Ranger stumbled back from their combined attack, his corrupted energy flickering slightly.

"Rince na Lasrach!" Magenta called out, her whip-blades creating intricate patterns that seemed to dance with ancient fire.

Amber's staff struck the ground. "Cosaint na Talún!" The earth itself responded, forcing the Death Ranger back further.

Billy and I exchanged looks - these weren't typical Ranger abilities. This was something else, something that belonged to this land.

"Your parlor tricks won't save her," Death Ranger snarled, though his voice carried less confidence now. "Michelle will-

"Will remain protected," Amber cut him off, his power signature pulsing stronger. "By forces you cannot comprehend."

"By guardians who were ancient when the first Thunder Ninja walked these lands," Magenta added, her weapons still tracing those strange, powerful symbols in the air.

The combined energy of their attacks was overwhelming - Thunder Ninja power amplified by something that felt as old as Ireland itself. For the first time, I saw the Death Ranger take a defensive stance.

"This isn't over," Death Ranger's corrupted energy flared. "Your ancient magic can't protect her forever."

"It's protected these lands for centuries," Magenta's whip-blades continued their deadly dance. "Long before you brought your twisted power here."

"And it will continue long after," Amber added, his staff glowing with those strange runes.

The Death Ranger disappeared in a flash of corrupted light, leaving behind that wrong feeling in the air. The Celtic Thunder Rangers remained focused on the spot where he'd been, as if reading something in the energy itself.

"Thank you," Billy stepped forward. "But who-

"We're not your enemies," Magenta cut him off, her voice carrying that academic tone again. "But we can't be your allies either. Not yet."

"The ancient ways must be protected," Amber's deep voice held finality. "Some secrets aren't ours to share."

Before we could respond, they vanished in flashes of amber and magenta light, leaving behind only the faint trace of power that felt as old as Ireland itself.

"Chatty bunch aren't they?" I replied, rubbing my shoulder where I'd hit the quarry wall.

"Their power signatures are fascinating," Billy was already scanning the area. "The way they're integrating Thunder Ninja abilities with what appears to be ancient Celtic magic..."

"Yeah, yeah, it's all very scientifically interesting. What I want to know is why they keep showing up to help but won't tell us who they are." I watched him collect data. "And what they mean about 'ancient ways' being protected."

"Whatever their reasons," Billy looked up from his scanner, "they seem to have a personal stake in keeping the Death Ranger away from Michelle. And right now, we need all the help we can get."

"Even from mysterious Rangers who speak in riddles and disappear dramatically?" But he had a point. "Come on, we should get back to the command center."

Livvie

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The twins were still drowsy-sweet from their nap when Niamh arrived to collect them. Rose insisted on performing a "goodbye fairy dance" while Killy meticulously packed their overnight bags, making sure everything was "properly arranged."

"Need straight pajamas," he informed his grandmother seriously.

"Of course, mo stór," Niamh smiled, well versed in the twins' particular needs.

After they left, the house felt suddenly quiet - that rare, precious silence that only happened when the twins were away. I took advantage of the moment to change, swapping my sports bra for a flowing green bohemian shirt that Jeremy had gotten me last month.

"Ready for dinner, mo chroí?" Jeremy appeared in our doorway.

"Definitely. The Cantina," I didn't even have to think about it. "I've been craving Trevor's burritos all day."

The Cantina was busy, but Trevor always kept our usual table free. The familiar warmth and energy of the place wrapped around us as we settled in - this had become our second home since moving to Ireland.

"The usual?" Trevor appeared with that knowing smile.

"Like you have to ask," I grinned. "Your burritos are the closest thing to proper spice in this country."

"Still trying to corrupt the Irish palate one dish at a time?" Trevor teased.

"Someone has to," I laughed. "Though I've mostly given up on this one." I nodded toward Jeremy, who was already requesting his usual mild version.

The burritos were perfect, as always. Trevor had mastered that balance between authentic Mexican flavors and Irish ingredients that somehow worked better than it should. We were just finishing when Fionn emerged from the kitchen with a sly smile, carrying something that definitely wasn't on the regular menu.

"Happy Birthday," he set down what looked like a cheesecake, but with colors and textures I'd never seen before. "Kenzie and I have been experimenting. Irish Cream Mango with tajin - thought you might appreciate the fusion."

"You had me at mango," I leaned forward to examine the creation. "Though this has Kenzie written all over it - she's been talking about experimenting with fusion desserts."

"She's got a real talent for pastry," Fionn smiled proudly. "This was mostly her idea, actually. I just helped refine it."

"Speaking of refining," Jeremy studied the tajin sprinkled across the top, "should I be worried about the spice level?"

"It's perfectly balanced," Fionn assured him. "We tested it on Trevor first - figured if he could handle it, anyone could."

"Oi!" Trevor called from behind the bar. "I heard that!"

The first bite was heaven - the smooth Irish Cream playing perfectly against the fresh mango, with just enough tajin to give it a kick without overwhelming the flavors. Kenzie might be working prep now, but her pastry chef aspirations were definitely showing in this creation.

"This needs to go on the regular menu," I declared, already planning how to convince the twins it wasn't fairy food so I wouldn't have to share.

Later, settled into our seats at the cinema, I felt that perfect contentment that comes from good food, great company, and the promise of a proper superhero film. The new Superman didn't disappoint - they'd finally managed to capture the essence of the character I grew up reading.

"That," I announced as we emerged into the cool Irish evening, "is how you do a bloody superhero film! The perfect balance of heart and action."

"Aye, it was brilliant," Jeremy agreed, his arm sliding around my waist as we headed for the car. "Though I suspect you might be slightly biased toward anything involving computers saving the day."

The moment we got home, the energy shifted. The house was quiet, no twins to consider, no need to maintain any pretense of restraint.

"So," Jeremy's voice dropped lower as he pulled me close, "about the rest of your birthday celebration..."

What followed was a thorough exploration of every possible surface in our temporarily child-free home. The kitchen counter (twice), the living room wall, his salon chair (which would never feel quite the same again), and finally, eventually, our actual bed.

Much later, wonderfully exhausted, I curled into Jeremy's side. "Best birthday ever."

"And to think," he kissed my temple, "you were worried about turning forty-three."

"Shut up," I mumbled against his chest, already half asleep. "Or I'll make you test those surfaces again."

"Is that supposed to be a threat, mo chroí?"

"Not at all," I tried to slip down his body, but he caught me.

"No," he pulled me back up gently but firmly. "I told you, none of that tonight. Tonight is all about you. One more go before sleep?"

His hands were already moving with purpose, making it impossible to argue. Not that I wanted to. After all, it was still technically my birthday for another hour...

"Happy Birthday to me," I breathed as he proved, yet again, why letting him take control sometimes led to the best results.

Mia

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The digital clock by my bed clicked over to midnight, but sleep wasn't coming. I stared at the ceiling of Amber and Trevor's guest room, replaying the quarry battle in my mind while Kaya curled regally on the pillow beside me.

"If it hadn't been for those Celtic Thunder Rangers showing up when they did..." I let out a heavy breath. "The Death Ranger nearly had me today."

"But he didn't," Kaya's tail twitched. "Though I agree - it was too close. We need to act."

"Clearly. But what exactly are we supposed to do?"

"You do realize I'm not psychic, right?" my cat's tone was dry.

I shot her a look. "No, but you are supposed to be my guardian."

"And as your guardian, I'm telling you we need to understand what those Thunder Rangers are protecting," Kaya's eyes gleamed in the darkness. "That power they were using - it's older than anything I've encountered."

"Older than the Silver Millennium?" That got my attention.

"Different. More... localized. Tied to this land specifically." She stretched lazily. "You felt it, didn't you? The way they drew power from the earth itself?"

"Yeah," I sat up against the headboard. "Billy's readings showed something similar. Like the Thunder Ninja powers are just the surface of what they're working with."

"And the Death Ranger's reaction to it was... interesting."

"His corrupted power seemed to recoil from whatever they were channeling," I remembered. "Like oil and water."

"Perhaps," Kaya's tail swished thoughtfully, "that's something we should explore further."

"The problem is," I ran a hand through my hair in frustration, "we can't exactly go asking around about ancient Celtic magic without raising suspicions. And the two people who seem to know anything about it won't even show us their faces."

"There might be another way," Kaya sat up, suddenly alert. "The ley lines Billy mentioned - they're strongest around certain locations. Including this house."

"Amber's house? Why would-"

"Think about it," Kaya's tail twitched impatiently. "All these people Michelle's drawn to, all settling along ancient power points. That's not coincidence."

"So what, you think Amber and Trevor's property might hold clues?"

"I think," Kaya's eyes glowed slightly in the darkness, "that there's a reason the Death Ranger keeps appearing near here. And it's not just because of Michelle."

A noise from down the hall - probably Rachel for her midnight feeding - reminded me why we needed to solve this quickly. These people, this found family of Michelle's... they deserved better than being caught in our supernatural drama.

"Livvie's sister, Abby...she works at UCC...I wonder if she could get us into the library to look at some of the old Irish literature," I wondered aloud.

"Livvie's sister, Abby... she works at UCC... I wonder if she could get us into the library to look at some of the old Irish literature," I wondered aloud.

"And how exactly would you explain your sudden interest in ancient Celtic texts?" Kaya's tone was skeptical. "Abby's a marine biologist - she'll wonder why you're not asking about sea creatures instead."

She had a point. Both Liv and Abby were sharp, each in their own way. And my cover story of being here to support Amber while being Rachel's godmother could only stretch so far.

"Maybe..." I thought carefully, "I could say it's research for some song lyrics. Something about incorporating Irish mythology into my next album. Abby doesn't need to help with the research itself - I just need access to the library."

"Because that wouldn't raise any questions about why a rock star is suddenly deep-diving into ancient Irish texts?"

"Got a better idea, oh wise guardian?"

Kaya's tail twitched in annoyance. "You could try telling the truth. Part of it anyway."

"What, that I'm researching ancient Celtic power points because mysterious Thunder Rangers keep showing up to save me from an evil alternate-universe Hunter?"

"No," she fixed me with that look that meant I was being deliberately dense. "That you're interested in local folklore for inspiration. That's not even a lie - we do need the inspiration, just not for songs."

Another sound from down the hall - Amber's voice softly singing to Rachel. The contrast between that peaceful moment and the danger lurking around them made my chest tight.

"Fine," I grabbed my phone. "I'll text Abby in the morning. But if this leads to me having to actually write a Celtic-inspired album..."

"It wouldn't be the worst cover story you've had to maintain," Kaya reminded me. "Remember that time in Tokyo?"

"We agreed never to speak of that."

The sound of Rachel finally settling back to sleep drifted through the walls. Amber's voice had stopped singing, replaced by that heavy quiet that meant she was probably watching the baby sleep - still unsure of herself, still learning to trust her own maternal instincts.

"You know what the worst part is?" I kept my voice low. "They're all building these beautiful lives here. Amber and Trevor with Rachel, Livvie and Jeremy with the twins, even Kara finding peace away from all that political drama. And here I am, bringing ancient battles and corrupted Rangers to their doorstep."

"You didn't bring this fight here," Kaya's voice was firm. "The Death Ranger chose this place, these people. You're trying to protect them."

"By lying to them. By letting them think I'm just here being a supportive friend while their homes sit on power points that could-"

"That could what?" Kaya interrupted. "What exactly do you think would happen if you told them the truth?"

"Best case? They think I'm insane. Worst case?" I stared at the ceiling. "They get pulled into this mess and someone gets hurt. Someone who doesn't have powers or training or any way to defend themselves."

"Like Michelle did?" Kaya's question was pointed.

"That's different. Michelle chose this life. Multiple times, actually." I shifted restlessly. "Amber's dealing with postpartum depression. Livvie's finally found somewhere she feels safe. They deserve their normal lives."

"Normal is relative," Kaya observed dryly. "Your friend group includes a cyber security expert in exile, an internationally famous musician, and a Michelin star chef. 'Normal' was never really on the table."

"You know what I mean. They deserve their version of normal. Without..." I gestured vaguely at myself, "all this."

Kaya curled into a tight ball, radiating exhaustion and judgment in equal measure. "You're the one who wanted to stay on Earth. I suggested remaining on Nemesis, but no... you had to have your 'normal' Earth rock star life."

"I worked hard for what I have," I defended. "I wasn't about to just leave it all. Besides... Earth needs protection."

"Words I never expected to hear from you," Kaya's laugh was more like a snort.

"I know, I know. I started out wanting to make the other Soldiers suffer, but... maybe somewhere along the way I figured out Earth is worth protecting."

"Hate to break it to you, Mia, but Earth life comes with Earth humans. And when you care about people... this is the cost."

"I know. Trust me, I know."

"It's late," Kaya yawned dramatically. "I need my beauty rest to deal with Amber's insufferable dog tomorrow."

I laughed softly. "Ellie would just happily sit by Amber's side if you didn't antagonize her."

"I do no such thing. She's unruly, stupid, unevolved... and disgusting."

"Right. You walking back and forth in front of her, hitting her in the face with your tail isn't antagonizing at all."

"Purely to test her primitive reactions. Science, you see."

I rolled my eyes. "Of course. How silly of me. Science. Goodnight, Kaya."

The next morning, after confirming Amber was okay with sharing Abby's number, I sent what I hoped was a casual text:

"Abby, this is Mia Black. Livvie mentioned you work at UCC and I was wondering if you could get me access to the library there. I would love to do some research on ancient Ireland. Being here has been so inspirational to my songwriting and I want to learn more."

Her response came quickly:

"Hi Mia! I know what you mean. Moving here has inspired me too, although my inspiration has led me to working with seal colonies. LOL. Yes, I would love to help. I can actually do you one better. Saoirse Riordan is our professor of Celtic studies. If you'd like I can set up a meeting with her. She would be your go-to resource for anything dealing with ancient Ireland."

I read Abby's text again. A Celtic studies professor would definitely be a better resource than randomly searching through library stacks.

"Well?" I showed Kaya the message. "Should I take her up on it?"

"Having an expert guide would be more efficient than your usual 'charge in and figure it out later' approach," Kaya observed dryly.

I typed back: "That would be amazing, actually. Thank you. When would be a good time?"

While waiting for Abby's response, I heard Amber in the kitchen with Rachel. The baby was having a good morning, judging by the happy sounds. One more reason to figure this out quickly - these peaceful moments needed protecting.

Abby's response came quickly: "Great! Let me check with her schedule and get back to you. She's usually pretty good about meeting with people interested in Celtic history. Fair warning though - once she gets started talking about ancient Irish traditions, she can go for hours!"

"Perfect," I muttered. "The more information, the better."

"Just remember," Kaya stretched lazily, "to keep your questions focused on the academic side. We don't need anyone getting suspicious about why a rock star is suddenly interested in ancient power sites."

The smell of coffee drifted up from the kitchen, along with Trevor's voice joining Amber and Rachel. Another normal morning in their world - one that had no place for corrupted Rangers or ancient powers.

"Right," I grabbed some clothes to change into. "Just a musician looking for song inspiration. Nothing suspicious about that."

By eleven, I was at UCC's library, Kaya securely tucked into her backpack carrier. Abby met us at the entrance with a woman who looked about my age - tall, athletic build, with striking red hair and sharp green eyes that seemed to take in everything at once.

"Mia, hi. This is Saoirse Riordan. Saoirse, this is Mia Black," Abby made the introductions.

"Hi, it's a pleasure to meet you. Thank you so much for taking the time."

Saoirse's handshake was firm. "Pleasure. I have to admit, I was a bit surprised when Abby mentioned that Mia Black, the rock star, wanted to discuss ancient Ireland."

"I'm just so fascinated," I said carefully. "Being in Ireland has inspired me so much."

Her eyes flickered to my backpack. "Is that a cat?"

"Oh yes, that's Kaya. She goes with me everywhere. You could say she's my emotional support cat."

"Ah, aye... that is so American of you." Something flickered across her expression. "Well, hello Kaya. Let's go to my office so we can talk."

"I'll leave you to it," Abby smiled. "Nice seeing you, Mia."

"You too, Abby. Thanks again," I followed Saoirse, trying to ignore how Kaya had suddenly gone very still in her carrier.

Saoirse's office was exactly what you'd expect from a Celtic studies professor - shelves lined with ancient texts, maps of old Ireland on the walls, and various artifacts carefully displayed. But something about the space felt... different. Like the air itself held weight.

"So," she settled behind her desk, gesturing for me to take a seat, "what specifically about ancient Ireland interests you?"

"I'm particularly interested in the old power sites," I kept my tone casual. "The places where ancient traditions say magic once existed. The intersection of mythology and actual historical locations."

Something shifted in her eyes - so subtle I almost missed it. "That's quite specific for song inspiration."

"Well, you know how it is with artistic vision," I smiled, though I could feel Kaya's tension through the backpack. "Sometimes certain themes just... call to you."

"Indeed." She leaned forward slightly. "And what made you choose this particular theme?"

"There's just something about this land," I chose my words carefully. "The energy here feels... different. Especially in certain locations."

"Such as?" Her tone was perfectly academic, but something in her posture changed slightly.

"Well, for instance, the area around Tower, near Blarney. The old stories say-"

The subtle shift in her expression made me pause. For just a moment, I could have sworn I felt something - like the air in the office had become charged, similar to what I'd felt in the quarry.

"Interesting choice," she said after a beat. "Most tourists focus on the more well-known sites. Newgrange, the Hill of Tara..."

"I'm not most tourists," I met her gaze steadily.

"No," she agreed, studying me with new intensity. "You're not, are you?"

"What stories have you heard about Blarney? It's most known for the stone... gift of gab they say," she pressed on.

"I'm more interested in the less tourist-friendly stories," I watched her reaction carefully. "The ones about ancient powers, about guardians who protected sacred sites. Particularly around Tower."

Something flashed in her eyes - recognition? Warning? - before her academic mask slipped back into place.

"Those are... less documented traditions," she said carefully. "Though some say the area held particular significance for ancient Celtic warriors. That certain... energies converged there."

The way she said 'energies' made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. This wasn't just a professor reciting folklore - she knew something. The question was, how much?

"Energies," I echoed. "Like the kind that might still affect the area today?"

"Aye, it is certainly possible. Celtic magic does not die, it simply transforms."

"Aye, it is certainly possible. Celtic magic does not die, it simply transforms."

The way she said it - not as theory or folklore, but as fact - made me lean forward slightly. "Transforms into what, exactly?"

"That depends," she studied me with those piercing green eyes. "On who's asking, and why they're really interested in ancient power sites."

The challenge in her voice was clear. We were both dancing around something bigger than my cover story of song inspiration, but neither of us seemed willing to be the first to break character.

"Let's say," I chose my words carefully, "someone was trying to understand how these... transformed energies might interact with other types of power. Newer ones."

Kaya went completely still in her chair - a warning. Maybe I was pushing too far, but something about this professor's carefully measured responses told me she knew far more than she was letting on.

"Other types of power?" Her voice remained casual, but her eyes sharpened. "Such as?"

"Oh, you know," I matched her tone, "more recent manifestations. The kind that might... clash with ancient energies."

For a long moment, she just looked at me, like she was weighing something important. Then she stood and walked to her office door, closing it quietly.

"Ms. Black," she returned to her desk but didn't sit, "why are you really interested in the power points around Tower?"

"Why are you so interested in my interest?" I countered.

The air in the office felt charged now, like the moment before a storm. Kaya's tension was practically radiating through her carrier. This conversation had shifted into dangerous territory, but I couldn't tell if we were approaching answers or threats.

"Let's say," she spoke carefully, "that certain areas around Tower have... historical significance that some people prefer to keep private."

"And let's say," I matched her deliberate tone, "that recent events might be threatening that privacy."

Her posture shifted slightly. "Recent events?"

"The kind that might require... intervention from those familiar with both old and new power sources."

We were speaking in riddles now, each of us clearly knowing more than we were saying, but neither willing to show our full hand. The charged energy in the room had intensified.

"If someone were concerned about such events," she said finally, "they might want to be careful about drawing attention to certain locations. Even in the name of musical inspiration."

"And if someone were trying to protect people from those events," I responded, "they might need to understand exactly what they're dealing with."

"Those who don't understand celtic powers really shouldn't try to interfere with them."

"Those who don't understand Celtic powers really shouldn't try to interfere with them."

The warning in her voice was clear, but there was something else too - a protective edge that felt familiar. Like how I felt about keeping Amber and the others safe.

"And those who understand Celtic powers," I kept my voice steady, "might want to consider that some threats don't care about traditional boundaries. That sometimes different types of protection need to work together."

She moved to the window, looking out over the campus grounds. "Some powers aren't meant to mix."

"And some threats don't give us that choice."

The silence that followed was heavy with unspoken knowledge. We were both guarding secrets, both protecting something bigger than ourselves, and both aware that the other knew it.

"Death has plagued Ireland many times over the centuries," she said, attempting to sound casual, though her words carried clear weight. "It is a power we know well and no longer welcome here."

The specific choice of words made Kaya shift in her chair. This wasn't just academic discussion anymore.

"Some forms of death are more... persistent than others," I replied carefully. "Especially when they're twisted versions of something else."

"Then perhaps," she turned back from the window, those green eyes suddenly intense, "those who oppose such twisted powers should be very careful about which ancient sites they investigate. Some places are better left... undisturbed."

"And if those sites are disturbed anyway?" I pressed. "By forces that don't care about ancient warnings?"

"Then those who guard such places will handle it," her voice carried centuries of certainty. "As they always have."

"Even if those forces come wielding powers you've never encountered?"

"You assume much about what we have or haven't encountered." She moved to one of her bookshelves, running her fingers along ancient spines. "Ireland's history is deeper than most realize."

I stood, sensing the conversation had reached its limits. We'd both said more than we'd planned to, while still saying nothing concrete at all. "Thank you for your time, Professor Riordan. This has been... illuminating."

"Ms. Black," she called as I reached the door. "Should your... musical inspiration lead you near Tower again, remember - some powers are meant to remain separate for good reason."

I waited until we were well away from her office, out of the building entirely, before speaking quietly to Kaya. "Well, that was..."

"Interesting," Kaya murmured from her chair. "Very interesting."

"She knows something about the Death Ranger. That comment about death and twisted powers wasn't coincidence."

"And she's clearly connected to those Celtic Thunder Rangers somehow," Kaya's voice was thoughtful. "The energy in that office felt similar to what we encountered in the quarry."

I found a quiet spot on campus to sit, pulling out my phone to text Billy. But how exactly do you explain a conversation that consisted entirely of careful implications and veiled warnings?

'Met with Celtic studies professor,' I typed finally. 'Pretty sure she knows more about our situation than she should. Need to talk.'

Billy's response came quickly: 'Location secure to talk?'

'Meet at Michelle's. The command center's more secure than Amber's guest room.'

'On my way.'

"You know," Kaya observed as we headed for the car, "for someone who claims ancient powers shouldn't mix with others, she seemed very well-informed about our current situation."

"Yeah, and that bit about Tower - she practically confirmed there's something significant there. The way she reacted when I mentioned it..."

"And her warning about places being 'better left undisturbed,'" Kaya added. "Almost like she was trying to keep us away from specific locations."

I started the car, already planning what to tell Billy. "We need to map out exactly where all these encounters have happened. Something tells me it's not random that the Death Ranger keeps appearing near certain areas."

"Or that Michelle's friends all settled along these power points."

The drive to Michelle's estate was quiet, both Kaya and I processing the layers of that conversation. Every careful word, every measured response from Professor Riordan suggested someone who knew exactly what she was protecting - and wasn't about to share those secrets easily.

Billy was already waiting in the command center when we arrived, surrounded by holographic displays of energy readings.

"So," he looked up as we entered, "tell me about this professor."

"Well," I settled into a chair while Kaya emerged from her carrier, "either we just met someone with an unusually detailed academic interest in ancient power sites, or..."

"Or?"

"Or we just had a very careful conversation with someone who knows exactly what's happening and doesn't want us interfering."

"Define 'careful conversation,'" Billy's fingers moved across the controls, pulling up a map of the area.

I recounted the meeting, every pointed comment and veiled warning. "The way she reacted when I mentioned Tower specifically... and that comment about death being unwelcome in Ireland..."

"Almost like she knew about the Death Ranger without actually saying it," Billy mused. "And you said the energy in her office felt similar to the Celtic Thunder Rangers?"

"Not exactly the same, but... related somehow." I moved to study the map. "She practically admitted there are people guarding certain locations. Ancient protectors of some kind."

"Which might explain why the Celtic Thunder Rangers keep showing up at specific sites." Billy started marking points on the map. "Look at this pattern - every encounter has been near what could be considered historically significant areas."

"Including where Michelle's friends all settled," I added. "Though I'm starting to think that wasn't as random as we thought."

Billy sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I have to get to lunch with Livvie. Part of me wishes Michelle would trust her with all this. She's brilliant. I could use the help of someone like her."

"You know Michelle wants to keep them all out of this side of her life," I leaned against the console. "I get it. I don't really want Amber knowing either."

"Of course this is the one thing you and Michelle agree on," he smiled slightly. "I get it and I'll respect it. You want to stay behind and monitor for a while?"

I nodded. "I do. After that conversation with Professor Riordan... I want to watch for any unusual energy signatures."

Once Billy was gone, Kaya leapt onto the console, her tail twitching with disapproval. "I'm not sure how I feel about us suddenly aligning with Rangers."

I laughed. "Not really sudden, Kaya. We've been headed down this path since the moment the Emperor and Empress gave me my power back. Although I wish he would have stayed dead."

"I liked it better when it was just us. No team."

"You don't like anyone, Kaya. Sometimes I wonder if you even like me," I smirked at my guardian.

If cats could roll their eyes, Kaya would have mastered it. "I like people. Sometimes. Some people. Well, I like you. Most of the time."

"Most of the time?" I turned back to the monitors. "I'm touched by your overwhelming affection."

"Well, you did choose Earth over Nemesis," Kaya settled into a more comfortable position on the console. "Though I suppose some of these humans aren't completely terrible. Amber has decent taste in tea, even if her choice in pets is questionable."

"You know, you could try being nicer to Ellie."

"I could also try eating rocks. Neither is likely to happen."

"You know, you could try being nicer to Ellie."

"I could also try eating rocks. Neither is likely to happen."

"At least she's not as bad as Michelle's cat," I smirked. "Remember when Thara tried to assert dominance over you?"

"We do not speak of that incident," Kaya's tail twitched irritably. "Though I will admit, for a regular cat, she has... presence."

I settled into the command center's chair, studying the map of energy readings Billy had left up. The professor's warnings about Tower kept echoing in my head. What was she protecting? And more importantly, what was she protecting it from?

"You're thinking too loud," Kaya observed.

"Just trying to piece it all together. The Celtic Thunder Rangers, Professor Riordan, these power points... there's a pattern here we're missing."

"Maybe we're overthinking it," I leaned back in the chair. "All these ancient powers and secret guardians... and here we are, hiding in Michelle's basement command center like it's totally normal."

"Normal is relative," Kaya stretched. "Though I do find it amusing that the tech genius who helped build this place is currently having lunch with someone who could probably improve his security protocols tenfold."

"If only she knew," I smiled, thinking of Livvie in her tech fairy cave. "Though speaking of lunch... we should probably head back to Amber's soon. I promised to help with Rachel this afternoon."

"You mean you promised to hold the baby while I have to endure that mongrel's attempts at friendship."

"Ellie just wants to play with you."

"And I just want to maintain my dignity. We can't all have what we want."

"Come on," I stood, gathering my things. "The sooner we get back, the sooner you can demonstrate your superior feline dignity to poor Ellie."

"You mock my suffering," Kaya settled into her carrier with practiced disdain. "Though I suppose watching you attempt to change a diaper will make up for it."

"I'm getting better at that," I defended, heading for the concealed exit.

"If by 'better' you mean Rachel only cries half the time now instead of always..."

"She doesn't cry when I hold her," I pointed out. "Just when I try to... you know... deal with the less pleasant aspects of baby care."

"At least Trevor doesn't laugh at your attempts anymore," Kaya muttered. "Much. Though I notice he's quick to take over when you start looking like you're disarming a bomb."

I rolled my eyes as we headed to the car.

Livvie

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Finally, someone who spoke my language. After spending most of my time either explaining tech in small words or watching Jeremy's eyes glaze over at anything more complicated than gaming specs, lunch with Billy Cranston felt like a gift.

I'd grabbed a table at Sliced - their sandwiches and pizza were amazing, and it was quieter than trying to find somewhere in Cork City. When Billy arrived, I waved him over, already excited about the possibility of actual technical discussion.

After ordering (a Guac Chicken Wrap for me (it was close enough to a burrito), Chicken Caesar for him), I couldn't contain my enthusiasm any longer. "I was so excited to get to talk to you. The innovations you've developed at Cranston Tech have been nothing short of remarkable."

"Your work is pretty impressive too," Billy smiled. "The encryption methods you've developed... I don't think I've seen anything quite like them."

"Had to get creative," I shrugged, though the praise from someone of his caliber meant more than I wanted to admit. "Especially after the Grayson situation. Standard protocols weren't going to cut it."

"Speaking of protocols," he leaned forward slightly, "that neural network approach you mentioned yesterday - have you considered applying it to quantum computing?"

"Actually," I felt myself light up the way Jeremy always teased me about when deep tech talk was involved, "I've been working on something that might interest you. A way to layer quantum encryption with distributed neural mapping..."

Our food arrived, but we barely noticed, too absorbed in discussing processing speeds and security frameworks. This was what I missed sometimes - someone who not only understood the technical side but could push it further.

"The processing power required would be massive," Billy noted, absently picking at his salad. "But if we combined your neural mapping with some of the quantum frameworks we've been developing..."

"The security would be nearly unbreakable," I finished, my wrap completely forgotten. "And the applications go beyond just data protection. Think about AI development, predictive modeling..."

"The Irish government must love having you on their cyber security team."

I grinned. "Let's just say they appreciate someone who can keep their systems secure without leaving traceable footprints. Though sometimes I miss the challenge of actual hacking. Security is important, but..."

"But it's not quite the same rush as breaking through someone else's defenses?" His eyes sparkled with understanding.

"Exactly! It's like..." I paused, trying to find the right analogy. "It's like being the world's best locksmith but only ever installing locks, never picking them. Although between you and me... I do get some hacking in for the greater good." I couldn't help but smile, thinking about the various ways I'd made life difficult for Grayson, Alan, and Brody.

"The greater good?" Billy's tone was carefully neutral, but something in his expression suggested understanding.

"Let's just say some people deserve to have their digital lives... complicated. Especially when they threaten my family." I took a bite of my wrap. "Though these days I try to keep my activities focused on this side of the Atlantic. Less chance of certain Americans taking notice."

"Smart," he nodded. "Though I imagine someone with your skills could operate without leaving traces anyway."

"The best hackers are the ones no one knows exist," I grinned. "Which is why certain individuals still can't figure out how their private communications keep becoming public knowledge."

"Though speaking of security," Billy shifted the conversation slightly, "I've been meaning to ask about consulting opportunities at Cranston Tech. Your approach to neural networking could be valuable for some projects we're developing."

My eyes lit up. "Really? I mean, I'd have to be careful about which projects I take on. Keeping a low profile and all that."

"Of course. Everything would be completely off the books. Private contracts, encrypted communications only." He smiled. "We value discretion at Cranston Tech."

"In that case..." I leaned forward, already excited about the possibilities. "I might have some ideas about improving your current security frameworks. Not that they're not impressive, but there's always room for enhancement."

"Exactly what I was hoping you'd say." He gestured to our barely-touched food. "Though maybe we should actually eat while we discuss the details? Jeremy mentioned you tend to forget about minor things like food when you get excited about tech."

"Says the man who just spent forty-five minutes talking quantum encryption without touching his salad," I grinned.

We managed to actually eat while discussing potential projects - everything from enhanced encryption protocols to AI development. It was refreshing to talk shop with someone who not only understood the technical aspects but could challenge my ideas and push them further.

"The twins must keep you busy though," Billy noted as we finished up. "How do you balance work with two-year-olds?"

"Two and a half," I corrected automatically, unable to hide my pride. "And they're actually amazing with my work. Rose does her fairy dances, and Killy... you wouldn't believe it, but he can spot pattern deviations in code without even knowing what he's looking at. He'll just point at my screen and say 'need straight' - and he's always right. There's always an error exactly where he indicates."

"Really?" Billy's interest peaked. "At two and a half?"

"He's got this incredible ability to recognize when patterns aren't aligned properly. Jeremy says he gets it from my side," I grinned. "Though having their playroom next to my office helps keep everyone happy."

"And Jeremy?"

"Understands that sometimes the tech fairy cave calls," I smiled. "Though he does enforce actual breaks. Says I'd forget to eat or sleep if someone didn't remind me."

"So why Ireland? You're brilliant. You could work anywhere in the world."

I laughed. "Needed a country with no extradition to the US." At his expression, I grinned. "I'm kidding. Actually, they would totally extradite me if the US asked if it wasn't for my value to them. No,

Jeremy's Irish. He grew up outside Dublin, and with the danger of US schools... seemed like a good time for us to move. Plus, Ireland has better weather than Australia, if you can believe it."

"Fair... though you certainly don't sound Australian anymore."

I sighed dramatically. "Yeah, been injected with the Irish." I caught myself. "Sorry, twelve-year-old boy humor. But really, no one - including me - knows why I sound so bloody Irish now. I chalk it up to over a decade with J. Actually, we celebrate thirteen years tomorrow. Guess somewhere in all that time my accent just morphed into his?"

"Yeah," I couldn't help but smile, thinking about that chance meeting in London. "From an Irish pub to Ireland itself. What about you? Is there anyone in your life? I know you dated Michelle in high school but..."

Billy laughed. "She was my first girlfriend. That seems like a lifetime ago. There was someone once, but for a long time now it's just been me and my work. Honestly, that's enough for me."

"Fair dinkum... but Michelle... I just... can't picture it. And to have Michelle Morris as your first girlfriend? When she was already famous?"

"It was after she moved to Angel Grove," Billy explained. "Lea was trying to give her a more normal life after everything in LA. Though 'normal' might be stretching it - she's still Michelle."

"Must have been intense, being thrown into that world."

"Actually more normal than you'd think. Lea got Michelle to Angel Grove because she could be more normal there. In Angel Grove she was just a classmate. None of us really saw her as 'Michelle Morris the actress and singer' after the initial meeting. She was just another cheerleader. Although, yes, Michelle is, and always has been, just an intense person. Dating her, even then, was... never boring."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Never boring definitely sounds like Michelle. When she first became friends with J, I remember thinking how random it seemed - this massive star just casually hanging out at our place, becoming part of our little circle."

"And now look at all of you - this whole community you've built there."

"Yeah, she has this way of bringing people together, doesn't she? Making these connections that shouldn't make sense on paper but somehow work perfectly."

"Though I have to admit," I took another bite of my wrap, "watching J do her hair for the first time was... interesting. This rock star just casually sitting in our salon, chatting about everything and nothing while my husband worked his magic."

"And now he's her go-to stylist," Billy smiled.

"Well, yeah. J's brilliant at what he does. And Michelle's loyal to the people she trusts." I paused, thinking about how our little circle had grown. "It's funny how it all worked out - Michelle bringing so many of us together... even Mia, though I still can't quite figure her out."

"Speaking of figuring things out," Billy steered the conversation back to tech, "I'd love to hear more about those security protocols you mentioned."

I grinned, recognizing the deliberate subject change but too excited about the technical possibilities to care. "Right, so about that quantum encryption approach..."

As we finished our lunch, exchanging contact details for the consulting work, I couldn't help but feel excited about the possibilities. It wasn't often I got to collaborate with someone who truly understood both the technical challenges and the need for absolute discretion.

"I should head back," I said, gathering my things. "The twins will be up from their nap soon, and Rose probably has a new fairy dance choreographed for my return."

"While Killy ensures it's properly aligned?" Billy smiled, clearly remembering my earlier stories about the twins.

"Exactly," I laughed. "Though knowing my luck, they've probably convinced J to let them reorganize my tech fairy cave in my absence."

As we said goodbye, I felt a spark of anticipation about this new professional connection. Working with Cranston Tech could be interesting - this could take my career to the next level and I couldn't wait to see where it went.







## "Celebrations and Complications"

The smell of McDonald's breakfast and Starbucks coffee pulled me from sleep. I opened my eyes to find Jeremy sitting on the edge of our bed, already dressed and holding what was clearly a breakfast sandwich and an iced caramel macchiato.

"Happy Anniversary, mo chroí," he smiled. "Twins are with Mam, your favorite brekkie is here, and we have the whole day to ourselves."

"You went to both Macca's and Starbucks?" I sat up, making grabby hands at the coffee. "Now that's true love."

"Thirteen years ago today, I bought you a pint," he handed over my breakfast. "Figured I'd start this anniversary by feeding your other addiction."

I took a grateful sip of coffee, remembering that night in London. "Best pint anyone's ever bought me."

"Did Rose try to teach Niamh her new fairy dance before you left?" I asked, unwrapping my sandwich.

"Of course. And Killy made sure her viewing angle was 'properly aligned' for optimal fairy appreciation." Jeremy stretched out beside me on the bed. "Though I think Mam was more excited about their sleepover than they were."

"Your mam does love her grandchildren," I smiled, taking another sip of coffee. "Even if they drive her mad sometimes."

"Rose tried to 'reorganize' her kitchen cupboards last time," Jeremy grinned. "Killy insisted everything needed to be at precise right angles."

"Perfect chaos, those two." I leaned back against the headboard, enjoying the rare quiet of our child-free morning. "Though I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Aye, you have given me two perfect wee ones. But today is just about us," Jeremy smiled as he kissed my head.

"Mmm," I finished the last of my sandwich. "So what's the plan then? Besides the traditional anniversary pint?"

"Well," he traced patterns on my arm, "I thought we could start with you finishing that fancy coffee I popped into town to get you, then maybe a walk through the Regional Park? It's a beautiful morning."

I curled into his side, enjoying the quiet and the coffee and the simple pleasure of being together without tiny voices demanding fairy dances or proper alignment. "Sounds perfect."

The Regional Park was quiet for a Sunday morning, the air crisp but not cold. Jeremy's hand was warm in mine as we walked, and I found myself thinking about all the paths that had led us here - from that pub in London to our life in Ballincollig.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Jeremy squeezed my hand.

"Just thinking about how different our lives are now," I smiled. "Thirteen years ago, I was just some Aussie on holiday, you were just an Irish hairdresser out with your mates..."

"And now we're proper adults with careers and twins and a house in Cork," he finished. "Though you're still the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, even if you do sound more Irish than Australian these days."

"Oi, that's your fault entirely," I bumped his shoulder playfully. "You and your accent being all... infectious."

He pulled me in and kissed my neck, "I'll infect you more later."

I smirked, "Promise?"

"Oh, aye. Absolutely."

We continued our walk, talking about everything and nothing - work projects, the twins' latest adventures, plans for the garden. It felt like those early days in London, when we could spend hours just walking and talking, discovering each other. Except now the discoveries were different - not the big revelations of new love, but the smaller, deeper understanding that comes from years of building a life together.

"So," I asked as we rounded the bend, "where are we going for this traditional anniversary pint?"

"Healy's or Mary O'Connell's. Your pick," he said as he led me to the fairy trail, my favorite part of the park.

"Mary O'Connell's," I decided, smiling at the little fairy houses nestled among the trees. "Rose would love these new additions. Though Killy would probably insist they need proper structural support."

"Our daughter the fairy princess and our son the architect," Jeremy laughed. "How did we get so lucky?"

I squeezed his hand, remembering all the paths that had led us here. "By starting with a pint in London thirteen years ago."

"And you making me wait three days to get you into bed," he teased.

I laughed, "Right? If I would have given you what you wanted the first night you never would have called me again."

"No, I wouldn't have... but you made me fall in love with you first. You tricky little sidhe," he smiled as he wrapped me in his arms.

I melted into his embrace, loving how that particular endearment still made me feel warm inside. "Worked out pretty well for this sidhe, didn't it?"

"Better than pretty well," he pulled me closer. "You enchanted me with that brilliant mind of yours."

I turned in his arms to face him. "You were everything I didn't know I was looking for. Although I'm still shocked that pint was for me. I thought for sure it was for Abs when the server left it. She's the one guys always looked at. I'm just plain old Livvie."

"Plain?" Jeremy's voice was soft but intense. "Love, you were the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. Still are. The way your eyes lit up when you laughed, how you held yourself with such quiet confidence... I couldn't look away if I tried."

"Even with James practically drooling over Abby all night?"

"James has always been an eejit," he kissed my temple. "I only had eyes for my tech fairy that night. Though I didn't know that's what you were yet."

"Tech fairy came later," I smiled against his chest. "After you found out your charming Aussie girl was actually a computer nerd."

"Found out? Love, you spent half that first breakfast explaining firewall protocols to me. I had no idea what you were talking about, but watching you get so excited about it..." he pulled back just enough to meet my eyes. "That's when I knew I was in serious trouble."

"Trouble, was I?"

"Still are, mo chroí. My beautiful, brilliant sidhe who can hack government systems but can't operate a toaster."

"That toaster was-"

"Defective, I know," he laughed, the sound echoing through the fairy trail. "Ready to head to Mary O'Connell's? Time for that traditional anniversary pint."

"Lead the way, love. Though..." I grinned up at him, "the night might end better than that first one did."

Michelle

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The gentle head-butting and quiet meows from Thara finally pulled me from sleep. After weeks of early mornings being able to sleep in felt decadent. Our first real vacation day.

"Good morning to you too," I mumbled, reaching out to scratch her head. I scooped her up as I made my way out of bed and into the living room, where Mom and Hunter were already settled on the balcony with coffee, Tomi playing contentedly on the floor.

"There she is," Hunter smiled.

"Sleep well, sweetheart?" Mom asked.

I nodded, still not fully awake. "It was fantastic. Would've been longer if someone hadn't decided it was morning pet time." I gestured with Thara.

"Ma ma ma ma ma!" Tomi's excited babble drew my attention as she reached up for me.

"Sorry, Thara. Looks like you've been replaced," I set my demanding cat down to scoop up my even more demanding daughter.

"There's coffee," Hunter nodded toward the pot on the table. "And your mom already ordered breakfast for everyone."

"Everyone?" I settled into a chair with Tomi, who immediately started playing with my hair.

"Jon's family is meeting us down at the restaurant in about an hour," Mom's tone was carefully neutral, though I caught her slight eye roll. "Apparently we're all having breakfast together before the beach."

"The beach?" I automatically checked Tomi's bracelets - secure as always.

"Private beach," Hunter assured me. "Part of the resort property. Though given how many other guests I saw checking in yesterday, probably not private enough for... certain activities."

I nodded, understanding his meaning. Tomi's bracelets would stay on. "Have the girls surfaced yet?"

"Arisa's in the shower. Harley's still deciding what bikini makes her look most 'grown up,'" Mom's disapproval was clear. "That child..."

"Mom," I warned quietly. "She's just got a crush. It's normal."

"Normal?" Mom's voice dropped so Tomi couldn't hear. "Like you and Jon were normal?"

"That's different," Hunter cut in, his tone protective. "Jake's nothing like his father. And he's made it very clear he sees Harley as a little sister."

"Still," Mom muttered. "The way she looks at him..."

"The way who looks at who?" Arissa appeared on the balcony, hair still damp from her shower.

"Nothing, baby," I shifted Tomi to make room for her. "How'd you sleep?"

"Good. Though Harley kept me up half the night talking about Jake's surfing techniques," she rolled her eyes. "As if she doesn't already know how to surf."

I caught Hunter's slight tension at the mention of surfing lessons.

"It's a crush," I said quietly, bouncing Tomi on my knee. "It's normal. You'll have a crush someday too, Arissa."

"Who says I don't already?" Arissa's smirk was pure teenage mischief.

Hunter nearly choked on his coffee. "What? You do? Who is he? Or she?"

"I didn't say I did," Arissa's grin widened. "Just never said I didn't."

"Hunter," I caught his eye, trying not to laugh at his panic, "they're teenage girls. You're going to have to accept that they're growing up."

"Growing up too fast," Hunter muttered, but I could see him trying to relax. "Where's your sister anyway? We need to head down soon."

"Still trying on swimsuits," Arissa rolled her eyes. "Though I'm pretty sure Jake's seen her in all of them already this trip."

"Not helping," I warned as Hunter tensed again. "Harley! Time to go, love!"

"Coming!" Her voice carried from her room, followed by what sounded like an entire closet being reorganized.

Mom stood, gathering her things. "I'll go hurry her along. And maybe suggest a more... appropriate swimsuit choice."

I shifted Tomi, preparing to hand her to Hunter so I could get ready myself. "I should probably throw on actual clothes too. Pajamas might not be appropriate breakfast attire."

"You okay?" I asked Hunter quietly as I stood.

"Yeah," he sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Just... remembering how young you were when..."

"And that's exactly why we know Jake isn't Jon," I said firmly. "He sees her as a kid sister, nothing more."

I handed Tomi to Hunter and headed to our bedroom to get ready. The purple bikini was an easy choice - my signature color, plus it photographed well. I added a wrap skirt and slides, pulling my hair into a quick ponytail and grabbing my sunglasses. Just enough tinted sunscreen and lip oil to look effortlessly put together for the inevitable paparazzi shots. After all these years, I knew exactly how to look casual while still being camera-ready.

"Ok Thara, I don't think you'd like the beach so I'll let you stay here and sunbathe indoors," I smiled as my cat claimed her spot in the window, settling regally on a pillow.

When I came back out to the living room, Harley had finally emerged - in what looked like her third tankini of the trip, this one a deep purple with board shorts, the henley-style top perfectly her style.

"That's new," I observed, recognizing Dot's shopping influence in the slightly more mature cut of the top, though still completely appropriate.

"I got it yesterday when Dot took me shopping," Harley said quickly. "It's still me, just... you know..."

It was - completely Harley while trying to look a bit more grown up. Unlike Arissa, who was rocking her usual crimson bikini with complete confidence.

"You both look lovely," I said before Mom could comment. "Everyone ready?"

"Just waiting on you, rock star," Hunter smiled, though I caught his protective dad look at both girls' choices. Tomi babbled happily in his arms, already wearing her own purple swimsuit and matching sun hat.

"Then let's go face the breakfast brigade," I adjusted Tomi's hat. "And hope the press gives us at least one peaceful meal."

"Harley, can you button your top?" Hunter asked as we headed down.

"Dad, it doesn't even show much. It's fine," Harley insisted.

"Hunter," I touched his arm gently. "The top is fine. Very age-appropriate."

"Age-appropriate for a sixteen-year-old or age-appropriate for our daughter?" he muttered, but I could see him trying to relax.

Arisa rolled her eyes behind his back, mouthing 'sorry' to her sister. Mom kept diplomatically quiet, though I could tell she was cataloging every detail of both girls' outfits.

As we approached the elevator, I caught sight of our reflection in the mirrored doors - my little family, all trying to navigate this delicate balance between growing up and holding on.

Jon's family was already at the restaurant when we arrived - Jake and Millie deep in conversation about surf conditions, while Dot coordinated breakfast orders with the staff. I felt Hunter tense slightly beside me as Harley immediately gravitated toward Jake's end of the table.

"Morning all," I said brightly, settling Tomi into the high chair the staff had ready. "Everyone sleep well?"

"Perfect weather for the beach today," Jake smiled, politely including Harley in the conversation while maintaining a careful distance. "The waves should be great for beginners."

"I'm not really a beginner," Harley started, but caught herself at Hunter's look. "I mean, a refresher would be good though."

"The acai bowls are amazing," Millie offered, smoothly changing the subject. "Jake and I tried them yesterday."

"Really?" Harley's attempt at casual interest wasn't fooling anyone. "Maybe I'll try that too..."

"Your show was amazing last night, Michi... you were as captivating as always," Jon smiled.

I felt Hunter shift beside me, his hand finding my knee under the table. "Thanks. The energy was amazing. I had a blast. Though today is about vacation, not work."

"Speaking of," Arissa chimed in, "when are we heading to the beach?"

"After breakfast," Mom answered, her tone making it clear she wasn't thrilled about Jon's compliment. "Though perhaps some of us should reapply sunscreen before we go."

Tomi's happy babbling cut through the tension as she reached for the fruit on my plate, completely oblivious to the complex dynamics swirling around our breakfast table.

"Here sweetie," I handed Tomi a piece of mango, watching her face light up. At least someone at the table was having an uncomplicated morning.

"The private beach is just past those palms," Jake pointed through the restaurant's windows. "Millie and I checked it out yesterday. There's a nice shallow area perfect for little ones."

"And good waves further out," Millie added, then seemed to realize that might not have been helpful as Hunter tensed again.

"The resort has umbrellas and chairs set up," Dot offered, clearly trying to keep conversation neutral. "And a private bar service."

"Which we'll definitely need," I heard Mom mutter under her breath, making me hide a smile behind my coffee cup.

"Da da!" Tomi announced, showing Hunter her mango-covered hands.

"Yes, Princess," he wiped her hands, visibly relaxing as he focused on our youngest. "Very messy."

"I remember when ours were that little. Seems like yesterday. These baby moments are so precious," Dot smiled.

"Don't I know it. These two are half grown and I can't believe it," I gestured at Harley and Arissa. "They grow up too fast."

"Not Tomi. She's not allowed to grow anymore," Hunter said as he wiped her hands.

"Good luck with that," Jon laughed. "One minute they're covered in mango, the next they're..." he trailed off, catching Hunter's warning look.

"Asking to go surfing with boys?" Arissa supplied helpfully, earning an elbow from Harley.

"Speaking of surfing," Millie intervened smoothly, "maybe we should head down before it gets too hot?"

I caught Mom's eye roll at the not-so-subtle subject change, but she was already gathering her things. "Yes, let's. Though some of us might want to button up first."

"Mom," I warned quietly, but Harley was already adjusting her top with a sigh.

The group naturally dispersed as we headed to the beach - Arissa gravitating toward Steph, while Harley tried (and failed) to look casual about following Jake and Millie. Mom scooped up Tomi with an expertise that had nothing to do with wanting to avoid Jon and everything to do with spoiling her youngest granddaughter. Not that I was complaining about the offer of free childcare.

That left the four of us - me, Hunter, Jon, and Dot - making our way to the private beach area. The resort had set up several groupings of lounge chairs under large umbrellas, offering at least the illusion of privacy. Though I could hear the subtle clicks of camera shutters from various "hidden" locations. After decades in the spotlight, I could spot paparazzi positions without even trying.

But today wasn't about them. Today was about vacation, family, and maybe letting Hunter relax enough to actually enjoy it.

I settled onto one of the loungers, Hunter immediately claiming the one next to me. Jon and Dot took chairs under the adjacent umbrella - close enough for conversation but maintaining that careful distance we'd all learned to navigate over the years.

"The press is going to have a field day with this," Dot observed dryly, watching a particularly obvious photographer trying to hide behind a palm tree.

"Oh, absolutely," I adjusted my sunglasses. "Tomorrow's headlines will be fascinating. 'Michelle Morris's Complicated Beach Day' or something equally dramatic."

"At least give them something worth photographing," Hunter murmured, his hand finding mine between our chairs. The gesture was subtle but deliberate - a reminder to everyone, including the cameras, of exactly where things stood.

From further down the beach, I could hear Tomi's delighted squeals as Mom introduced her to the ocean. Arissa's laugh carried from somewhere near the beach bar where she was hanging

out with Steph. And if I squinted, I could just make out Harley's form near the surf, carefully maintaining what she thought was a casual distance from Jake and Millie.

"You know what's really going to drive them crazy?" I smirked, squeezing Hunter's hand. "Us being completely boring. Just a normal family on vacation."

"Normal?" Jon raised an eyebrow. "When have we ever managed that?"

"Speak for yourself," Hunter's tone was light but pointed. "Some of us excel at normal."

Before Jon could respond, Tomi's excited "MA MA!" cut through any tension. She was toddling up the beach with Mom, her little sun hat slightly askew, reaching for me with wet hands.

"Having fun in the water, baby girl?" I reached for her, not caring about my dry swimsuit.

"The waves are a bit much for her," Mom explained, settling into a chair. "But she loved the shallow part."

"Da!" Tomi squirmed from my lap toward Hunter, leaving wet handprints on both of us.

"Always Daddy's girl when she wants something," I laughed, watching Hunter's face light up as he caught her.

Harley

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I tried to look casual as I walked near the surf, keeping what I hoped was a mature, natural distance from Jake and Millie. Not too close to seem desperate, but close enough to be included if they decided to hit the waves.

"The conditions are perfect," Jake was saying to Millie, his arm around her waist in that easy way that made my stomach hurt. "Though the break is a bit rough for beginners."

I wanted to point out that I wasn't actually a beginner - that Aunt Tori had taught me years ago and I was actually pretty good. But that would ruin my plan to get surfing "lessons."

Behind us, I could feel Dad watching. I knew why - the whole Jon and Mom history when she was my age. Dad tried to hide it, but I could see him comparing the situations in his head. Not that Jake was anything like his dad. Jake was... different. Better. Even if he did only see me as a kid sister.

Arissa thought the whole thing was hilarious - me pretending I needed help surfing just to spend time with Jake. But she didn't understand. Nobody did.

I watched Jake demonstrate proper paddling technique to Millie, trying not to be obvious about studying the way the sun caught his hair. Everyone thought this was just some silly crush, but they didn't understand. This was different. Real. Even Mom, who usually got it, kept giving me these looks - like she understood but also knew something I didn't.

"You know," Arissa's voice made me jump, "you could probably teach Millie better than Jake can. Considering Aunt Tori actually certified you last summer."

"Shut up," I muttered, not taking my eyes off Jake. "That's not the point."

"Oh, I know exactly what the point is." I could hear the eye roll in her voice. "You're so obvious, Har."

"Whatever. Shouldn't you be off with Steph or something?"

"Just trying to save you from yourself," she bumped my shoulder. "But fine, continue your pining. I'll go hang out with the adults who actually want my company."

I ignored her, focusing instead on how Jake's hands covered Millie's as he showed her the right grip on the board. Someday, when I was older... when I wasn't just like his kid sister...

I could feel Dad watching again from his spot near Mom. He thought he was being subtle, but subtle wasn't exactly Dad's strong suit. I'd overheard him and Mom arguing about this trip - about Jake being here, about how young I was.

But I wasn't that young. Not really. And Jake was nothing like Jon. Even if Jon was cool - those hockey games when I was little were some of my favorite memories - Jake was different. Better. More... everything.

"Hey, Harley!" Jake called out. "Want to help me show Millie the basics?"

My heart did that stupid flutter thing it always did when he said my name. Play it cool, I told myself. "Sure, I guess. If you want."

"Great!" His smile was perfect. Even if it was the same one he gave everyone. "You can demonstrate while I explain. You're way better at this than me anyway."

"Oh, um, I don't know about that..." I tried to sound uncertain, even though I'd been surfing since I was six.

Millie's knowing look made my face heat up. She wasn't mean about it - she was actually really nice, which somehow made it worse.

"Come on," Jake waved me over, completely casual like my heart wasn't trying to explode.  
"Let's start with the basics."

I nodded, trying to look uncertain despite years of experience.

"Perfect!" His hand on my shoulder as he positioned me on the board felt like it was burning through my skin, but to him it was just... normal. Teaching. "You've got great natural balance - probably from all that hockey, right?"

He remembered I played hockey. My stomach did that stupid flip thing again.

"Yeah, she's amazing on the ice," Millie added warmly. "Jake was telling me about watching you play last time we visited."

He talked about me? To his wife? I tried not to read too much into it, but the fact that he noticed, that he remembered...

"We'll have you riding waves in no time," Jake grinned, that easy, friendly smile that made me forget how to breathe properly. "Athletes like you usually pick this up super fast."

"Ok, so first thing is paddling technique," Jake demonstrated on his own board. "You want to keep your core tight and..."

I pretended to concentrate on his instructions, even though I could probably teach this myself. The way his eyes lit up when he talked about surfing almost made up for having to play beginner.

"Like this?" I deliberately made my form slightly off, just to see if he'd correct it.

"Almost," he moved closer, adjusting my position. "Just shift your shoulders a bit... there. Perfect!"

Behind us, I could hear Dad's voice getting slightly louder in conversation with Mom. Probably trying not to watch us too obviously. They all thought they were so subtle.

"You're a natural," Jake's encouragement was completely genuine - because of course it was. He was just... nice. To everyone. "Want to try catching a small wave?"

"I don't know..." I bit my lip, looking uncertain. "Maybe you could show me first?"

Millie's knowing smile made me blush again. But Jake just nodded enthusiastically, completely oblivious to anything except teaching a family friend's daughter how to surf.

I watched him demonstrate proper technique, my mind wandering to the future. Just one more month until I turned 13, and then only five years until I was 18. It wasn't that long, really. Mom and Jon had been together when she was my age - even if everyone acted like that was different somehow.

I knew Jake had to wait because of his acting career. The press would go crazy if anything happened now. But once I was 18... well, Millie was sweet and all, and she was helping Jake's career since she was already famous. Mom always said sometimes you needed "industry relationships" to help your career. That's probably all this was - Jake being smart about his future. Millie would be fine when he left her. She was a successful actress; she'd find someone else.

"Ready to try?" Jake's voice pulled me from my daydream. "We'll start with the whitewater, nice and easy."

"Okay," I tried to sound nervous but eager. Like I hadn't been surfing waves twice this size for years.

"I'll be right here," he assured me, and my heart did that stupid flutter thing again. "Just remember what I showed you about popping up."

I deliberately wobbled a bit as I got into position, catching Arissa's eye roll from where she was watching with Steph. Whatever. She didn't understand. None of them did.

"Here comes a good one," Jake called out. His hand on my board, steadying it, felt like electricity. "Ready?"

I nodded, forcing myself to look uncertain. The wave was barely enough to push the board, but I made a show of concentrating hard, like this was the biggest challenge ever.

"That was great!" His enthusiasm was so genuine it almost made me feel bad about pretending. Almost. "You're a natural, Harley! Want to try another one?"

"If... if you'll help me?" I looked up through my lashes the way I'd seen Mom do.

"Of course!" Jake's easy agreement made my heart soar, even though part of me knew he'd say the same thing to anyone. "We'll get you catching real waves in no time."

"You really are picking this up fast," Millie added encouragingly. Which would have been nice if she wasn't, you know, in the way of my entire future.

I could hear Mom and Jon laughing about something back on the beach, that easy friendship they had now. See? Everything worked out fine with them. Well, except for the part where Mom married Dad instead, but that was different. Jake and I were meant to be together. Everyone would see that eventually.

"Hey, focus here," Jake tapped my shoulder playfully. "You're drifting. Literally - paddle back this way a bit."

His touch sent butterflies through my stomach, even though he probably didn't even think twice about it. That's what made Jake so perfect - he was just naturally sweet like that. To everyone. But someday...

"Sorry," I ducked my head, pretending to be embarrassed about drifting when really I was just trying to hide my blush. "I'll pay better attention."

The next wave was perfect - just big enough that I could show off a little without being too obvious. Before I could stop myself, muscle memory kicked in and I executed a perfect pop-up and cross-step that Aunt Tori would have been proud of.

"Holy crap, Harley!" Jake's excitement was genuine as I paddled back. "That was incredible! Are you sure you haven't done this before?"

Without thinking - okay, maybe thinking a little - I launched myself off my board and into a congratulatory hug. Jake caught me easily, spinning me around as he held me in his arms.

"Natural athlete!" he laughed, completely oblivious to how my heart was about to explode. "You're going to be better than me in no time!"

I caught a glimpse of Dad over Jake's shoulder - his face a mixture of panic and that look he got whenever he thought about Mom's past. But I didn't care. Jake was hugging me, praising me, and even Millie's presence couldn't dim the perfect moment.

"Careful there, kiddo," Jake set me down, ruffling my hair like I was ten or something. "Don't want to slip on the board."

Right. Kiddo. Like a little kid. But he'd hugged me, spun me around. That had to mean something... right?

My skin still tingled where he'd held me. Jake was always so careful about touching me normally - probably because he had to hide how he really felt. But just now... he hadn't even hesitated to catch me, to hold me. Sure, he'd called me "kiddo" after, but that was just for show. He had to

say things like that with everyone watching. Especially Dad, who looked like he was about to have an aneurysm.

I caught Mom putting her hand on Dad's arm, probably trying to calm him down. They just didn't understand. Nobody did. The way Jake had smiled at me, how strong his arms felt... he wouldn't have held me like that if he only thought of me as a kid. He couldn't have.

"Want to try another wave?" Jake asked, already turning to help Millie with her board position again. His voice was so casual, like he hadn't just held me in his arms moments ago. But that was just Jake - good at hiding his feelings, like Mom said Jon used to be.

Dad was definitely going to say something later about appropriate boundaries, but I didn't care. That moment had been worth any lecture.

Michelle

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I kept my hand on Hunter's arm, feeling the tension in his muscles as we watched the scene unfold. That hug had triggered every protective instinct he had - and honestly, watching Harley launch herself at Jake had sent my own heart into my throat for a moment.

"She's fine," I murmured. "Jake handled it perfectly."

And he had - the quick spin, the casual "kiddo," the immediate return to teaching mode. He was nothing like his father had been at that age. But try telling that to Hunter, who was watching our daughter's face as she stared at Jake with that painfully familiar look of first love.

"I know that look," Hunter's voice was tight. "I've seen it before. In old photos of you with-"

"And that's exactly why we know this is different," I cut him off gently. "Jake's not Jon. And Harley's crush, while very real to her, isn't going to end the same way."

Though watching her rationalize every interaction, the way she clung to every casual touch... God, I remembered that feeling. Even if the situations were completely different.

I sighed, "If that had been me and Jon there would have been a kiss. Making out...a return to the hotel. That is not what this is. This is an innocent school girl crush."

Hunter blinked at me, "Blunt much?"

"Sorry, but you get my point."

"Yeah, Jake is a good man," Hunter said quietly. "Unlike-"

"Exactly," I squeezed his arm. "Jake sees her as a kid sister. He's happily married. He's not going to cross any lines or encourage anything inappropriate. The most dangerous thing here is Harley's own imagination."

Mom snorted from her chair where she was building a sandcastle with Tomi. "That imagination is working overtime from what I can see."

"She'll grow out of it," I said, watching Harley pretend to need help standing on her board - something she'd mastered years ago. "We all did."

"Some of us later than others," Mom muttered.

"Some of us later than others," Mom muttered.

Before I could respond, Jake's voice carried across the water. "Hey Harley, you've got water in your ear - hold still." He reached out, brushing her hair back from her face with casual brotherly concern.

The look on Harley's face - like Jake had just handed her the moon - made my heart ache. I felt Hunter tense beside me again as our daughter leaned into the innocent touch like it was something magical.

"Thanks," Harley's voice carried that breathless quality I remembered all too well from my own teen years.

"No problem, kiddo. Can't have our star student getting swimmer's ear," Jake grinned, already turning back to help Millie.

"Hunter," I warned quietly, feeling him shift. "He's being kind, that's all."

"Being kind is what makes it worse," he muttered. "She's going to read into every little thing."

"Like someone else did at that age?" Mom added pointedly.

I rolled my eyes, "Mom, Jon was my boyfriend. That was 100% different."

"That's not as comforting as you may think it is," Hunter glared at me.

"No, I mean..." I shifted Tomi in my lap, choosing my words carefully. "Jake isn't encouraging anything. He's not flirting, he's not creating private moments, he's not... doing any of the things Jon did. He's being a good guy who sees her as a kid sister, nothing more."

"Ma ma ma!" Tomi reached toward the water, providing a welcome distraction.

"Your daddy's just worried about your sister," I told her, though my eyes were on Hunter. "Even though he doesn't need to be."

"Tell that to the teenager currently melting because Jake touched her hair," Mom observed dryly

I sighed in exasperation. "You are both being ridiculous. Harley isn't me and Jake isn't Jon."

"No, but damn if she doesn't look just like you and he looks just like his dad," Mom said.

"But they aren't us. Hell, when I was her age I had already lost my virginity to Jon," I blurted out.

The silence that followed was deafening. Hunter's face went through several emotions at once, while Mom looked like she wanted to be anywhere else. Even Tomi seemed to sense the tension, going still in my arms.

"And that," I said more quietly, "is exactly why this is different. Jake would never..."

"If my daughter isn't still a virgin when we leave this island there will be some people not leaving at all," Hunter growled.

I sighed and shook my head. "Hunter, love, you're working yourself up over nothing. Jake is married, responsible, and sees Harley as nothing more than a kid sister. The only person creating romantic scenarios here is our daughter's imagination."

Tomi chose that moment to throw sand at her dad, breaking some of the tension. But I could still see Hunter's eyes tracking every interaction between Jake and Harley, cataloging every innocent touch through the lens of our own complicated history.

"Maybe we should suggest lunch soon," Mom offered, clearly trying to help. "Get everyone out of the water for a bit."

Livvie

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Jeremy set our Guinness pints on the table - thirteen years of tradition condensed into one perfect pour. The pub was quiet for lunch hour, just a few regulars at the bar and soft Irish music playing in the background.

"To the tech fairy who wandered into 'my' pub," Jeremy smiled, raising his glass.

"Wrong pub," I clinked my glass against his. "But I suppose you'll do."

We'd claimed our usual corner booth, the one where we could people-watch while staying in our own little bubble. Thirteen years of anniversaries, and somehow each one felt both familiar and new.

"So," Jeremy's fingers found mine across the table, "what does my sidhe want to do with the rest of our child-free afternoon?"

"Well," I took a sip of my Guinness, "we could check out that new arcade that opened in Ballincollig Center. Since we don't have any tiny voices insisting on 'proper game alignment' or fairy dance breaks between rounds."

"Or," Jeremy's thumb traced patterns on my palm, "we could head home for a bit, then get dressed up for dinner? I might have reservations at that new place in Cork you've been wanting to try."

"The Italian place?" I perked up. "How did you manage that? They're booked solid for months."

"I have my ways," he grinned. "Though it might have involved Trevor putting in a good word."

"Pulling strings with our Michelin star friend?" I laughed. "You really went all out this year."

"Thirteen years since you made me wait three days," he squeezed my hand. "Figured it deserved something special."

"Though I have to admit," Jeremy's eyes sparkled with that look that still made my stomach flip, "I'm rather interested in what happens between now and dinner."

"Oh really?" I raised an eyebrow, trying to hide my smile behind my pint glass. "And what exactly did you have in mind?"

"Well," he leaned closer, voice dropping, "we do have the house to ourselves. No tiny tech experts or fairy princesses to interrupt..."

"Mmm," I set down my glass. "That does sound promising. Though you did go to all that trouble to get those dinner reservations..."

"Dinner's not for hours," his fingers traced up my arm. "And I can think of several very interesting ways to pass the time."

The look in his eyes made me forget we were in public. Thirteen years, and he could still make me feel like that girl in a London pub, falling head over heels for an Irish hairdresser's charm.

We finished our pints maybe a bit faster than tradition called for, the promise of an empty house making us both eager to leave. Jeremy's hand stayed on my lower back as we walked to the car, that subtle possessive touch that still sent shivers down my spine.

"You know," I said as we drove home, "we should probably get ready for dinner early. Given how long it takes to get into Cork City..."

"Oh absolutely," Jeremy's grin was wicked. "Hours early. Very responsible planning, that."

The moment our front door closed behind us, Jeremy pulled me into a kiss that made me forget about dinner entirely. Thirteen years of practice meant he knew exactly how to make me melt.

"Happy Anniversary, mo chroí," he murmured against my lips.

"I need you," I managed between kisses. "Now."

We did eventually make it upstairs, but not before I pushed him back on the sofa and undid his jeans.

"Oh Love," he moaned.

"You didn't let me do this for you on my birthday, but today isn't all about me," I said as I kissed down his body.

What followed was a perfect reminder of why thirteen years together had only made things better between us. We took our time, knowing we had the whole afternoon to ourselves, no little voices to interrupt our celebration. We did eventually make it up to our bed.

Later, curled against Jeremy's chest, I traced patterns on his skin. "We should probably start getting ready for dinner soon."

"Probably," he agreed, pulling me closer. "Though I'm quite comfortable right here."

"Didn't you say something about fancy dinner reservations?"

"Mmm," he kissed my temple. "But dessert first."

We eventually managed to drag ourselves out of bed, though getting ready took longer than necessary with Jeremy's hands constantly finding reasons to "help" with my dress.

"Love," I laughed as he kissed my neck while I tried to put on earrings, "we're going to be late for those reservations you worked so hard to get."

"Worth it," he murmured, but stepped back to finish buttoning his own shirt. "Though you do look absolutely gorgeous in that green dress."

I smoothed down the fabric - one of my favorites, a deep emerald that made my eyes pop. "You clean up pretty well yourself."

"Ready for part two of our celebration?" He offered his arm with exaggerated formality.

"Lead the way," I took his arm, loving how even after thirteen years, he could still make me feel like the only woman in the world. "Though I hope you know this isn't the end of our celebrating."

"Of course not," he smirked.

The restaurant was everything I'd heard about - intimate lighting, soft Italian music, and the kind of atmosphere that made you forget you were just outside Cork City. After we ordered, Jeremy reached under the table for something.

"While we wait for dinner, do you want your gift?" he asked.

I smiled, pulling my own carefully wrapped package from my purse. "Yes. I have a gift for you too."

"Ladies first," Jeremy slid an elegantly wrapped box across the table.

I carefully unwrapped it to find a sleek jewelry box. Inside was a delicate silver pendant - a fairy sitting cross-legged with a laptop, tiny green stones making up her wings.

"J..." I breathed, lifting it out. "It's perfect. Where did you even find something like this?"

"Had it made," he smiled. "Worked with that jewelry designer in Cork - the one who did Michelle's pieces for the ACMs? Thought my tech fairy deserved something special."

"It's beautiful," I touched the tiny wings. "Help me put it on?"

As Jeremy fastened the clasp behind my neck, his fingers lingering on my skin, I pushed his gift across the table. "Your turn."

Jeremy unwrapped his gift carefully, and I watched his face as he realized what he was holding.

"No way," his eyes went wide. "Seo Linn tickets? But they've been sold out for months!"

"Front row," I couldn't help but grin at his excitement. "At the Marquee in Cork City."

"Mo chroí," he was practically bouncing in his seat like one of the twins. "How did you manage this?"

"A tech fairy never reveals her secrets," I squeezed his hand across the table. "Though I will say some strategic website monitoring might have been involved."

The pure joy on his face was worth every hour I'd spent coding that ticket-tracking algorithm. There was nothing quite like seeing my usually composed husband light up like a kid at Christmas over his favorite band.

"Well, Trev got to meet Andy Bell. No reason you shouldn't be able to meet Stiofán Ó Fearail," I smiled.

"Wait? Meet?"

"Oh, did I forget to mention the meet and greet?" I grinned, loving how his eyes lit up even more. Seeing my cool, collected husband get excited like this made me fall in love with him all over again.

"You," Jeremy leaned across the table to kiss me, not caring that we were in public, "are absolutely incredible. Best wife ever."

"I do try," I touched the fairy pendant at my neck. "Though you didn't do so bad yourself."

Our food arrived, and we spent dinner talking about everything and nothing - the twins' latest adventures, work stories, plans for the garden. It felt like those early dates in London, when we could talk for hours and never run out of things to say. Except now the stories included Rose's latest fairy choreography and Killy's increasing insistence that the kitchen cupboards needed "proper alignment."

"So," Jeremy's voice dropped lower as we finished our wine, "ready to head home? Continue our celebration?"

The look in his eyes made me forget we were in a fancy restaurant. "Definitely. Though this time," I smirked, "maybe we actually make it to the bedroom before-"

"Excuse me," he cut me off, already signaling for the check.

The ride home felt longer than usual, Jeremy's hand on my knee making it hard to think straight. Thirteen years together and he could still make my heart race with a simple touch.

"You know," I murmured as we pulled up to our house, "we have hours before we need to pick up the twins tomorrow."

"Hours, you say?" His voice had that low tone that never failed to send shivers down my spine. "Whatever shall we do with all that time?"

We barely made it through the front door before his lips found mine. The fairy pendant caught the light as he pulled me closer, a reminder of how perfectly he knew me - the tech geek who'd stumbled into his life thirteen years ago in a London pub.

"Happy Anniversary, mo chroí," he whispered against my lips.

"Bedroom," I managed between kisses. "And this time, actually make it there."

We did make it to the bedroom this time, though several items of clothing didn't survive the journey. In the soft evening light filtering through our window, Jeremy's hands and lips traced familiar paths that still felt new somehow. Thirteen years of learning each other, and yet moments like these could still take my breath away.

Later, curled against his chest, listening to his heartbeat slow back to normal, I felt that perfect contentment that only comes from being exactly where you belong.

"I love you," Jeremy murmured into my hair. "My beautiful tech fairy."

"Love you too," I smiled against his skin. "Aren't you glad I made you wait those three days?"

"Best wait of my life," he pulled me closer. "Happy Anniversary, mo sidhe."

Tomorrow we'd pick up our chaos twins, return to our normal life of fairy dances and proper alignment. But tonight was just us, just like it had been thirteen years ago in London.

## "Who We Are"

I stared up at the wall, a route I would have considered easy a year ago. Now my arms were already shaking, and I was barely halfway up. This was ridiculous. I'd climbed actual mountains, tackled real rock faces. This manufactured wall should not be giving me this much trouble.

"You're doing great, mo ghrá!" Trevor called up encouragingly.

I gritted my teeth, reaching for the next hold. My muscles protested - apparently giving birth and nearly dying did a number on your core strength. Who knew?

"I used to do this route as a warm-up," I muttered, trying to ignore how my arms trembled.

"Used to" being the operative phrase. Before pregnancy, before complications, before... everything. I forced myself to focus on the next move instead of the growing frustration.

"Take your time, love," Trevor's voice carried up, steady and patient. Too patient. He'd given up climbing for months in solidarity with me, but he'd bounced back like it was nothing. Meanwhile, I was struggling with routes rated for beginners.

My foot slipped slightly, and I caught myself with a grunt. Sweat was starting to make my grip uncertain - another thing that never used to be an issue. The logical part of my brain knew this was normal, that my body needed time to rebuild its strength. But logic wasn't winning against the voice in my head that kept comparing every move to how easy it used to be.

"Maybe I should just-" I started to suggest coming down, but Trevor cut me off.

"You've got this, Amber. One hold at a time. Just like we always do."

"Just like we always do," I echoed under my breath. Except it wasn't like we always did. Everything was different now. My center of gravity felt wrong, my endurance was shot, and muscles I'd spent years training seemed to have forgotten everything they knew.

I reached for the next hold, forcing myself to breathe steadily like Trevor had taught me years ago. Back in LA, when he'd first introduced me to climbing. Now I felt like I was starting from scratch.

"Remember that first climb in California?" Trevor called up, clearly reading my frustration. "You said the same thing then - that it was too hard, that you couldn't do it."

"That was different," I grunted, but I couldn't help smiling at the memory. "I was learning then. This... I should know how to do this."

"And you do. Your body just needs to remember."

My fingers found the next hold, but my arms were shaking badly now. The top of the wall seemed impossibly far away, even though it was nothing compared to the climbs we used to do.

"This is ridiculous," I muttered, hating how weak I felt. "I climbed actual mountains in Yosemite. Now I can't even..."

"Now you're three months post-major surgery and nearly dying," Trevor's voice was gentle but firm. "You're not being fair to yourself, mo ghrá."

He was right, of course. The rational part of my brain knew that. Just like I knew that being able to hold Rachel while painting her tiny nails was more important than being able to scale a wall. But still...

"I hate feeling weak," I admitted, pausing to rest my arms.

"You're the strongest person I know," Trevor said. "And not because of how many walls you can climb."

"The strongest person who can't finish a beginner route," I grumbled, but there was less bite in my frustration now.

"The strongest person who survived something that should have killed you," Trevor countered. "Who's fighting her way back, who's learning to be a mother even when it terrifies her. The climbing will come back, love. Just like everything else is."

My arms were screaming now, muscles trembling with fatigue. A few months ago, I would have pushed through anyway, forced myself to finish. But part of recovery - both physical and mental - was learning when to stop.

"I need to come down," I said finally, hating the admission but knowing it was the right choice.

"Okay," Trevor's voice held nothing but support. "Take a break, give it another go. You've got this, Love."

I sighed as I came down.

"New climber?" A voice asked.

I turned to see a couple watching us - a man with brown hair and blue eyes, and a woman with fiery red hair and piercing green eyes. I fought the urge to glare at their assumption.



"No, not new, just recovering," I managed.

"Amber is actually an amazing climber. We just have to get her body to heal, gently of course," Trevor said, ever the diplomat. "You two look like you climb a lot."

The man laughed, "Oh aye... we're only here to warm up before we go out for a real climb."

"Maybe you can join us some time, once she's in shape. Not often we find other couples that climb together," the woman said.

"That would be grand. I'm Trevor O'Sullivan, this is my wife Amber," Trevor said.

"Tiernan Riordan and that's my wife, Saoirse," Tiernan replied.

"Wait, O'Sullivan... you're that chef that owns the Celtic Cantina. My colleague Abby is always raving about it," Saoirse said.

Trevor laughed, "Aye, that would be me. And I'll have to thank Abs for talking the Cantina up."

"So you work at UCC?" I asked.

Saoirse nodded, "Aye. I teach Celtic History."

"Oh that sounds fascinating," Trevor's eyes lit up with that enthusiasm he always had for anything Irish or Celtic.

"It is," she nodded.

I tried not to roll my eyes at Trevor's immediate shift into host mode. Though I had to admit, it would be nice to know other climbers in the area. Even if I wasn't exactly at my best right now.

"We'd love to," Saoirse smiled, "though not the Cantina - wouldn't want to make you work on your day off."

"There's a decent café just down the road," Tiernan suggested.

As we gathered our gear, I caught Trevor watching me with that look that meant he was worried I was pushing too hard. "I'm fine," I assured him quietly. "Just frustrated."

"Baby steps, mo ghrá," he squeezed my hand. Though it was almost funny how protective he was being - Niamh had practically pushed us out the door this morning, insisting that getting back to climbing would be good for both of us. Sometimes I thought Trevor was more cautious about my recovery than anyone else.

The café was quiet for a Monday afternoon, and we found a corner table easily. Trevor naturally fell into conversation with Tiernan about different climbing spots in the area, while Saoirse asked about Rachel.

"Three months old?" she smiled. "No wonder you're frustrated with climbing. You're actually doing amazingly well to be back at it already."

There was something knowing in her tone that made me feel less self-conscious about my earlier struggle. "Were you climbing before I showed up? I didn't see you on the walls."

"We were just arriving," Tiernan explained. "Though Saoirse's right - most people wouldn't be attempting those routes so soon after..." he trailed off, clearly unsure how to reference my physical state.

"The birth was complicated," I said simply, appreciating how neither of them pushed for details. "But the doctors cleared me for activity, and honestly, I needed to get back to something normal."

"Nothing wrong with taking it slow though," Trevor added, that protective edge creeping into his voice again.

I reached for his hand under the table, grateful as always for his constant support. Some things were worth taking slowly.

"So how long have you two been climbing together?" Trevor asked, his fingers intertwined with mine.

"Since we were teenagers," Saoirse shared a look with Tiernan that suggested there was more to that story. "Though we mostly do outdoor climbs now. The walls are just for practice and bad weather days."

"We used to do a lot of outdoor climbing in California," I found myself saying. "Before we moved here."

"You should join us sometime," Tiernan offered. "Once you're ready. We know some good spots that aren't too challenging but offer amazing views."

I felt Trevor's hand tighten slightly in mine - not protective this time, but excited. I knew he missed our more adventurous climbs, even if he'd never say it.

"That would be brilliant," he smiled.

I nodded in agreement, "Absolutely."

"So, Amber," Saoirse leaned forward slightly, "we know Trevor's a chef. What do you do for work?"

"Well," I smiled, still proud of how far I'd come, "I was the brand ambassador for Lydia James Fashions, but now I'm launching my own company - Amber Nichole Cosmetics. Our first line debuts this autumn."

"Oh wow, impressive," Saoirse's interest seemed genuine.

"And we know Saoirse works at UCC. What about you, Tiernan?" Trevor asked.

"Nothing nearly as exciting," Tiernan shrugged modestly. "Construction, though we've been handling some interesting projects lately."

"Such as?" Trevor's interest was piqued.

"That big estate going up just outside Ballincollig? My company's handling the build."

"You mean Michelle and Hunter Bradley's place?" I couldn't help but laugh at the coincidence.

"You know of it?" Tiernan looked surprised.

"You could say that," I shared an amused look with Trevor. "Michelle and Hunter are practically family. It's a long story, but we're all quite close."

"Small world," Saoirse smiled. "The estate's turning out beautifully - the stonework especially."

"Tiernan's team is doing amazing work," Trevor agreed. "The recording studio is going to be incredible from what we've seen."

"The acoustics in that space were a challenge," Tiernan nodded. "But it's coming together nicely."

"Michelle's particular about getting things exactly right," I smiled, remembering her excitement over the plans. "Though the end result is always worth it."

The conversation flowed easily after that - Trevor and Tiernan discussing different building projects around Cork, while Saoirse asked about the cosmetics industry. It felt nice, normal even, making new friends who didn't know our whole complicated history.

Kenzie

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I tucked my red hair behind my ear as I checked the French toast, mentally adding this to my list

of recipes to perfect before culinary school started. Though at this rate, my hair would be blonde again before classes began - the red dye was pretty, but maybe not the most professional look for a future pastry chef.

"You're thinking too loud," Shay commented from where she was perched on our tiny counter, already on her second coffee. All black everything, as usual - though I'd noticed her stealing one of my colorful hoodies lately.

"Just wondering if I should go back to blonde," I flipped the toast. "What do you think?"

"I think you should do whatever makes you happy, love," she smirked. "Though if you're asking if I'll still fancy you blonde, the answer is obviously yes."

"Obviously," I grinned, hip-checking her lightly as I reached for the cinnamon. "The girls should be here soon. Hal texted they're on their way."

"Ah yes, time for Kira to judge our life choices while eating all our food."

"Be nice," I laughed, though there was no real warning in it. We both knew how this went by now.

"I'm always nice," Shay protested, though her smirk said otherwise. "I even put on colors today."

I glanced at her "colorful" outfit - black jeans, black t-shirt, and my stolen pink hoodie. "Wow, such sacrifice."

"Oi, this is progress. Next thing you know I'll be as perky as you used to be. Go Longhorns!" Her mock cheerleader impression made me snort.

"God, remember those uniforms?" I shuddered dramatically. "Though I have to admit, the scholarship money was worth it."

"And now look at you - future pastry chef extraordinaire, living in sin with your emo girlfriend in Cork." She hopped down to wrap her arms around my waist from behind. "Kara must be so proud."

"Pretty sure she's still praying for my soul," I leaned back into her. "Though at least she's stopped trying to set me up with 'nice Christian boys' from her church."

A knock at the door interrupted whatever sarcastic comment Shay was about to make.

"I'll get it," Shay pressed a quick kiss to my cheek before heading to the door. "You save that French toast before it burns."

I heard Kira and Kora's voices in the hallway, followed by Hal's warm greeting. Despite everything, he'd always been supportive - even when Kara wasn't.

"Something smells amazing," Kora bounded into the kitchen, her enthusiasm reminding me of myself at that age, before... everything.

"French toast," I confirmed, sliding the last pieces onto a serving plate. "Though not quite as good as Fionn's yet."

"Yet being the operative word," Shay appeared with Kira, who was eyeing my hair with that look that meant she was probably wondering why anyone would give up being blonde and perfect. "Our girl's going to outdo him someday."

"You're biased," I laughed, but couldn't help feeling warm at her confidence in me.

"Obviously," she grinned. "Now feed us, chef."

"You staying, Hal?" I asked.

"Wish I could. That smells amazing, but I have to get home. Kara has a to-do list for me."

I laughed, understanding completely. "Hey, you think Jeremy can get me in before school starts? I know he's spending September in Australia so he's probably really booked."

"Kenz, you know how he works," Hal smiled. "He'll work outside business hours for family, and like it or not, you're family. Shoot him a text and he'll have you in within 24 hours."

I nodded, feeling that familiar warmth at being included in the family circle, despite everything. "Okay, I will. Well, enjoy your to-do list."

Hal laughed, "Can't wait."

"See you later. We'll drop the girls off after dinner."

Hal waved and headed out, leaving us to our brunch plans.

"Alright, food's ready," I started plating the French toast while Shay grabbed the syrup. "There's fruit too, because I know Kora actually eats it, unlike some people."

"Hey, I eat fruit!" Kira protested.

"If you count those awful fruit-flavored energy drinks you're obsessed with," Kora muttered.

"At least the cheer academy has a nutrition plan," Kira sighed. "Even if it's not the same as real cheerleading. I miss proper football games."

"American football," Shay corrected with a smirk. "The Irish might disagree about what 'proper' football is."

"It's just different here," I tried to sound encouraging. "Though from what I've seen, the academy's actually pretty intense."

"It's not the same," Kira pushed her fruit around the plate. "You were lucky you got to do real cheerleading before moving."

"Lucky is a relative term," I shared a knowing look with Shay. "Though I hear the academy's competition team is pretty impressive."

Kira shrugged, clearly still not happy about the move.

"Oi, Kora, you hear from Harley? How's Hawaii?" Shay asked.

Kora rolled her eyes, "She texts me but all she talks about is Jake. She even pretended to not know how to surf because she wanted Jake to 'teach' her. It's dumb."

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Kira shrugged, clearly still not happy about the move.

"Oi, Kora, you hear from Harley? How's Hawaii?" Shay asked.

Kora rolled her eyes, "She texts me but all she talks about is Jake. She even pretended to not know how to surf because she wanted Jake to 'teach' her. It's dumb."

"Ah, first crushes," Shay's voice dripped with sarcasm. "So pure, so innocent, so incredibly stupid."

"Be nice," I nudged her, though I couldn't help smiling. "We can't all figure ourselves out as early as others."

"Some of us had to try being a perfect cheerleader first?" she teased, stealing a bite from my plate. "And it's not a crush."

"Some of us had to date the football team," I corrected, catching the slight shift in Kira's expression. Sometimes I forgot how much she'd idolized that version of me.

"Some of us had to try being a perfect cheerleader first?" she teased, stealing a bite from my plate. "And it's not a crush."

"Some of us had to date the football team," I corrected, catching the slight shift in Kira's expression. Sometimes I forgot how much she'd idolized that version of me.

"What do you mean it's not a crush?" Kira perked up, clearly eager to change the subject from my former life.

"Harley thinks she's in love," Kora sighed, pushing her empty plate away. "She has this whole plan about how when she turns eighteen, Jake will leave Millie for her."

"Oh no," Shay muttered into her coffee.

"Oh yes," Kora nodded. "She won't listen to reason. Says her mom and Jon were together at her age, so..."

"That's... not exactly the same situation," I tried to find the diplomatic words.

"Not even close," Shay added, her protective instincts clearly extending to Harley too. "And if Jon had been with Michelle like that today he would be in jail. From what I've heard the 90s were very different."

I nodded, "So I've heard. There's no way Jake would touch Harley."

"Jake's actually a good guy," Kora added. "He and Millie are perfect together. Harley just won't see it."

"First heartbreak's always the worst," Shay's voice softened slightly. "Even if it's just one-sided."

"Speaking of one-sided," I started gathering plates, noticing how Kora suddenly became very interested in her water glass. Some things were better left unspoken, especially with Kira right there.

"So what's the plan for today?" I asked, deliberately changing the subject as I loaded the dishwasher. "We could check out that new bookstore near UCC?"

"Or we could go to the cinema," Shay suggested. "That new horror film just opened."

"No horror movies," Kira protested. "Mom would kill us."

"Rom-com it is then," Shay sighed dramatically, making me hide a smile. For someone who claimed to hate anything romantic or cheerful, she sure knew a lot about every romance movie that came out.

"There's that new one with the Irish actress Kenzie likes," Kora piped up, clearly grateful for the subject change.

"Saoirse Ronan isn't in everything, love," Shay teased me, knowing full well about my slight obsession with Irish cinema since moving here.

"No, but she should be," I defended, throwing a dish towel at her head.

"We could always practice your Irish accent," Shay dodged the towel with a smirk. "Since you're so determined to sound local."

"My accent is not that bad!" Though we all knew it was. Even after 2 months here, I still sounded aggressively American, while Shay's Yorkshire accent had somehow gotten even stronger, like she was trying to balance out my attempts at fitting in.

"Sure, love. Keep telling yourself that," she grinned. "Though watching you try to order coffee in Irish that one time was adorable."

"That was one time!" I felt my face heat up. "And Fionn said my pronunciation wasn't terrible."

"Fionn was being nice because he wants you to keep making those experimental desserts for the Cantina."

"Speaking of," Kora perked up, "any new recipes we get to try today?"

"Speaking of," Kora perked up, "any new recipes we get to try today?"

"Maybe later," I pulled out my phone, remembering I needed to text Jeremy. "First I should sort out this hair appointment."

Me: Hey Jeremy, any chance you could fit me in soon? Thinking of going back to blonde before school starts.

"The red's growing on me," Shay commented, though she'd support whatever I decided. That was one of the things I loved about her - she just wanted me to be myself.

My phone buzzed.

Jeremy: You have the girls today right? Drop by after you take them home tonight? Can sort you out then if you don't mind the late hour x

"Tonight works," I typed back a quick response. "Now, about that movie..."

"Superman?" Kora asked.

"Yes! Mom's been talking about it all week," Kira agreed enthusiastically. "She said it's the best Superman film in years."

"Then Superman it is," Shay reached for her keys. "Though I still say horror films are better."

"You just like watching me hide behind my hands," I teased, grabbing my bag.

"That might be part of the appeal," she smirked. "Come on then, if we hurry we can make the next showing."

The girls bounded ahead of us down the stairs of our building, already debating which snacks to get at the cinema.

Mia

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Watching Niamh with Rachel was like observing a masterclass in grandmothering. She had this effortless way of knowing exactly what the baby needed, while I still felt like I might break her if I held her wrong.

"She's not made of glass," Niamh commented, noticing my hesitation as Rachel reached for me. "And she likes you."

Kaya, sprawled regally on the windowsill, made a noise that might have been a snort. Playing normal house cat was clearly trying her patience.

"I'm better at protecting people than nurturing them," I admitted, though I carefully took Rachel anyway. The baby immediately grabbed for my necklace, her grip surprisingly strong.

"You're doing fine," Niamh smiled. "And Amber will be glad to hear she took her bottle for you earlier."

"Though Amber still hasn't changed a diaper," I observed, watching Rachel examine my necklace with intense concentration.

"She will when she's ready," Niamh's voice held absolute certainty. "She's already come so far. Did you see her with the nail polish yesterday?"

I nodded, remembering how focused Amber had been, treating those tiny nails like the most important cosmetics application of her career. These small victories meant everything.

"The climbing's helping too," Niamh continued, preparing another bottle with practiced ease. "Getting back to something normal, something that's just theirs."

Rachel suddenly decided my hair was more interesting than my necklace, and I caught Kaya's tail twitching with what might have been amusement at my predicament.

"Careful there, little one," I gently extracted my hair from Rachel's surprisingly strong grip. "I'm not patient about having my hair pulled."

"She does love grabbing hair," Niamh laughed. "Though at least your Da's short hair is safe from those little fingers, isn't it?" she cooed at Rachel.

"At least she's not trying to grab Kaya's tail anymore," I glanced at my guardian, who somehow managed to look both regal and annoyed from her windowsill perch.

"That cat has more patience than I expected," Niamh observed. "Especially with a baby in the house."

If she only knew. Kaya's tail twitched again, and I could practically hear her thoughts about having to pretend to be a normal house cat. At least Ellie was outside at the moment - their mutual disdain was exhausting to manage sometimes.

"She's selective about who she tolerates," I said diplomatically, adjusting Rachel as she started to fuss. "Bottle time?"

"Actually I suspect she needs a nappy. I'll change her," Niamh took her upstairs.

Kaya immediately seized the moment of privacy to leap from the window to my lap. "Finally. Pretending to be a normal cat is exhausting. Especially with that mongrel around."

"Ellie's not that bad," I stroked her fur absently, keeping my voice low. "And you're doing great with Rachel."

"The infant is... tolerable," Kaya admitted reluctantly. "Though I don't understand why you insist on playing nursemaid when we should be investigating those Celtic Thunder Rangers."

"Because this is what friends do," I reminded her. "And Amber needs the support right now. Besides, Billy is working on it and there isn't much else we can do right now."

"The Death Ranger has been quiet too long," Kaya's tail twitched with concern. "And those Celtic Rangers... there's something familiar about their energy."

"You felt it too?" I kept my voice low, aware of Niamh upstairs. "Like it's older than-"

A bark from the garden interrupted us as Ellie spotted something through the window. Kaya immediately resumed her "normal cat" pose, though I caught her eye roll at the dog's enthusiasm.

"At least she's outside," Kaya muttered, just as we heard Niamh's footsteps on the stairs.

"Someone's all fresh," Niamh announced, returning with Rachel. "Though I think she might be ready for a nap soon."

Niamh settled into the armchair with Rachel, who was fighting sleep despite clearly being tired. "You know, I realized I don't know much about you, beyond being Amber's best friend and Rachel's godmother."

"Not much to tell really," I shrugged, watching Kaya pretend to be fascinated by a dust mote. "Though the music keeps me busy."

"Ah yes, Trevor mentioned you're quite famous. I'm afraid I'm not familiar with your songs - what kind of music do you make?"

That was easier ground. "Rock mostly. Alternative rock. My latest album hit number one in several countries."

"And you still find time to help with the baby," Niamh smiled warmly. "Rachel's lucky to have such dedicated godparents."

I relaxed slightly, grateful she wasn't pushing for more personal details. "Amber's my best friend. This is where I need to be right now."

"Aye. So you and Michelle don't sing the same kind of music?" Niamh asked.

I couldn't help but laugh. "Not even close. Michelle's more... mainstream pop country. I'm more heavy alternative rock. Different worlds entirely."

"That explains the look," Niamh nodded at my all-black outfit with understanding. "Though you both seem to have quite the following."

"Different audiences," I smiled, watching Rachel finally start to drift off. "Though we've learned to appreciate each other's styles. Eventually."

Kaya made a noise that might have been a snort, earning a curious look from Niamh. Right. Normal cats don't comment on music genres.

"I should look up some of your music," Niamh said, carefully adjusting Rachel as she finally gave in to sleep. "Though perhaps not while this little one's napping."

"Probably wise," I agreed. "My music isn't exactly... soothing."

"And how long can you stay with us? I know Amber appreciates having you here."

"A while longer," I said carefully, thinking of the Death Ranger situation I couldn't mention. "My schedule's flexible right now, and Amber needs..." I trailed off, not sure how much to say about those early days after Rachel's birth.

"She needs her best friend," Niamh finished simply. No judgment, no pushing for details. Just understanding. I could see where Trevor got it from.

"Though I have to say," Niamh's voice was warm, "for someone who projects such a... dark image, you're wonderful with Rachel."

I glanced down at my black outfit, silver jewelry, and combat boots. "Appearances can be deceiving. Besides, Rachel doesn't judge my fashion choices yet."

"Give her time," Niamh laughed softly. "Though with Amber as her mother, she'll probably have strong opinions about style very early."

Rachel shifted slightly in her sleep, one tiny hand clutching Niamh's shirt. Even Kaya seemed transfixed by the baby's peaceful expression, though she'd never admit it.

"Should we put her in her crib?" I asked, watching Rachel's face scrunch slightly before settling again.

"In a moment," Niamh smiled. "Sometimes you just need to hold them while they sleep. Would you mind letting Ellie in from the garden, Love?"

I caught Kaya's slight tail twitch as I stood to let the dog in. The eternal battle between maintaining her "normal cat" act and showing her disdain for Ellie was clearly wearing on her.

Ellie bounded in happily, though she immediately calmed when she saw Rachel sleeping. For all Kaya's complaints, the dog was surprisingly gentle around the baby.

"Good girl," I murmured, watching her settle on her bed in the corner, pointedly ignoring Kaya's imperial presence on the windowsill.

"Those two," Niamh shook her head fondly. "Like an old married couple with their bickering."

If she only knew.

"Though Ellie's gotten much better about chasing her," Niamh observed. "Your cat must have quite the personality to put her in her place so quickly."

'You have no idea,' I thought, watching Kaya pretend not to preen at the compliment.

"She's... particular about her personal space," I said diplomatically.

"Reminds me a bit of you, actually," Niamh's observation was casual but perceptive. "Reserved at first, but fiercely loyal once you let people in."

I wasn't sure how to respond to that unexpected insight. Fortunately, Rachel chose that moment to make a small sound in her sleep, drawing Niamh's attention back to the baby.

"I should probably put her down properly," she stood carefully. "Would you mind starting the kettle? I think we could both use a cup of tea."

"Of course," I headed to the kitchen, grateful for the simple task. Kaya followed, probably hoping for a moment to speak freely while Niamh was upstairs.

"She's perceptive," my guardian observed quietly as I filled the kettle. "For a human."

"Most mothers are," I muttered, reaching for the tea Trevor always kept stocked. "Even if they're not technically yours."

"Is that discomfort I detect?" Kaya's tail twitched with interest. "The great Mia Black, unsettled by a little maternal attention?"

"Shouldn't you be pretending to nap somewhere?" I shot back, hearing Niamh's footsteps on the stairs.

Kaya just gave me that insufferably knowing look cats are so good at before resuming her "normal pet" act as Niamh rejoined us.

"She's down properly," Niamh smiled. "Though I suspect she'll be up again just as Amber and Trevor get home from climbing."

"Babies do have perfect timing that way," I set out the mugs, remembering how Trevor had shown me exactly how strong Niamh liked her tea.

"Speaking of timing," Niamh settled at the kitchen table, "have you heard from them? They should be finishing up at the climbing center soon."

"Not yet," I poured the water over the tea bags. "Though knowing Trevor, he's probably already texted you three times."

Niamh laughed, pulling out her phone. "Only twice, actually. They're doing well, taking it slow."

I nodded, letting her take the lead on updates about Amber. After all, she saw them every day, knew far more about their progress than I did. Even being here to help, there was still so much I was catching up on.

We'd just finished lunch, the remains of our sandwiches pushed aside as Trevor and Tiernan compared notes on different climbing spots around Cork. Despite my earlier frustration at the climbing center, I found myself actually enjoying the conversation. There was something comfortable about these two - maybe because they treated me like a fellow climber who was recovering, not someone to tiptoe around.

"You should definitely try the Cantina," Trevor was saying, relaxed in that way he got when talking about food or climbing. "Though I might be a bit biased."

"We will," Saoirse smiled. "And you two should join us climbing once you're ready. The routes near Blarney are beautiful."

"That would be grand," Trevor's eyes lit up, though I caught his quick glance my way. Always checking, always protective, even when trying not to show it.

"We'd like that," I found myself saying, and meaning it. The idea of getting back to real outdoor climbs someday... it felt like something to work toward.

"Though maybe we start with some easier routes first," Trevor suggested, his hand finding mine under the table. Not protective this time - supportive. He knew how much I missed our more challenging climbs.

"Of course," Tiernan nodded. "We know some good spots for working back up to the harder stuff. No rush."

I appreciated how they didn't make a big deal about it, didn't treat me like I was fragile. Just climbers talking about climbing, making plans for future routes.

"Mam's probably wondering when we'll be home," Trevor checked his phone. "Though she loves any excuse to spend more time with Ráichéal."

I nodded, "Si, but we shouldn't take advantage. We should get home."

"Of course," Tiernan stood, reaching for his wallet. "This was great - we should do it again sometime."

"Let us treat," Trevor insisted. "Consider it incentive to visit the Cantina soon."

As we exchanged numbers and said our goodbyes, I found myself feeling surprisingly positive about the morning. Despite my struggles on the wall, we'd somehow made new friends who understood the climbing world, who didn't treat me like I might break.

"They seem nice," I said as we headed to the car.

"They do," Trevor smiled, squeezing my hand. "And it'll be good to have climbing partners once we're ready."

The drive home was quiet, comfortable. Trevor hummed along to something on the radio while I watched the familiar streets of Ballincollig pass by. My arms were starting to feel the morning's exertion - a reminder of how far I still had to go, but also proof that I was actually doing something again.

"You did really well today, mo ghrá," Trevor said softly as we pulled into our drive.

"I barely finished one route," I sighed, but without the bitter frustration from earlier. Meeting Tiernan and Saoirse had helped put things in perspective somehow.

"You got back on the wall," he reached for my hand. "That's what matters."

Ellie's excited barking greeted us before we even reached the door. Through the window, I could see Mia and Mam in the kitchen, probably having tea while Ráichéal napped.

"How was she?" I asked as we walked in, though I already knew the answer. Mam and Mia had everything under control, as always.

"Perfect angel," Mam smiled. "Just went down for her nap about an hour ago."

"After thoroughly investigating my necklaces," Mia added dryly, touching the silver chains that had apparently fascinated my daughter.

I caught sight of Kaya in her favorite windowsill spot, deliberately ignoring Ellie's attempts to get her attention.

"And how was climbing?" Mam asked, but her tone was casual - not worried or hovering like I'd feared people would be. Just normal interest in our morning.

"We actually met some other climbers," Trevor started preparing coffee, moving around our kitchen with that easy grace he had. "Might have found some future climbing partners."

"Oh?" Mam's interest was genuine. "Local climbers?"

"Aye," Trevor handed me a coffee - he always knew exactly when I needed it. "Tiernan and Saoirse. She actually teaches at UCC - Celtic History."

"And they climb real routes," I added, settling at the kitchen table. "They offered to show us some spots around Blarney once..." I trailed off, not wanting to put a timeline on my recovery.

"Once you're ready," Mam finished simply, no pressure in her voice. "That'll be lovely."

"Saoirse Riordan?" Mia asked, suddenly at attention. Something in her tone made me look at her more closely.

"You know her?" Trevor asked, pausing in his coffee preparation.

"We talked briefly..." Mia seemed to choose her words carefully. "Abby connected us. I had some questions about celtic history...for my song writing."

I noticed Kaya's tail twitch slightly, though it was probably because Ellie had moved closer to her windowsill.

"Small world," I said, though something about Mia's reaction felt odd. "Cork can be like that sometimes."

"We talked briefly..." Mia seemed to choose her words carefully. "Abby connected us. I had some questions about Celtic history... for my song writing."

I noticed Kaya's tail twitch slightly at the name, though it could have been because Ellie had moved closer to her windowsill.

"Small world," I said, though something about Mia's reaction felt odd. "Cork can be like that sometimes."

"Did she help with your research?" Trevor asked, setting more coffee cups on the table.



"Some," Mia's response was vague in a way that wasn't like her. "Celtic mythology is... complex."

Before I could ask more, a small cry from upstairs indicated Rachel was awake. The conversation shifted naturally to baby matters, but I couldn't shake the feeling there was something more to Mia's interest in Professor Riordan.

Kenzie

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"That was really good," Kira said as we left the cinema.

"See? Not everything has to be a rom-com," Shay smirked, though I caught her wiping away what might have been a tear.

The afternoon sun was perfect for wandering through Cork City Centre, watching Kora and Kira explore shops they hadn't visited since moving here. It felt nice, normal - being the cool older cousins showing them around our new home.

"Can we check out Penneys?" Kora asked, eyeing the department store. "Mom says they have different stuff here than at home."

"Different store entirely than JC Penny's," I laughed. "But sure. Then maybe dinner at that pizza place near UCC?"

"The one with the garlic knots?" Shay perked up. She'd never admit it, but those garlic knots had become her weakness.

After dinner and ice cream, I dropped Shay at our flat before heading out with the girls. I needed to drop them off at home then it was off to Jeremy's for my hair make over.

"Thanks for today," Kora hugged me goodbye outside their house.

"Yeah, the movie was really good," Kira added, hugging me too.

"Tell Kara I'll text her later," I called as they headed inside. Better to avoid any awkward interactions tonight.

The drive to Jeremy and Livvie's wasn't long. I touched my red hair in the rearview mirror, wondering if going back to blonde was really about looking professional for culinary school, or if part of me was ready for another change.

The lights were still on at their house when I pulled up, and I could see the salon area lit through the front windows. Jeremy always did this - made time for family no matter the hour.

I went and knocked on the door. Jeremy answered, "Hi Love, come on in."

"KENZIE!" Rose called as she jumped at me after running down the hall.

I laughed and caught her, "Hey Fairy Girl, shouldn't you be in bed?"

"Oh aye, she should, but you try getting a hyper fairy to bed when she is set against it," Jeremy said as he closed the door behind me.

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"Oh aye, she should, but you try getting a hyper fairy to bed when she is set against it," Jeremy said as he closed the door behind me.

"Need proper bedtime," Killy appeared in his pajamas, looking seriously concerned about the disruption to their routine.

"The twins were excited when they heard you were coming," Livvie called from somewhere upstairs. "Though they really should be sleeping by now."

"Five more minutes?" Rose pleaded, still clinging to me. "See Kenzie hair!"

Livvie came downstairs carrying Killy, "Love, it's bedtime. Let Da work."

"Tell you what Rose, if you listen to your mom I'll make you a super special burrito next time you're at the Cantina," I promised.

Rose seemed to consider this.

"A Róisín, éist le do mham, téigh a chodladh anois nó suífidh tú sa chúinne. An dtuigeann tú?" Jeremy said firmly.

Rose froze, "Sea, a Da. Is breá liom tú."

And with that she went upstairs with Livvie and Killy.

Livvie shook her head, "Have fun Kenz."

"Works every time," Jeremy grinned once the family had disappeared upstairs. "Right then, what are we doing with your hair tonight?"

"Well," I studied my reflection, "I want to go back to blonde. But I'm also thinking... maybe shoulder length? The long hair is pretty, but with culinary school coming up, something more manageable might be better."

"Shoulder length would suit you," Jeremy considered my hair thoughtfully. "And blonde... are we thinking your natural shade, or something different?"

"Natural, I think," I touched the red strands one last time. "It's time. New chapter, you know?"

"Or just a new perspective," he smiled understandingly. "Right then, let's get started."

"So how are the girls settling in?" Jeremy asked as he mixed the color. "Must be strange for them, moving to a new country."

"Kora's adjusting pretty well," I watched him work in the mirror. "Kira... she misses cheerleading. Real cheerleading, not the academy stuff here. She keeps bringing up how I used to be on the squad."

"Ah," Jeremy's tone was understanding. "Still idolizing the old you?"

"Yeah. She doesn't get why I walked away from all that. Why I changed." I smiled slightly. "Though she did enjoy Superman today, even if it wasn't a rom-com."

"And how's Shay?"

"Good. She stole my pink hoodie and pretends she didn't," I laughed. "But she's excited about starting at UCC. We both are."

"And the prep cook job?" Jeremy started sectioning my hair. "That cheesecake you made Livvie for her birthday was incredible, by the way. The Irish Cream and mango combination..."

"Thanks," I couldn't help but smile. "Fionn's been amazing, letting me try new things. I'm working on something new with passion fruit next."

"Sounds interesting. You'll have to bring it to our next family dinner."

"If it turns out right," I watched him work through the mirror. "Sometimes I still can't believe this is my life now, you know? Working in a real kitchen, living in Ireland, going to culinary school..."

"Instead of cheerleading in Texas?" he asked gently.

"I just hope Kara doesn't read too much into the blonde," I admitted. "Like she thinks I'm going back to being who she wanted me to be. I'm not - I'm just... growing up, I guess."

"Kara doesn't get to decide what your hair means," Jeremy said, starting to apply the color. "Besides, professional chef Kenzie with a sleek blonde bob is a very different person from cheerleader Mac with long blonde curls."

I smiled at his insight. "Yeah. It's not about going backwards. It's about looking how I want to look now. For me."

"Speaking of professional chef Kenzie - still thinking about specializing in pastry?"

"That's the dream," I nodded. "Fionn's been really supportive, letting me experiment after my regular shifts. Though I still have to master the basics first."

"You will," he said with that easy confidence that made him such a good honorary big brother. "And when you open your own pastry shop someday, I expect family discounts."

I laughed, "Actually, I'm hoping to get a job with Trevor. I would love to be the head pastry chef for all of his restaurants someday. Come up with fun, innovative desserts for each of his fusion themes."

"That's brilliant," Jeremy started checking the color development. "Trevor mentioned you'd talked to him about it. He seemed excited about the possibility."

"Yeah, he was really supportive when I brought it up. Said he likes the idea of keeping talent in the family. Of course, I still need to prove myself - get through culinary school, really master the basics."

"Knowing Trevor, he wouldn't have encouraged it if he didn't already see your potential. Man doesn't make empty promises, especially about his kitchens."

The thought made me smile. Having Trevor's support, knowing this dream could be real... it made everything else feel more possible too.

"Right then," Jeremy stepped back to examine the color. "Time to rinse. Then we'll do the cut."

At the washing station, I let my mind wander while Jeremy worked. It felt good, having actual plans, real goals. Not just running away from what I didn't want to be, but moving toward what I did want.

"You know," Jeremy commented as he started cutting, "Shay's going to pretend to be devastated about losing the red hair."

I laughed. "Nah. She doesn't actually care. She just wants me to be me."

"And that is why you two work so beautifully."

I looked at him in the mirror, thoughtful. "You weren't much older than me when you moved in with Trevor."

Jeremy laughed softly. "You mean Trevor wasn't much older than you. I was a few years older than that. But aye..."

"I just... I mean, I have trouble even imagining you two together, but you're both so great. I can't imagine why you broke up."

"My mam," Jeremy said simply.

"Right, she's a homophobe?"

"In the most literal sense," his hands stilled for a moment. "She threatened to ruin Trev's career, so I orchestrated a very final and dramatic way to get him to leave me. And it worked."

"So you did really love him then?"

There was a pause, then a slight nod. "Aye, at the time, he was my first love. I was very much in love with him then."

"Does it ever feel weird?" I asked carefully. "Like, seeing him with Amber, or being around each other at family stuff?"

"Not anymore," Jeremy resumed working on my hair. "We're exactly who we're meant to be now. I have Liv and the twins, he has Amber and Ráichéal. It all worked out perfectly - just not the way any of us expected."

"Like at Sosaidh and Abby's wedding," I remembered the stories. "When Mary showed up..."

"Aye," his voice took on an edge. "Though watching Michelle torment her that night almost made it worth it."

I thought about my own situation with Kara - not nearly as dramatic, but still complicated. "It's weird how parents can love you but still try to make you be someone you're not."

"The trick is finding people who love you for exactly who you are," Jeremy smiled. "Like Shay does with you."

"Yeah," I smiled, thinking about Shay. "She's never once asked me to be anything other than who I am. Even when that meant walking away from cheerleading and everything Kara wanted for me."

"Speaking of walking away from expectations," Jeremy started checking the color. "Time to rinse. Then we'll do the cut."

At the washing station, I let my mind wander. It was strange how life worked out - here I was, getting my hair done by someone who knew exactly what it was like to disappoint a parent by being true to yourself.

"You know," I said as he started cutting, "sometimes I feel guilty about how much it hurts Kara. But then I look at you and Trevor, how happy you both are now..."

"Sometimes the hardest thing is letting go of who others want you to be," Jeremy's voice was gentle. "But look at us now - Trevor's got his Michelin star, I've got my salon and my family. Sometimes the path to happiness isn't what anyone expects."

"I know Kara still doesn't like me with Shay. She just isn't as vocal about it as my aunt," I sighed.

"Kara's mum?"

I nodded.

"I think Kara has adjusted to Shay. It was hard for her, but she's tried," Jeremy said carefully. "She shows up, she makes an effort. That's more than some parents manage."

"Yeah," I watched him work in the mirror. "She does try. Even if she still sometimes gives Shay disapproving looks."

Jeremy smiled knowingly. "Better than my mam trying to have Liv killed at a wedding."

"God, that whole story still blows my mind," I shook my head slightly. "Though at least you got to watch Michelle torment her all night."

"One of Michelle's finer moments of chaos," he laughed. "And speaking of moments..." he stepped back to check the cut. "Ready to see the new you?"

I took a deep breath, watching him remove the cape. This wasn't about going backwards - it was about moving forward as myself, whoever that turned out to be.

Jeremy turned my chair to face the mirror, and for a moment I just stared. The shoulder-length cut framed my face perfectly, the blonde warm and natural. This was... me. Just me.

"What do you think?" Jeremy asked, though his smile suggested he already knew.

"It's perfect," I touched the ends of my hair. "Professional but still... young? Does that make sense?"

"Exactly what we were going for," he nodded. "Think Shay's going to pretend to be devastated about losing the red."

"Nah, she'll love it," I smiled, still examining my reflection. "She already said as long as I'm happy with it, she's happy."

Jeremy smiled as he started cleaning up. "You two really do work perfectly together."

The drive home was quick - Cork City was quiet this late at night. I kept catching glimpses of my new hair in the rearview mirror, excited to see Shay's reaction even though I knew she'd support any choice I made.

Our flat was still lit when I pulled up - Shay was probably working on one of her fragrance formulas. She did her best work late at night, just like me with my baking experiments.

"Hey love," I called out as I opened the door. "Still up?"

"In here," her voice carried from our tiny kitchen. "Was starting to wonder if Jeremy had turned you into a- oh." She stopped mid-sentence as I walked in, her eyes widening slightly.

"Too much?" I asked, suddenly nervous despite knowing better.

A slow smile spread across her face. "Not at all. You look gorgeous." She pulled me into her arms and kissed me.

"Thanks. I really like it," I smiled as I kissed her back.

"It suits you," she ran her fingers through my shorter hair. "Professional pastry chef Kenzie."

"That's the goal," I leaned into her touch. "Though I was thinking about what you said about conforming to beauty standards..."

"Love," she cut me off gently, "I was joking. You know that, right? This is clearly what you want - not what Kara wants or what anyone else expects. Just you."

Sometimes it still amazed me how well she understood me - how she could see past all my uncertainties to what really mattered.

"Speaking of what I want," I glanced at her workspace on the kitchen counter, "what are you working on this late?"

"Just some ideas," she gestured to her notes. "Trying to get ahead on fragrance concepts for when I finish school. Even if Lydia's making me wait, doesn't mean I can't develop ideas."

I moved closer, running my fingers through my newly shortened hair. "Those ideas can wait till morning. I was thinking maybe we could celebrate my new look..."

"Suddenly my fragrance notes seem a lot less urgent," Shay smiled, carefully gathering her papers. She took my hand, leading me toward our bedroom. "Come on, love. Let's see how this shorter hair looks against the pillows."

Later, wrapped in Shay's arms, I felt completely at peace. My blonde hair fanned across the pillow, her black t-shirt I'd stolen to sleep in soft against my skin - everything about this moment felt right. Being exactly who I was meant to be, chasing my dreams with someone who loved me for myself... it didn't matter what anyone else thought. Shay and I had built something real here, something that was ours alone.

"Different Shores"

I smirked at my phone screen, scrolling through the Instagram comments. I'd been dropping hints all morning about my character for 911: Nashville, watching my followers get increasingly excited with each tease. Now it was finally time to reveal the premiere date and my character's name.

"I know you're not working," Hunter teased as he walked into the living room with Tomi, who was already sporting her purple swimsuit. "This is supposed to be vacation."

I rolled my eyes. "At this point, is there really a difference between work and my life? Besides, this is fun. Everyone's been speculating for months about my character, and now they finally get to meet Dixie."

"Has anyone actually guessed that name?" Hunter settled Tomi on his lap. "It does seem a bit on the nose for Nashville."

I laughed, scrolling through the countless theories. "You'd think so, but no. Not a single person guessed Dixie."

"And once you drop this reveal, you're actually going to get ready for the pool?" His tone was playful but pointed. "You did promise a certain someone swimming lessons today."

"Of course," I reached over to tickle Tomi's belly. "You handle the sunscreen, and I'll go change. Though..." I grinned at my phone, "maybe just one more teaser first."

"Just post it already," Hunter laughed, already reaching for the sunscreen. "The fans have waited long enough."

I nodded, typing out my post with practiced ease: "So excited to introduce you all to Dixie Bennings! Premiering October 16th on ABC. She's fierce, she's funny, and she's about to shake things up in Music City. #911Nashville #NewRole #ComingSoon"

"Ma ma ma!" Tomi reached for my phone, clearly unimpressed with my social media moment.

"Yes, baby girl, Mama's done," I set my phone aside, though I could already feel it buzzing with notifications. "Let me go change while Daddy makes sure you don't turn into a little lobster."

"Speaking of lobsters," Hunter called as I headed to our room, "fair warning - Harley's spending the day at the beach again.. Jake mentioned more surfing lessons earlier."

I paused in the doorway. "And how are you feeling about that?"

"About our teenage daughter getting surfing "lessons" from her crush? Just peachy," his voice dripped with sarcasm. "Though at least Arissa promised to stay close."

My phone was practically having a meltdown as I changed into my swimsuit. The notifications were coming so fast I could barely read them:

"DIXIE BENNINGS! Finally a name!"

"October 16th can't come fast enough!"

"Michelle Morris on TV again? YES!"

"Please tell me we get to hear you sing on the show!"

I grinned, slipping on my cover-up while scanning the comments. My fans never disappointed when it came to enthusiasm. A text from Jeremy popped up above the flood of notifications:

"Dixie Bennings? Very country. Though not as country as your accent's going to be 🤠"

"Just wait till you hear it," I texted back.

A notification from Entertainment Weekly caught my eye - they'd already posted an article about the reveal. That was fast, even for them. Though knowing my PR team, they'd probably had it ready to go.

I gave myself a final check in the mirror, knowing photos of the Bradley family at the pool were inevitable. The new purple and black bikini was perfect, the mesh wrap skirt adding just enough coverage for the walk down. Beach waves fell naturally around my shoulders - casual but camera-ready. A hint of lip gloss, my signature purple sunglasses, and black wedge sandals completed the look. The beach bag was packed with everything we'd need.

Time to focus on what really mattered - swimming with my husband and baby girl. Though I couldn't help but smile, knowing tomorrow's entertainment sites would probably run photos of "TV Star Michelle Morris-Bradley enjoying family time in Hawaii after major career announcement."

"Ready to swim, baby girl?" I called out as I returned to the living room.

Tomi squealed and reached for me, now thoroughly coated in sunscreen thanks to Hunter. He'd even managed to get her sun hat to stay on - for now at least.

"Jon's heading to the pool too," Arissa announced, coming in from the balcony where she'd been texting.

I caught Hunter's slight tension. Even after all these years, even with everything resolved, that protective instinct never quite went away.

"And where's your sister?" I asked, though I already knew the answer.

"Beach with Jake and Millie," Arissa rolled her eyes. "Still pretending she needs surfing lessons."

"Da da!" Tomi interrupted, clearly done with all this talking when there was swimming to be done.

"Alright princess," Hunter scooped her up. "Let's go show everyone your new swim moves."

"Are you coming to the pool with us?" I asked Arissa.

"No, I'm going to the beach with Grandma. She said she would take me since you and Dad are taking Tomi and Harley is... otherwise occupied," Arissa replied.

I nodded, "OK. Have fun. We'll text you later."

My phone buzzed again as we headed out - more notifications about Dixie Bennings flooding in, but those could wait. Family vacation moments were more important than social media reactions, even if my PR team might disagree. Though I couldn't help but notice my latest post had already hit a million likes.

"Your phone's about to explode," Hunter commented as we walked toward the pool, Tomi babbling happily in his arms.

"Let it," I adjusted my sunglasses. "Right now I'm just Michelle Bradley, taking my baby swimming. Dixie can wait."

The "hidden" photographers weren't even trying to be subtle anymore. I caught at least three cameras behind strategically placed plants around the pool area, and there was definitely someone with a long lens on a balcony above. At least they were keeping their distance - they'd learned that lesson years ago.

Tomi bounced in Hunter's arms as we found the perfect spot to set up. I caught him scanning the area automatically, noting all the exit routes and vantage points. Some habits never changed, even on vacation.

"Ready to show Daddy how good you are at kicking?" I slipped off my wrap and sandals, pretending not to notice the rapid-fire clicks from behind a nearby palm tree. Tomorrow's

entertainment sites would probably run something about "Michelle Morris-Bradley's post-baby body" - as if Tomi wasn't already walking.

Hunter handed me our daughter, already stripped down to her purple swimsuit and floating devices. "Water baby time," he grinned, pulling off his shirt. I didn't miss how the camera clicks intensified - apparently shirtless Hunter Bradley was still newsworthy. Not that I disagreed mind you.

"Come on, love," I waded into the pool with Tomi. "Let's give them something worth photographing - like your perfect swim form."

As Hunter and I played with Tomi in the water, I was conscious of every camera click but refused to let it intrude on our moment. I'd been in the spotlight since I was younger than Harley - the constant photography was just background noise at this point. Getting upset only fueled the kind of headlines I didn't need, and honestly, some sweet family photos might help counter whatever ridiculous divorce rumor was circulating this week. I couldn't even keep track anymore of which one of us was supposedly having an affair with whom.

Besides, watching Tomi splash and giggle as Hunter taught her to kick was worth any number of paparazzi photos. Some moments were perfect regardless of who was watching.

"Da da da!" Tomi squealed as Hunter guided her through the water. His years of athletic training showed in how naturally he moved, making even basic swim lessons look graceful. No wonder the sports magazines still occasionally ran features on "Motocross Legend Hunter Bradley's New Life" - though they usually focused more on his transition from champion racer to devoted dad than anything else. He'd never been happier than when we decided he'd stay home with her.

I caught a few guests trying to subtly film us on their phones. The combination of the former rock star and the ex-racing champion teaching their toddler to swim was apparently too good to resist. At least most people respected the unspoken rule about keeping their distance - a rule Hunter had firmly but politely established years ago.

"Ma ma!" Tomi babbled excitedly, her little legs kicking in the water. The pride in Hunter's eyes as he supported her made my heart squeeze. The cameras could catch this moment if they wanted - the former bad boy of motocross being the gentlest, most patient swimming instructor to our baby girl was exactly the kind of image I was happy to share with the world.

Jon's arrival at the pool was announced by Tomi's excited squeal - she always lit up when she saw him, despite Hunter's lingering protective instincts.

"There's my favorite little fish," Jon smiled, joining us in the water. Despite everything in our complicated history, he'd always been good with the girls.

"Ba ba ba!" Tomi splashed enthusiastically, making both men instinctively shield their faces from the spray.

I caught a few more camera clicks from behind the plants. Tomorrow's entertainment sites would probably have a field day with photos of me and both men in the pool, but at least we were all used to ignoring the speculation by now.

Jon reached to take Tomi from Hunter. Hunter pulled her in closer to him. "Excuse me?"

"I just wanted to hold her," Jon said.

"OK, you ask, you don't touch my daughter without permission. And I feel better if Michelle or I are holding her in the water," Hunter said.

Jon held his hands up, "OK, ok. Sorry."

I sighed as I went to take Tomi and remove her from this alpha male display, "Come on baby girl, let's go down the slide again."

I caught a few more camera clicks from behind the plants. Tomorrow's entertainment sites would probably have a field day with photos of me and both men in the pool, but at least we were all used to ignoring the speculation by now.

Jon reached for Tomi, but Hunter immediately pulled her closer. "Excuse me?"

"I just wanted to hold her," Jon said.

"You ask first," Hunter's voice was firm but controlled. "And I feel better if Michelle or I are holding her in the water."

Jon held his hands up. "OK, ok. Sorry."

I sighed, moving to take Tomi from Hunter before this protective dad moment could escalate further. "Come on baby girl, let's go down the slide again." Some dynamics never changed, no matter how many years passed. At least they'd learned to keep things civil, even if Hunter's papa bear instincts still flared up occasionally.

I took Tomi up the slide and came down with her in my lap, her delighted giggles making me smile. Hunter caught her easily, but then Jon grabbed me from behind, pulling me against him. I tried to move away, but he held on, and I couldn't tell if he was genuinely trying to be playful or

deliberately provoking Hunter. Either way, I could feel Hunter's tension spike at Jon's hands on me while I was wearing nothing but a tiny bikini.

I ducked under the water, slipping out of Jon's grip and surfacing next to Hunter. "Sorry," I whispered.

"Not your fault," Hunter's voice was low, controlled, but his glare at Jon said everything. "Nice photo op you created."

Jon's smirk was deliberate. "Oh, are there photographers around?"

"Da da!" Tomi's happy babble cut through the tension, her tiny hands reaching for Hunter.

"Really?" I fixed Jon with a look. "You want to play games while my daughter's here?"

The smirk faded slightly from his face. Whatever his intentions had been, he knew he'd crossed a line. Hunter might tolerate a lot for the sake of keeping peace, but using our family moments for tabloid bait wasn't one of them.

"Just having fun," Jon shrugged, but he kept his distance now.

"Yeah, well, find a different kind of fun," Hunter's voice was quiet but firm as he settled Tomi more securely in his arms. "Preferably one that doesn't involve touching my wife."

I caught movement behind the plants - the photographers were definitely getting their money's worth today. Tomorrow's headlines practically wrote themselves.

Livvie

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"J, you have got to talk to James," I demanded as I walked out of my office. He was on the sofa watching the twins 'play' Mario Kart World (which really was just them pressing buttons in Free Roam mode.)

"Again? What's he done now?" Jeremy looked up, though he kept one eye on the twins.

"More like what he hasn't done," I leaned against the doorframe. "Asked him how his parents took the news about the baby and him having his first proper girlfriend. The wanker hasn't told them yet."

"Oh bloody hell. That eejit," Jeremy sighed, running a hand through his hair.

"Aye. And you know it's only a matter of time before Pete's parents mention it. They need to hear it from him," I pointed out.

"Oh aye. I'll talk to him. Again. All the good it will do," Jeremy shook his head, though we both knew he'd keep trying.

"Da! Watch!" Rose called out, clearly unimpressed with our adult concerns.

"One moment, mo stór," Jeremy assured them before turning back to me. "How far along is Aine now?"

"About seventeen weeks," I settled onto the arm of the sofa. "And James is running out of excuses. His parents aren't exactly the type to miss their first grandchild's entire pregnancy."

"No, they're the type to make everyone miserable when they find out they were the last to know," Jeremy grimaced. "They may not love it, but they aren't Mary. They will ultimately be happy to have a grandchild."

"Da! Look!" The twins were getting impatient with our conversation.

"One moment Loves. And honestly, they know their son. They will probably be surprised this didn't happen sooner as much as he... enjoys women," I said, keeping it toddler friendly.

"Aye, but this is different," Jeremy lowered his voice. "It's not just about the baby. He's actually serious about Aine. That's probably what's really making him nervous about telling them."

I nodded, understanding completely. James's parents had watched him go through women like he was collecting trading cards. Having him announce both a pregnancy and a committed relationship at once might give them whiplash.

"He's also terrified of being in a relationship. Remember how he ended up deciding to ask her to be exclusive? I asked him how he felt about the idea of other men fu-uh... being intimate with her," I caught myself, glancing at the twins. "The idea upset him, and I told him then he better commit. So he did."

Jeremy nodded, "Aye. Tactful as always, Liv."

I shrugged, "I was just phrasing it in a way James would understand."

"Fair point," Jeremy conceded, though I could see him fighting a smile.

"Da! PLEASE!" The twins' patience had clearly run out.

"Alright, alright," Jeremy turned his attention back to their game. "Show me what you've got."

I pulled out my phone, checking the notifications that had been piling up. "Speaking of drama, have you seen Michelle's social media today? She finally dropped the character reveal."

"Aye, saw that. Dixie Bennings," Jeremy grinned. "Though I'm more interested in whatever's happening at the pool. Jon's there."

"Of course he is," I opened Instagram, immediately spotting several not-so-subtle paparazzi shots already making the rounds. "Oh, Hunter looks thrilled."

"When does he ever look thrilled about Jon?" Jeremy asked, though his focus was still mainly on the twins' game.

"Why is Michelle even still friends with that wanker?" I asked.

"It's complicated," Jeremy sighed. "They've known each other since she was a kid."

"Still," I scrolled through more photos. "The way he's acting in these pool pictures... he knows exactly what he's doing."

"Aye, he does," Jeremy's voice took on an edge. "Though Hunter's learned to handle it better than I would."

I caught his meaning - after everything with Mary, Jeremy had strong feelings about people deliberately causing drama for their own entertainment.

"Oh, there's some good news though. Fionn told Sosaidh that Declan's transfer to Cork was approved. He starts first of August. I didn't even have to alter anything in their systems."

Jeremy looked at me sharply. "Does that mean you got into their systems?"

"Aye, but I didn't change anything," I said innocently.

"Livvie!"

I shrugged. "Fionn is happy. I had to make sure it stayed that way. Besides, I think Declan's company was just as eager to get him away from the scandal in his community. Sosaidh says he's taking a flat in the same building as James."

"That building is perfect for Declan," Jeremy mused. "Lots of business professionals, good security. And the flats are spacious."

"Aye, plenty of room if Fionn decides to move in eventually," I agreed. "Though they're taking things slow. Smart, really."

"Unlike James," Jeremy shook his head. "Who still needs to tell his parents about both Aine and the baby."

My phone buzzed with another notification - more pool photos hitting social media. "Speaking of drama... oh, Hunter's going to hate these headlines tomorrow."

"That bad?" Jeremy glanced over while the twins argued about whose turn it was.

"Let's just say the entertainment sites are having a field day with Jon's hands-on approach to pool time. What exactly was Michelle thinking inviting that wanker and his family on vacation with them?"

Jeremy sighed, "She wasn't. She just sees Jon as a friend. And I guess when he invited Harley and Arissa to join them, Michelle figured it would be grand for them all to be together."

"Sometimes she forgets not everyone has pure motives," I scrolled through more photos. "Though Hunter clearly hasn't forgotten. Look at his face in this one."

"Aye, well, he has his reasons," Jeremy's voice held that protective edge it got whenever anyone threatened his chosen family's happiness. "Though Michelle can handle herself."

"True. And at least the Dixie Bennings announcement is getting more attention than the pool drama."

"Michelle knows how to manage the media," Jeremy said.

"You going to Hal's today?" I asked.

Jeremy shook his head. "No. He has several flights today. He'll be home late. You're stuck with me today."

"Ah, perhaps we should invite James to lunch," I suggested. "Have that chat about telling his parents."

"We could. Should I invite Pete too? Get some backup?"

"Not a bad idea. I'll see if Shay wants to watch the twins. She was asking for some time with them."

"SHAY?!" Rose perked up immediately at the name.

I laughed, "Maybe, love. I'll see if she's free."

I pulled out my phone to text Shay, knowing she'd probably jump at the chance to spend time with the twins. For someone who maintained such a carefully crafted dark image, she had a surprising soft spot for our chaos duo.

"Text Pete first," Jeremy suggested. "Make sure he's free before we arrange anything."

"Already on it," I showed him my screen. "Though knowing Pete, he's probably been waiting for us to intervene with James anyway."

"Da! MY turn!" Rose's declaration pulled Jeremy's attention back to the game.

"No, Ro Ro, proper turn order," Killy protested, though with less intensity than usual.

My phone buzzed with Pete's response. "He's in. Says James has been avoiding his calls about this very subject."

"Of course he has," Jeremy shook his head. "That eejit would avoid everything if we let him."

"Aine and Gina have become quite close. I'm not surprised Pete has tried to get through to James," I sighed. "The girls are already planning the nursery together."

"And James is pretending nothing is changing," Jeremy added, his attention split between the twins' game and our conversation. "Though he can't avoid reality forever."

"No, especially not with Gina involved. That woman is a force of nature when she sets her mind to something." I started typing out a message to Shay about watching the twins.

"Like someone else I know," Jeremy gave me a knowing look. "Speaking of forces of nature."

"I have no idea what you mean," I said innocently, though we both knew my tech fairy tendencies could be just as unstoppable as Gina's determination.

My phone buzzed with Shay's immediate response - exactly as enthusiastic as I'd expected. "Shay's free. Says she'll bring some new art supplies for the twins."

"Of course she will," Jeremy smiled. "For someone who claims to hate anything cheerful, she certainly spoils them."

"Like you're one to talk about spoiling," I teased. "Now, where should we ambush James for lunch?"

"Somewhere public enough that he can't make a scene, but private enough for this conversation," Jeremy considered. "The Cantina?"

"Perfect. Trevor will make sure we have a quiet corner." I started typing messages to coordinate everything. "Though knowing James, he'll figure out something's up the moment he sees all of us there."

"Good. Maybe it'll finally get through his thick skull that he needs to handle this properly."

By the time Shay arrived - laden with art supplies as promised - we'd arranged everything. The twins were thrilled to see their "big sister" and we managed to slip out while Rose was showing off her latest fairy dance and Killy was meticulously organizing the new colored pencils.

"Think James suspects anything?" I asked as we pulled into the Cantina's car park. Pete's car was already there.

"If he doesn't, he's thicker than I thought," Jeremy spotted James arriving just behind us, his expression already wary. "Though that look suggests he's figured it out."

"Wonderful," James called out as he approached, voice dripping with sarcasm. "A lunch ambush. Just what I needed today."

"Well, if you'd answer Pete's calls..." I let the sentence hang meaningfully.

Trevor was waiting at the door, clearly briefed on the situation. "Your usual corner's ready," he said, leading us to the secluded table where Pete was already waiting. "I'll send Fionn over with drinks."

"I don't need an intervention," James muttered as we settled into our seats. "I'll tell them. Eventually."

"Mate, Aine's showing," Pete pointed out. "Eventually isn't going to cut it much longer."

"And it's only a matter of time before Pete's mam lets it slip," I added. "Your parents deserve to hear it from you, not through gossip."

James slumped in his chair. "You don't understand. They still think of me as that irresponsible kid who-"

"Who got through uni on charm alone and goes through women like they are disposable?" Jeremy cut in. "Aye, they do. Which is exactly why you need to show them you're different now."

Fionn appeared with our usual drinks, reading the tension at the table perfectly. "I'll give you lot a few minutes before taking your orders."

"They're going to be disappointed," James stared into his drink. "Again."

"No, they're not," Pete leaned forward. "You have a good job, you're taking responsibility, you're actually in a real relationship-"

"That started with a one night stand that got her pregnant," James interrupted.

"Aye, but you stepped up," Jeremy's voice was firm. "You're doing the right thing. And more than that, you actually care about her."

"That's what scares you more than telling them about the baby, isn't it?" I studied James's face. "The fact that you're actually falling for her."

James's silence was answer enough. Pete and Jeremy exchanged knowing looks while Fionn tactfully remained at the bar, giving us space for this conversation.

"Look," Pete's voice was understanding, "I know I can't relate - Gina and I have been together since school. But your parents just want you to be happy. Even if this isn't how any of us expected it to happen."

"Your parents gave up on me settling down decades ago," James countered. "Can't blame them. I'm in my forties and just now..." he trailed off.

"Just now actually falling for someone," Jeremy finished for him. "Better late than never, mate."

"And you're stepping up," I added. "You're not that same wanker who thought he'd be chasing women forever."

"The old James would have run for the hills," Jeremy pointed out. "Not asked a girl to be exclusive because he couldn't stand the thought of her with someone else."

James shot me a look. "You told them about that conversation?"

"Of course I did," I shrugged unapologetically. "It proved my point about you actually caring about her."

"I've never even had a girlfriend before," James sighed.

"Not even in school?" I asked.

"No, he's right. Never. Aine is literally his first girlfriend," Jeremy confirmed as Pete nodded in agreement.

"Which is exactly why your parents need to hear about this from you," I pressed. "You're not just telling them about a baby - you're telling them their perpetual bachelor son has finally found someone worth committing to."

"At forty-three," James muttered into his drink.

"Better late than never," Pete said. "And Aine's good for you. Anyone can see that."

"And you're forty-four... forty-five this year," Jeremy corrected with a smirk.

Fionn chose that moment to return, clearly hoping the tension had eased enough to take our orders.

"The usual for everyone?" he asked, though his eyes lingered sympathetically on James. Being part of our extended circle meant he probably knew exactly what this lunch intervention was about.

"And maybe some of that chocolate thing you've been experimenting with," I suggested. "We might need it."

"Trying to sweeten me up now?" James attempted a weak joke.

"No, that's what the whiskey in your coffee was for," Jeremy replied. "This is about giving you the courage to do what you know you need to do."

"There's no whiskey in my coffee," James frowned, looking suspiciously at his mug.

"Not yet," Jeremy grinned. "But the day's still young."

"Look," Pete leaned forward, "you need to tell them before someone else does. My mam's already excited about the baby - you know she can't keep news like this to herself for long."

"And Gina's planning the nursery with Aine," I added. "Word's going to get around."

"Plus," Jeremy's voice softened slightly, "Aine deserves better than being your secret. She's carrying your child, your first real girlfriend... she should be able to meet your parents properly."

James's shoulders slumped. We all knew Jeremy had hit on the real issue - it wasn't fair to Aine to keep hiding this.

"She hasn't exactly been pushing to meet them," James muttered defensively.



"Because she's trying not to pressure you," I pointed out. "But she's seventeen weeks pregnant, James. With your first child. Your parents' first grandchild."

"And unlike my mam," Jeremy added, "they'll probably be thrilled once they get over the shock. They've wanted grandchildren for years."

"They wanted grandchildren when I was younger," James corrected. "Not when I'm closer to fifty than forty."

"Better late than never applies to grandchildren too," Pete said. "Look how excited my parents are, and they already have three."

Fionn returned with our food, and I caught the slight nod he gave Trevor, who was watching from the bar. They were both too professional to openly eavesdrop, but everyone in our circle was invested in James finally doing the right thing.

"Fionn! Sosaidh told me about Declan moving to Cork! Are you excited?" I asked.

A soft smile crossed his face, though he tried to maintain his professional demeanor. "Aye, it'll be nice having him closer."

"He found a good flat," Jeremy added. "In that building near the city center."

"Taking things slow though," Fionn's smile grew slightly. "For now anyway."

"Smart," James commented. "Unlike some of us."

"Everyone moves at their own pace," Fionn said diplomatically before heading back to the bar.

"Speaking of pace," I turned back to James, "yours needs to pick up a bit. Your parents need to know."

"How do I tell them? 'Oh, Mam, Da, I finally have a girlfriend. Oh and I knocked her up before we even got together'?"

"Maybe lead with the girlfriend part first," Jeremy suggested dryly. "Let them process one piece of news at a time."

"Tell them you've met someone special," Pete added. "Someone who makes you want more than just... your usual approach to relationships."

"And then tell them about the baby," I said. "They might surprise you with how they react. They've probably given up hope of ever having grandchildren."

"That's what worries me," James pushed his food around his plate. "They've probably given up hope of me ever growing up at all."

"Then prove them wrong," Jeremy's voice was firm but kind. "Show them you have grown up. That you're ready to be a father, that you actually care about Aine."

"And maybe mention that she has a proper job and her own career," I added. "They might be relieved to know she's not some young girl you've taken advantage of."

"Aye, tell them about her work in marketing," Pete suggested. "Her education, her family background..."

"Make it clear this isn't just another of your... situations," Jeremy chose his words carefully. "This is different. You're different."

"And what if they don't believe that?" James looked up from his plate. "What if they think I'm just going to mess this up like I mess up everything else?"

"Then prove them wrong," I said firmly. "You're already proving it by being there for Aine, by wanting to make this work. That's not the James they're expecting."

"And if you keep hiding it," Jeremy added, "you're just confirming their worst expectations. Telling them yourself, facing this head-on - that's what a grown man does."

"A grown man who's about to be a father," Pete reminded him gently.

James's face softened slightly at that word - 'father.' Even after all these months, it still seemed to catch him by surprise sometimes.

"You know what really terrifies me?" James's voice was quieter now. "What if I'm rubbish at it? Being a father. Being in a relationship. All of it."

"Welcome to how every new parent feels," Jeremy said. "You think I wasn't terrified when Liv was pregnant with the twins?"

"At least you had experience with relationships," James countered. "I've never even tried to be someone's boyfriend before, let alone someone's father."

"And yet you're already doing both," I pointed out. "You're there for her appointments, you're planning for the baby, you actually care about her feelings. That's more than the old James would have managed."

"The old James wouldn't have made it past that first morning," Pete added. "But you did. You're still here. That counts for something."

"Besides," Jeremy leaned forward, "you've got all of us. You think we're going to let you mess this up?"

"Exactly," I nodded. "Between me, Gina, and Sosaidh keeping an eye on things-

"Ah yes, my personal surveillance team," James managed a weak smile.

"Someone has to make sure you don't revert to your old ways," Pete grinned. "Though honestly, mate, I don't think that's likely. The way you look at Aine..."

"Like a lovesick teenager," Jeremy teased. "Never thought I'd see the day."

"I am not lovesick," James protested, but his face gave him away. "I just... I don't want to disappoint her. Or the baby."

"Then start by telling your parents," I said gently. "Show Aine you're proud to be with her, that you're ready for all of this."

James nodded. "OK. I'll talk to them. I'm not sure how. But I will."

"Today," I demanded.

"This weekend. I think I should go tell them in person."

I nodded. "Fair dinkum. This weekend then."

"And if you don't," Jeremy added, "Liv will probably hack your phone and tell them herself."

"I would never," I protested, though we all knew better. "But seriously, James. This weekend. No more delays."

Michelle  
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"She's finally out," Hunter announced quietly, settling onto the couch next to me. After all the excitement at the pool, Tomi had fought her nap hard, but exhaustion finally won.

I curled into his side, still in my cover-up from the pool. "Sorry about earlier. I should have known Jon would pull something like that."

"Not your fault," Hunter's arm tightened around me slightly. "Though the photos are already hitting the entertainment sites."

"Let them," I shrugged, checking my phone. "The Dixie announcement is still trending higher. Besides, anyone who matters knows the truth."

"Still," his voice held that edge it got whenever Jon pushed boundaries, "he knew exactly what he was doing."

I sighed, "I know he did. I swear, I thought he would behave since Dot is on the trip too."

Hunter looked at me. "Yes, Jon has always behaved around his wife. He totally never cheated on her with you while she was in the next room."

I rolled my eyes, but he was right. Jon's presence on this trip had been a mistake - one I should have seen coming. Even after all these years, he still couldn't resist creating drama, still had to push those boundaries.

"Maybe we should spend tomorrow at the private beach instead," I suggested. "Just us and the girls. No cameras, no Jon..."

"Now that sounds like a vacation," Hunter pulled me closer. "Though we might have to convince Harley she can go a whole day without Jake."

"She's got it bad," I sighed, remembering my own teenage intensity all too well. "Though at least Jake's handling it well - keeping his distance while still being kind."

"Unlike some people at that age," Hunter's voice was pointed but gentle. He never held my past against me, but we both knew the contrast between Jake's behavior and Jon's history made Hunter's protective instincts flare up even more.

"She'll grow out of it," I nestled closer. "And in the meantime, we keep her safe. Starting with a family day tomorrow."

"At least Jake keeps things completely appropriate with Harley. Professional during surf lessons, always makes sure Millie's there..."

I nodded against Hunter's chest. "He's a good kid. Nothing like his father."

"Thank god for that," Hunter muttered, then added more softly, "Though watching our daughter pine after him..."

"Brings up some uncomfortable memories?" I finished for him. The parallels weren't lost on me, even if the situations were completely different.

"It doesn't help that he looks just like Jon at that age and she is a spitting image of you," he sighed.

"Brings up some uncomfortable memories?" I finished for him. The parallels weren't lost on me, even if the situations were completely different.

"It doesn't help that he looks just like Jon at that age and she is a spitting image of you," he sighed.

"But that's where the similarities end," I said firmly, turning to face him. "Jake is nothing like Jon was. And Harley... she might look like me, but she has your heart. Your strength."

"And my stubbornness," Hunter's smile was wry. "Though right now I wish she had a little less of that."

"She'll be okay," I assured him, though I understood his worry. "We're here to make sure of that. And tomorrow, we're having a family day. Just us."

"Just have to figure out how to tell her," Hunter mused. "She's not going to be happy about missing a day of 'surf lessons.'"

"Leave that to me," I shifted to grab my phone. "I'll text Jake first, make sure he and Millie have other plans tomorrow. That way Harley can't argue."

"Clever," Hunter pulled me back against him. "Though she'll probably still pout."

"Let her. Better a pouty teenager than..." I trailed off, but Hunter knew what I meant. Better a normal teenage crush than what had happened with me and Jon at that age. "Besides, she needs to spend some time with her sisters. Arissa mentioned she misses how things used to be, before Harley got so... focused on Jake."

"Focused is one word for it," Hunter's voice held a mix of amusement and concern.

I sighed, "Babe, she's nearly 13...this is normal. And it will pass. She is going to start school in a whole new country soon and she'll meet new guys that are her age."

Hunter looked at me, "That's not the comfort you think it is."

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Hunter looked at me. "That's not the comfort you think it is."

"Better than her planning her future around a married man twice her age," I pointed out. "At least school crushes will be age-appropriate."

"Can't she just stay focused on hockey?" Hunter groaned. "She was so much easier to handle when all she cared about was sports."

"Says the man who used to race motorcycles to impress girls," I teased, trying to lighten his mood. "Face it, love. Our little tomboy is growing up."

"I don't wanna lose my son," Hunter faux whined.

I shrugged. "She's a girl. It was bound to happen eventually."

"She was perfectly happy being one of the guys until Jake showed up," Hunter sighed. "Hockey, motocross, skateboarding... now suddenly she's pretending she doesn't know how to surf."

"She'll find her balance," I assured him, though I couldn't help smiling at his dramatics. "She can be both - the athlete and the girl with crushes. Just like her mom."

"As long as she handles those crushes better than her mom did," he teased, pulling me closer.

I rolled my eyes. "Speaking of high school romances... I should check in with Billy."

Hunter looked at me. "That's your segway?"

I shrugged again. "Yeah?"

"Sometimes I forget you two dated," Hunter shook his head. "Though I'm still not sure how that happened, given everything I know about both of you."

"We were kids," I reached for my phone. "And Lea was desperate to get me away from LA and Jon. Billy was safe, sweet... exactly what everyone thought I needed at the time."

"And now he's developing tech for your security systems," Hunter's voice held a hint of amusement at life's strange circles.

I found Billy's number and hit send, settling back against Hunter as I waited for him to answer.

"Hi Michelle," Billy's familiar voice came through on the second ring.

"Hey Billy! How are things there?"

"Your Command Center is very nearly finished. Just have a few final touches to make," he sounded pleased. "I also had a wonderful lunch with your friend Livvie. She is a remarkable woman."

"Of course you and Liv connected. I should have guessed," I laughed softly.

"I'm hiring her to consult with Cranston Tech," he said.

"Oof... um, Billy, be careful how much access you give her to your systems. Livvie is good... very good. She can hack anything," I warned.

"She is good, but anything I don't want her to find is encrypted in a way not of this planet. She'll never find it," Billy assured me.

"Hope so," I shifted slightly. "Any sign of the Death Ranger?"

"Not recently, but we've had one attack since you left. Mia and I were handling it but those new Thunder Rangers showed up and he retreated. It appears he doesn't respond well to whatever power they have tapped into."

"Any information on who they are?"

"Not yet. Mia and I are working on it."

"I'm glad you and Mia can work together," I said carefully.

"Mia isn't so bad Michelle. I think you two have more in common than you think."

"I have nothing in common with her," I responded automatically. "So things are okay there?"

"Yes. Enjoy your vacation. I'll fill you in when you get home."

"OK... but if you need us back sooner..."

"I know how to find you. Seriously, we're fine here."

I sighed, "Ok. Thanks again."

"Happy to help. And let Hunter know Robbie is fine. He's a very good boy."

I smiled at that. "He'll be happy to know that. Talk soon."

After hanging up, Hunter pulled me closer. "How are things?"

"Sounds like everything's under control," I set my phone aside. "Though those Thunder Rangers are still a mystery."

"And you hate mysteries," Hunter's voice held a hint of understanding. "Especially when they involve other Rangers."

"I just don't like not knowing who's out there," I admitted. "Even if they seem to be helping. And Billy and Mia working together..."

"Still don't trust her?"

"It's not that I don't trust her exactly," I shifted to face him. "I just... there's something about her that doesn't add up. And now she's involved in all of this."

"Has she given you any reason not to trust her?" Hunter asked carefully. "Besides being friends with Amber?"

"No," I sighed. "But Billy saying we have things in common doesn't help. What could I possibly have in common with her?"

Hunter laughed, "Mich, are you serious right now? You two have so much in common."

"Like what?!" I asked, insulted at the accusation.

"Let's see," Hunter started counting on his fingers. "You're both incredibly successful musicians who started young. You both had difficult childhoods. You both put up walls and act tough to protect yourselves. You both are fiercely protective of the people you care about. You both-"

"Okay, okay," I cut him off. "But she's all... dark and brooding. And her music is nothing like mine."

"Different genres, same passion," Hunter pointed out. "And maybe if you gave her a chance, you'd see past the 'dark and brooding' part."

I smirked, "Like I saw past you being all dark and brooding?"

"I was never brooding," he protested, but his smile gave him away. "Just... thoughtful."

"Right. The thoughtful bad boy of motocross," I teased. "Who turned out to be the sweetest dad and husband ever."

"Don't let that get around," he pulled me closer. "I have a reputation to maintain."

"Your secret's safe with me," I settled against him. "Though watching you with Tomi kind of gives it away."

"Speaking of secrets," Hunter's voice turned more serious, "what do you think about these Thunder Rangers? Billy seemed concerned about their power source."

"Yeah, that caught my attention too," I admitted. "Especially since the Death Ranger apparently reacts to it. That's... unusual."

"Think they're connected somehow?"

"Maybe. Though Billy and Mia seem to trust them, or at least their intentions." I frowned slightly. "I just wish I knew who they were. Having unknown Rangers in Cork while we're here in Hawaii..."

"You're worried about everyone back home," Hunter finished for me. "Even Mia."

"I am not worried about Mia," I protested automatically, though we both knew I was lying. I loved our chosen family and like it or not, Mia was part of that too.

"You're worried about everyone back home," Hunter finished for me. "Even Mia."

"I am not worried about Mia," I protested automatically, though we both knew I was lying. I loved our chosen family and like it or not, Mia was part of that too.

"She's good for Amber," Hunter said carefully. "And she's proven herself trustworthy with everything else."

"I know," I sighed. "It's just... hard sometimes. Trusting new people with our family."

"Says the woman who collected half of Ireland into our circle," he teased gently.

"That's different. Trevor, Amber, Livvie... they all made sense somehow."

"And maybe Mia makes sense too, even if you're not ready to see it yet."

Before I could argue further, a small cry from the bedroom caught our attention.

"Perfect timing," Hunter smiled. "Someone's up from her nap."

"And probably hungry," I started to get up, but Hunter was already moving.

"I've got her. You should check your social media - last I saw, Dixie Bennings was trending even higher than the pool drama."

"Always the silver lining," I called after him, reaching for my phone. He was right though - the character reveal was dominating entertainment news, pushing the photos with Jon to secondary status. My PR team would be pleased.

"Ma ma!" Tomi's happy voice carried from the bedroom, followed by Hunter's gentle laugh.

Sometimes I still couldn't believe this was my life - vacation drama and social media management mixed with perfect family moments. Though right now, listening to Hunter and Tomi's voices, the rest of it seemed far less important.

Livvie

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On the drive home from lunch, I glanced at Jeremy. "Do you actually think James is going to talk to his parents?"

Jeremy sighed. "I don't know. I mean, I can make him. I could go with him."

"To Drogheda?" I asked.

Jeremy nodded. "Yeah. Don't love the idea but... maybe he needs moral support."

"It would give you a chance to see your Da. And to check in on Mary," I said carefully.

"Check in on Mary? Why?" Jeremy looked confused.

"To make sure she doesn't have any hidden tech I don't know about. And to ensure she hasn't moved to tech-free ways of trying to ruin our lives that I can't trace?"

"Ugh..."

"I know you don't want to see Mary..."

"Ever again."

"I know, but just enough to ensure she's keeping to her word and not planning my demise again," I said.

"Well, when you put it like that," Jeremy sighed. "Fine. I'll go with James and pop in to check on Mary while I'm there."

"I presume you'll stay the night?"

"Probably. I'll get a room."

"Not staying with your parents?"

"Bloody hell, no fucking way," Jeremy replied emphatically.

I laughed. "Didn't think so."

"So you'll go with him this weekend then?" I asked, though it wasn't really a question. We both knew James needed the support.

"Aye," Jeremy nodded. "Drive up Saturday morning, deal with his parents, check on Da and... Mary," his voice soured slightly at her name, "then get a room for the night. Head back Sunday."

"Good. The twins and I will have a proper fairy weekend while you're gone," I smiled. "Though it would be nice to know what Mary's been up to. She's been suspiciously quiet since going tech-free."

"Livvie..." his tone was warning but fond.

"What? Can't blame a girl for being careful. She did try to kill me."

"And that's exactly why you're staying far away from Drogheda," Jeremy reached for my hand. "Though I appreciate the protective instinct, mo chroí."

When we got home, we found Shay in the living room watching TV, the twins sound asleep on either side of her. The sight of our emo babysitter sandwiched between two napping toddlers was adorably incongruous.

"Hi," she whispered. "They didn't want to go down for a nap so I got them to watch Bluey with me. They were out five minutes in."

"They love time with their big sister," I smiled. The twins had adopted Shay as family almost immediately, and she'd taken to the role with surprising enthusiasm.

"We can carry them upstairs for you," Jeremy offered.

Shay shook her head. "It's fine. I'm in no hurry. Kenz is at work and I just need to pack for tomorrow."

"Oh right, Hal's flying you to Scotland to get Penny. I'm glad you decided to stay the night," I said. Shay adored her baby sister, but the sheep farm where Penny lived with their Auntie Addie was another matter entirely. She'd wanted to make it a day trip until I suggested giving Addie at least one night's visit.

"Aye, but one night on the fucking sheep farm is all I can handle," Shay muttered.

I chuckled. "Fair enough. I know Addie will be happy to see you regardless. How long is Penny staying?"

"A fortnight. She'll be with me for a couple nights, but mostly at Kara and Hal's," Shay explained.

"Oh, Tiffany will be thrilled to have her best friend for two weeks," I smiled.

"Aye, those two are inseparable when they're together," Jeremy smiled, carefully settling into a chair to avoid waking the twins. "Though I'm surprised Penny's willing to leave the farm for so long."

"Only because Auntie Addie promised to video call with her every day so she can see her lamb and that wee highland cow of hers," Shay explained. "Otherwise she'd never agree to two weeks away from them."

"That child and her animals," I smiled. "Though at least she and Tiffany found each other. It's nice seeing Penny connect with someone who isn't covered in wool."

"Or hooves," Shay added with a slight eye roll, though her voice held genuine affection. "Auntie Addie says she's been talking about this visit for weeks. She'll miss her 'friends' but I think Kara and I can keep her and Tiffany so busy she won't even think about it."

"Guess it's just me and the twins this weekend after all. J is going to Drogheda with James tomorrow," I said.

"Oh? Why? You like Drogheda as much as I like the sheep farm," Shay said.

"James needs to tell his parents about Aine and the baby," Jeremy explained quietly, mindful of the sleeping twins. "Thought he could use some moral support."

"And to check that Mary's behaving herself," I added, though we all knew my concerns about Jeremy's mother went deeper than that.

"Ah," Shay nodded understanding. "Good thing you're staying here then. Last thing we need is Mary getting any ideas. After the wedding... she is fucking mad."

"That's putting it mildly," Jeremy's voice tightened slightly. The memory of what his mother had planned still affected him deeply.

"Which is exactly why I need to keep tabs on her," I said. "Even if she's gone tech-free, she's proven what she's capable of."

"At least Da's keeping an eye on her now," Jeremy sighed. "Though I still don't understand why he stays."

"Da thinks it's his penance," I explained. "For not stopping her sooner."

Rose stirred slightly at Jeremy's tone, and we all instinctively lowered our voices. Some topics were better discussed when little ears weren't around.

Jeremy sighed, "I'll talk to him about that too. He needs to leave her. He deserves to be happy."

"He won't though," I said softly. "He thinks staying is some sort of atonement for all the years he let her control everything."

"Like watching her try to kill you wasn't punishment enough," Shay muttered, her natural protectiveness showing. Our chosen family had taken Mary's actions at the wedding very personally.

"Maybe seeing James step up will inspire him," Jeremy mused. "Show him it's never too late to make changes."

Killy shifted in his sleep, curling closer to Shay, and we all fell silent again. The weight of family - both chosen and blood - hung in the air between us.

"At least you're not going alone," I reached for Jeremy's hand. "Though I'm not sure which will be worse - watching James tell his parents or dealing with Mary."

"Definitely Mary," Shay said with certainty. "James's parents might be shocked, but they're not psychotic."

"True," Jeremy managed a small smile. "And they'll probably be thrilled once the shock wears off. They've wanted grandchildren for years."

"Even if it comes with James finally having his first proper girlfriend at forty-five?" Shay asked.

"Better late than never," I shrugged. "Though I still can't believe he's never had a real relationship before Aine."

"Some people take longer to find their path," Jeremy squeezed my hand. "Look at Da - he's still finding his."

Rose stirred slightly and without opening her eyes she murmured, "Snack."

Shay chuckled, "Do you think about anything but snacks, Fairy Girl?"

"Snacks," Rose mumbled again as she blinked her eyes open and saw us. "DA!"

The excitement in her voice woke Killy, who sat up immediately, looking around to assess the situation with his usual precision.

"Hello mo stór," Jeremy smiled. "Have a good nap with Shay?"

"Snack now?" Rose was already climbing into Jeremy's lap, while Killy remained curled against Shay, still waking up.

"Always thinking with your stomach," I laughed. "Just like your Da."

"I'll get them something," Shay offered, but Killy clung to her side, not quite ready to let go of his nap buddy.

"I've got it," I headed toward the kitchen. "Though someone needs to decide what kind of snack they want."

"Fairy bread!" Rose declared immediately.

"Those aren't snacks, those are dessert," Jeremy tried to reason with her, though we all knew it was futile when Rose had her mind set on something.

"Proper snack first," Killy mumbled, still pressed against Shay. "Then fairy bread."

"Look at that," Shay grinned. "A compromise. You two are getting better at this."

I couldn't help but smile at how our normally precise boy was so content to stay cuddled up with Shay. She might maintain her emo image, but the twins had clearly seen right through it from the start.

I went into the kitchen and filled their sippy cups with mango punch and grabbed two small bags of Tayto Snax. The potato puffs were perfect toddler snacks - though getting them had been Jeremy's influence. Now the twins were as addicted to them as their Da.

"Here we go," I handed each twin their snack and cup. "Though I suppose fairy bread might be possible later."

"After dinner," Jeremy added quickly, seeing Rose's eyes light up at the mention of fairy bread.

"Proper order," Killy nodded seriously, though he still hadn't moved from Shay's side.

"Speaking of dinner," Shay glanced at her phone, "I should probably head home soon. Kenz will be done at the Cantina, and I still need to pack for tomorrow."

"No!" Killy's protest was immediate, his grip on Shay tightening slightly.

"Stay dinner?" Rose added hopefully, potato puff crumbs around her mouth.

"I can't tonight, Fairy Girl," Shay's voice was gentle. "I have to get ready for my trip to see Penny, remember?"

"Well, I mean, we could go eat at the Cantina... our treat. If you're interested," Jeremy offered.

"Burrito!" Rose smiled at the mention of the Cantina.

"Plus Trevor's been letting Fionn and Kenzie experiment with new desserts," I added, watching Killy still firmly attached to Shay's side. "And clearly someone's not ready to let you go yet."

Shay looked down at Killy, then at Rose's hopeful face. "Well, since packing won't take that long anyway... I suppose I could manage dinner first."

"Cantina!" both twins cheered, though Killy managed to make his excitement sound precisely measured.

"Though someone needs to clean up these snack crumbs first," Jeremy pointed out, eyeing Rose's potato puff debris.

"And maybe wash faces," I added, noting how the mango punch had somehow made it onto both twins despite their sippy cups.

"Proper cleaning procedure," Killy agreed, finally loosening his grip on Shay enough to sit up straight.

"Then Cantina?" Rose asked hopefully.

"Then Cantina," Jeremy confirmed. "Though maybe we should text Trevor to warn him we're coming..."

"See Patrick!" Rose cheered. She loved Trev's pet lobster.

"...for Patrick's sake." Jeremy finished.

"Poor Patrick," I laughed, remembering how our fairy girl had tried to 'rescue' the lobster on our last visit.

"Proper tank only," Killy insisted, finally standing up from his spot next to Shay.

"Right then," Jeremy pulled out his phone. "Let me warn Trevor to secure Patrick's tank before we arrive. Last thing we need is another great escape attempt."

Shay was fighting back a smile, clearly remembering the chaos of Rose's last 'lobster rescue mission.' "I can't believe Michelle actually gifted Trevor a pet lobster."

"Only Michelle would think a live lobster was an appropriate birthday gift," I shook my head fondly. "Though Trevor adores that thing."

"Patrick friend!" Rose declared, already heading for her shoes with determined fairy energy.

"At least she's stopped trying to teach him fairy dances through the glass," Jeremy muttered, typing out his warning text to Trevor.

When we arrived at the Cantina, we spotted Amber, Rachel, and Niamh already settled in the VIP room.

"Auntie Amber!" Rose squealed, making a beeline for them. "Baby Ra-hel!"

I caught up to our excited fairy girl, scooping her up. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Care to join us? We just ordered," Amber offered with a smile.

"Love to," I settled Rose into a chair while the others found seats.

"Mamó!" Killy went straight to Niamh, who welcomed him onto her lap with practiced ease.

"How was climbing?" I asked Amber as Jeremy helped Shay pull up another chair.



"Better," Amber's smile was genuine, if slightly frustrated. "Though I'm still not where I used to be."

"But you're getting there," Trevor appeared with drinks, his protective instincts obvious even as he tried to be encouraging.

"Baby steps," Amber nodded, adjusting Rachel's carrier. "Or in this case, baby climbs."

Rachel babbled happily, drawing Rose's immediate attention. Our fairy girl was fascinated by her baby cousin, though we still had to monitor her "fairy blessing" attempts.

"Gentle with the baby, mo stór," Jeremy reminded Rose, who was already leaning toward Rachel with determined fairy energy.

"Where's Mia?" I asked, noticing her absence.

"She's hanging out with Billy. It's an odd friendship, but they seem genuinely fond of each other," Amber said.

The mention of Billy made me think of our lunch earlier, but before I could mention it, Trevor appeared to take our orders.

"The usual for everyone?" Trevor asked, though his attention was divided between taking orders and watching Rose's careful attempts to interact with Rachel.

"Burrito!" Rose demanded.

Trevor laughed, "Aye Love, always."

"Oi, usual... my girlfriend off the clock yet?" Shay asked.

"Just about. I'll have her join you when she is," Trevor smiled. "Though I know she'll want you to try her newest creation. It's fantastic. Might even use it in the Galway restaurant when we get it open."

"She mentioned something about passion fruit?" Jeremy asked.

"Aye, she and Fionn have been experimenting. Between the two of them, the dessert menu's going to need its own expansion."

"As long as they don't experiment with Patrick," I teased, making Rose's head snap up at the lobster's name.

"Patrick!" Rose demanded.

"Patrick is our most discerning critic you know. Patrick observes experiments. He doesn't participate," Trevor said.

"Patrick!" Rose demanded again, trying to bolt for the lobster tank.

"Hold it right there," Jeremy caught her mid-run. "I'll take you to see Patrick after you eat."

"Now!" Rose insisted.

"Róisín Dónailín O'Brien," Jeremy warned.

Rose froze at her full name, looking down with a pout. "Aye Da."

I caught Amber trying not to smile - we'd all seen this particular scene play out before. Our fairy girl's enthusiasm for Patrick was only matched by her father's ability to reign it in when needed.

"Proper dinner order," Killy nodded from Niamh's lap, though he was eyeing the lobster tank too. For all his precision, he was just as fascinated by Patrick as his sister.

"Speaking of proper order," Trevor glanced at his watch, "let me get these orders in and send Kenzie out. She's probably already spotted Shay through the kitchen window anyway."

"Probably counting down the minutes," Amber smiled. "Though I hope she knows Scotland isn't that far away."

"Try telling that to those two," Niamh commented fondly. "You'd think Shay was going to the moon instead of the sheep farm for one night."

"The sheep farm is worse than the moon," Shay muttered, making us all laugh.

Rachel chose that moment to make a grab for Rose's hair, successfully distracting our fairy girl from her Patrick-related disappointment.

"Gentle with baby," Jeremy said pulling Rose back.

"Oh, Liv, I'm actually glad we ran into you. I was thinking about starting some yoga classes at the place in Castle West For recovery, you know? Something gentle to help build strength back. Would you want to come with me?" Amber asked.

"Yeah, absolutely!" I nodded. "Send me the schedule and I'll make it work." Yoga wasn't exactly my idea of fun, but between my hours in the tech fairy cave and wanting to support Amber's recovery, it made sense. Besides, it would be nice to spend more time together.

"I'll look up the schedule when I get home," Amber said, adjusting Rachel in her carrier. "Might be good to have something regular scheduled, you know?"

"Aye, and it'll get me out of my tech fairy cave more," I agreed, just as Kenzie appeared, still in her chef uniform.

"Hey love," Shay smiled as Kenzie slid into the chair next to her. "All set for tomorrow?"

"Yeah, just gonna miss you, but I'll be fine,," Kenzie nodded, though she was studying Shay's face carefully. "You okay? Ready for the sheep farm?"

"One night won't kill me," Shay tried to sound casual, but we all heard the slight dread in her voice.

"Though the sheep might try," Trevor teased as he returned with drinks, making Shay roll her eyes.

"Patrick now?" Rose tried again hopefully, clearly thinking Trevor's return meant dinner was imminent.

"Food's just gone in," Trevor assured her. "Though I hear someone's been planning new rescue attempts?"

"No rescue!" Killy stated firmly. "Proper tank only."

"See? Your brother has the right idea," Jeremy smiled. "Patrick's happy in his tank."

"Speaking of tanks," Kenzie turned to Trevor, "did you see the new dessert plating I set up? I was thinking we could use those blue glass dishes..."

"Already approved it," Trevor grinned.

"Prep cook with dessert privileges. Look at you, Love," Shay smiled proudly.

"Trev is great about letting me experiment as long as my prep work is done," Kenzie said.

"And why not? You have a knack for it... and it gets Fionn out of his comfort zone too. Neither he nor I specialize in pastry," Trevor added.

Amber laughed. "And to think this is the same man that once tried to tell me pastry chefs aren't real chefs."

"I amended that statement and admitted I was wrong a long time ago," Trevor sighed. "Kenzie is well on her way to being a terrific chef."

"Patrick now?" Rose tried again, clearly hoping the conversation about desserts meant dinner was close.

"Soon, mo stór," Jeremy assured her. "Though maybe we should tell Trevor about your new fairy dance for Patrick?"

"NO!" Killy's protest was immediate. "No fairy dances for Patrick!"

"Proper tank observation only," Niamh agreed solemnly, though I caught her fighting a smile.

"You know," Amber shifted Rachel to her other side, "I still can't believe Michelle actually gave you a lobster as a birthday gift."

"Complete with a chef's hat," Trevor laughed. "Though Patrick's turned out to be quite the attraction."

"Especially with certain fairy visitors," I glanced at Rose, who was now plotting her path to the tank with what she probably thought was subtle determination.

"Proper tank observation only," Niamh agreed solemnly, though I caught her fighting a smile.

"You know," Amber shifted Rachel to her other side, "I still can't believe Michelle actually gave you a lobster as a birthday gift."

"Complete with a chef's hat," Trevor laughed. "Though Patrick's turned out to be quite the attraction."

"Especially with certain fairy visitors," I glanced at Rose, who was now plotting her path to the tank with what she probably thought was subtle determination.

"Rose," Jeremy's voice held that warning tone he'd perfected since the twins were born. "I see you planning."

"Just looking," Rose insisted, though her innocent expression fooled no one.

"Looking with fairy eyes," Killy observed critically from Niamh's lap. "Need to wait for Da."

"That's right," Jeremy nodded approvingly. "After dinner, I'll take you both to see Patrick properly."

"Though maybe we should have Trevor put on some extra security," I teased. "Just in case any fairy rescue attempts are being plotted."

"Patrick safe," Killy assured everyone seriously, while Rose's innocent expression somehow managed to become even more suspiciously angelic.

Fionn appeared with our food just then, providing a welcome distraction from potential lobster liberation schemes.

"Burrito!" Rose exclaimed happily, Patrick temporarily forgotten as she grabbed her burrito.

Fionn appeared with our food just then, providing a welcome distraction from potential lobster liberation schemes.

"Burrito!" Rose exclaimed happily, temporarily distracted by the plate Fionn set in front of her.

"Careful, it's hot," Jeremy cautioned as she reached eagerly for her food. Our fairy girl's enthusiasm for meals rivaled her enthusiasm for everything else.

"Proper temperature required," Killy nodded as Niamh helped him get settled with his own plate.

"And speaking of proper temperature," Fionn smiled at Kenzie, "that new dessert of yours is ready for tasting whenever everyone's finished."

The promise of dessert seemed to encourage Rose to focus entirely on her dinner, much to everyone's relief.

The evening wound down naturally - Rose finally got her supervised Patrick visit (with Killy ensuring proper observation protocols), Kenzie's new dessert earned universal approval, and promises were made to video chat with Penny about her animals while Shay was at the sheep farm.

As we gathered our things to head home, I watched our little family - both blood and chosen. Jeremy helping the sleepy twins into their jackets, Shay and Kenzie heading to their cozy flat, Amber and Trevor discussing yoga schedules while Rachel dozed in her carrier, Niamh fussing over everyone equally. Tomorrow would bring new challenges - Jeremy's trip to Drogheda, Shay facing the sheep farm, my eternal vigilance over Mary's activities - but tonight was just... perfect.









"Going Back"

James was uncharacteristically quiet as we pulled out of Cork, which was saying something given how early we'd started. Usually he'd be chattering away about his latest conquests or business deals, but today... well, today was different.

"You alright there, mate?" I glanced over at him. He was staring out the window like a man heading to his execution rather than to tell his parents about their first grandchild.

"What if they're disappointed?" he finally asked, still not looking at me. "What if they think I've messed up again?"

"They might be shocked," I admitted, "but disappointed? That you're finally settling down, having a family? Not likely."

"Whoa there mate... who said anything about settling down?"

I shot him a look. "You're having a baby with her. You asked her to be exclusive. That's the definition of settling down."

"I just... I don't want her seeing other blokes," he shifted uncomfortably. "And yeah, we're having a baby, but that doesn't mean..."

"That doesn't mean what, exactly?" I couldn't keep the edge out of my voice. "That you're going to step up and be there for them properly?"

"Of course I am!" The defensive tone in his voice was familiar - I'd heard it every time someone questioned his commitment to Aine. "I just... I don't know how to do this. Any of it. But, you... you're going to see your mam?"

I sighed, "Nice deflection. And she is not my mam anymore. Niamh is. But yes, I'm going to see Mary, albeit briefly."

"Why? After what she tried to do to Livvie..." James trailed off, probably remembering the wedding drama.

"Because Liv wants me to check that she's actually staying tech-free and not plotting anything else," I gripped the steering wheel tighter. "And because Da... well, he's still there, isn't he?"

"By choice," James pointed out.

"Aye, though damned if I understand why," I muttered, focusing on the road ahead rather than memories of Mary's particular brand of manipulation.

"At least your Da's trying now," James offered after a moment. "With the twins and everything."

"Aye," I nodded, grateful for that at least. "It's... different. Better. Like we're finally figuring out how to be father and son without Mary's influence."

"Think my parents will be like that? When the baby comes?"

"Probably," I couldn't help but smile. "Your mam's been wanting grandchildren since forever. Even if this isn't exactly how she pictured it happening."

"You mean she didn't picture her forty-five-year-old perpetual bachelor son knocking up a girl before actually dating her?" James attempted a weak joke.

"Well, when you put it that way..." I shot him a look. "Though you might want to phrase it differently when you tell them."

"How exactly am I supposed to phrase it?" James ran a hand through his hair. "'Hey Mam, Da, remember how you always wanted grandchildren? Surprise!'"

"Maybe lead with the girlfriend part first," I suggested dryly. "Let them process one piece of news at a time."

"Right. 'Hey Mam, Da, you know how I've never had a proper girlfriend before? Well...'"

"Now you're getting it," I grinned, though I caught his nervous fidgeting. "Just... be honest with them. Tell them about Aine - her job, her family, how you actually care about her."

"And then drop the baby bomb?"

"Better than them hearing it from Pete's mam first," I reminded him. "You know she's bursting to share the news with everyone."

"How the fuck did we even get here mate? It was so much easier when we were in school," James sighed.

"Was it?" I glanced at him. "You mean when you were chasing anything in a skirt, Pete was already in love with Gina, and I was fucking every attractive lad or lass I met?"

"At least we knew what we were doing then. Or thought we did." He stared out the window again. "Now I'm about to be someone's Da and you're..."

"Happy," I finished for him. "With my wife, my kids, my chosen family. Even if it's not the life Mary wanted for me."

"Fuck Mary," James muttered.

"Aye, well, Mary's expectations were never about what would make me happy, were they?"

"No. But remember when life was simpler? When you were my wing man and we were fucking half of Dublin," James said, clearly nostalgic for our university days.

"You mean when Mary forced me to destroy the best thing in my life by driving Trev away?" My voice was sharper than intended. "Those weren't exactly glory days for me, mate."

"I mean, I know you were a mess after Trev left, but we had some good times," James said.

I shook my head. "I was too pissed to remember most of it. School, work, drinking at the pub, playing in the band, taking someone home, and doing it all again the next day. That was my life until Livvie came along."

James was quiet for a moment, probably remembering those days differently than I did. "Livvie really changed everything for you, didn't she?"

"Aye," I couldn't help but smile, thinking of my tech fairy. "She saw past all the mess. Didn't let me hide behind it either."

"Like Aine's doing with me?" he asked hesitantly.

"Something like that," I glanced at him. "Though you're not quite the disaster I was. Just... emotionally stunted."

"Oi!" But he was almost smiling now. "I'm not emotionally stunted. I'm... selective about commitment."

"Selective? You never had commitment at all," I corrected. "Now you're having a baby with your first proper girlfriend. Quite the leap there, mate."

"It's not like I planned it," he shifted uncomfortably. "One night with Aine and suddenly..."

"And yet you're still here," I pointed out. "Not running away, not trying to buy her off. Actually trying to build something real with her."

"Because the thought of her with someone else..." he trailed off, that familiar possessive tone creeping into his voice.

"Drives you mad?" I finished for him. "Aye, that's usually a sign you actually care about someone. Welcome to relationships, mate."

"Fuck off," but there wasn't any heat in it. "When did you get so wise about all this?"

"Experience," I grinned. "Though you weren't exactly supportive of my relationships back then."

"Yeah, well," James shifted uncomfortably, "I liked having my wing man. Didn't want to lose you to domesticity."

"And now look at you," I couldn't resist. "About to join the ranks of domesticity yourself."

"Speaking of that," James glanced at the road signs, clearly eager to change the subject, "how long till we reach Drogheda?"

"Couple more hours," I tried not to think about what waited for us there. "Plenty of time for you to practice telling your parents about impending grandparenthood."

"Fuck," he slumped in his seat. "Maybe we should stop for coffee first. Remember that time in uni when we..." he started one of his usual stories, but his voice trailed off. "What if it's a girl, J? I don't... I mean, look how I am with Rose."

I laughed, "You're fine with Rose... you don't want to have to think about the fact every woman you ever screwed over was someone's daughter and if you have a daughter it could be some other bloke screwing yours over someday."

"Fuck off," but his face showed I'd hit the mark. "It's not... I mean..."

"Karma's a bitch, mate," I couldn't help but enjoy his discomfort a bit. After all his years of conquest stories, watching him face this particular fear was somewhat satisfying.

"How do you do it?" he asked suddenly. "Having a daughter, knowing what men are like? What I'm like?"

"By raising her to know her worth," I said simply. "And by being ready to kill any man who treats her like you treated women. Just like I did when I protected Sosaidh from you."

He winced at the memory. "That was... I was drunk."

"You were not. You were a wanker," I corrected. "My sister had just left her abusive boyfriend and you thought it was a good time to make a move."

"And you broke my nose," he touched it reflexively. "Fair enough, really."

"Aye, well, maybe having a daughter will finally teach you to see women as actual people," I couldn't keep the edge from my voice. "Instead of conquests to brag about at the pub."

The silence that followed was heavy with decades of friendship - the good and the bad of it.

"It's different with Aine," he finally said quietly. "I actually... I mean, I think about her feelings. About what she wants. I've never done that before."

"That's called being in a relationship, mate," I glanced at him. "Welcome to actually caring about someone besides yourself. Remember that night at O'Brien's? When I met Livvie - and Abs shot you down spectacularly, as I recall."

James glared. "What about it?"

"You spent months giving me shite - for not taking her home that first night, for waiting those three days she asked for, for doing long distance. Christ, you even tried to convince me to cheat before I moved to the States to be with her. But now... now maybe you understand what it's like, yeah? The thought of losing someone?"

James sighed. "I'm starting to, I think."

"Scary, isn't it?" I kept my voice neutral, though watching James finally face these feelings was... interesting. "Actually having something to lose?"

"Terrifying," he admitted. "How did you... I mean, when you knew Livvie was it..."

"When I knew she was worth changing my whole life for?" I finished for him. "Or when I realized I was more scared of losing her than I was of commitment?"

"Both. Either." He was staring straight ahead now, probably finding it easier to have this conversation without eye contact. "I keep thinking about Aine with someone else and it makes me mental. But then I think about being someone's Da, about actually being responsible for another person, and that's even worse."

"Welcome to growing up," I couldn't help but smile slightly. "Only took you forty-five years. To answer your question, I knew Livvie was it the second day we met up for lunch. I spent the day with her, got to know her as a person and realized she was remarkable and what I was feeling was something I hadn't felt since Trev. By the time we actually made love the first time I knew I never wanted to let her go and long distance was easy compared to the idea of losing her."

"And here I was ready to never call Aine again until she told me about the baby," James admitted. "Remember how mental I went that day? You had to talk me off the ledge."

"Aye, I remember. You were ready to run for the hills," I shot him a look. "But you didn't. And somewhere along the way, while trying to do the right thing..."

"I actually started caring about her," he finished quietly. "Wasn't expecting that part."

"Funny how that happens," I said. "When you actually spend time with someone, get to know them as a person instead of just another conquest."

"It's... different," he shifted uncomfortably. "The way I feel when she smiles at me, or when she lets me feel the baby move. Even just watching her work on her marketing presentations..."

"That's called having actual feelings, mate," I couldn't help but tease him a bit. "Though your parents will probably be thrilled to hear you talk about her like that. Might help soften the 'surprise, you're going to be grandparents' announcement."

"Christ," he ran a hand through his hair. "I still don't know how to tell them. 'Remember how you always wanted me to settle down? Well, I got a girl pregnant and now I'm actually falling for her' doesn't exactly sound great."

"Better than them hearing it from Pete's mam," I reminded him. "Or finding out through Drogheda gossip."

The familiar streets of Drogheda made my stomach tighten slightly, though not as much as when we passed Mary's church. James noticed - he'd always been good at reading my moods, even when we were kids.

"You sure about checking on her?" he asked quietly as we pulled into his parents' neighborhood. "You could skip it, head straight back to Cork after we're done here."

"Promised Liv I would," I kept my eyes on the road. "Make sure she's actually staying away from technology, not finding new ways to..." I trailed off, not needing to finish that thought.

"Right," James was starting to look a bit green as we approached his parents' house. "Maybe we should get coffee first? Or lunch? Or-"

"Stop stalling," I pulled into their drive. "The sooner you tell them, the sooner it's done."

"Fuck," he muttered, staring at his childhood home like it might bite him. "I think I'm going to be sick."

I sighed. "Come on mate, you want me to stick with you for a bit?"

"Would you?"

I nodded and turned off the car. James led the way inside, calling out as he opened the door, "Mam? Da?"

"James? That you, Love?" his mam's voice carried from somewhere inside.

I shot him a look. "Did you tell them you were coming?"

"Not exactly," he admitted as he headed for the living room.

"Bloody hell," I muttered, following him.

"What a pleasant surprise... oh, Jeremy, you're here too! Always lovely to see you," Mrs. Kelly beamed.

"You as well," I accepted her hug after she'd embraced James.

"Can I get you boys some tea?"

"Oh, no, it's quite alright-" I started.

"Really, it's no trouble at all," she insisted.

"I appreciate it, but I couldn't-"

"Please, sit. Let me bring you a nice cup of Lyon's."

I fought back a comment about her choice of tea - I'd been drinking Barry's since leaving my parents' house. But Irish manners won out. "Well, okay, that would be lovely."

We settled into the familiar living room as Mrs. Kelly went to fetch the tea.

"Didn't know you were coming for a visit, though it's always good to see you, my boy," Mr. Kelly smiled at James.

"Should have called. Sorry. It was a last-minute decision," James said.

I shot him a look that clearly said 'get on with it.'

"Here we are then," Mrs. Kelly returned with the tea tray, serving us before taking her own seat.

"Jeremy, love, I heard about what Mary did. I was so sorry. I do hope your sweet wife is doing okay."

I managed a smile. "Thank you, Mrs. Kelly. And yes, Livvie is doing wonderful. We're just glad we were able to stop Mary's plans."

"Oh aye, the idea of it all... I cannot believe Father Michael didn't do more after he found out," Mrs. Kelly shook her head.

"That's quite enough," Mr. Kelly cut in. "I'm sure Jeremy doesn't want to relive what his mam did."

"It's fine, really. And she isn't my mam. Not after what she did. She's just Mary now," I said firmly.

"So sad, although I can't say that I blame you," Mrs. Kelly said softly.

"So, a stór, what brings you by?" Mr. Kelly asked James.

"Um, uh..." James stuttered.

"James has some news to share," I pressed, trying to move things along.

"Right, news. You see... I'm not sure how to tell you this honestly... the thing is it was all so unexpected... but this is where we are then and... I didn't plan for this," James rambled.

I gave him a look that clearly said 'get on with it, eejit.'

Mr. Kelly chuckled. "Oh son, we know. We've been expecting this."

James looked bewildered. "You have?"

"Oh aye, we've known for some time now, but these are the sorts of things you have to come to in your own time," Mrs. Kelly said gently.

"We knew this was coming and we just want you to know we support you... both of you," Mr. Kelly added.

"What? How did..." James started.

"Hang on, what exactly do you know?" I asked, suddenly wary.

"About James being gay... you two are finally together, no? We've been expecting this since you came out all those years ago," Mr. Kelly said.

"I know it must be hard to divorce Livvie after what just happened with Mary," Mrs. Kelly added sympathetically.

James and I both sat there gawking, tea forgotten.

"Wait, what? No!" I managed.



"No, no... that's not... wait, you think I'm gay?" James sputtered.

"Not really the headline here, mate," I muttered.

"I am NOT gay," James finally found his voice. "And Jeremy is definitely not divorcing Livvie. Christ, where did you even..."

"Language, James," his mam corrected automatically.

"Sorry, but... no. Just no. I'm not gay, Jeremy's not leaving Livvie, and that's not why we're here at all."

"Oh," Mr. Kelly looked genuinely confused. "But you've never had a proper girlfriend, and you two have always been so close..."

"Because we're friends!" James's voice was getting higher. "Best friends since we were weans! And I have plenty of... I mean, I've had... oh bloody hell."

"What your son is trying to say," I cut in, fighting back inappropriate laughter at James's panic, "is that he's actually here to tell you he has a girlfriend. Who is very much a woman."

Mrs. Kelly's teacup clattered slightly as she set it down. "A girlfriend? An actual girlfriend?"

"Aine," James managed, his voice steadier now. "Her name's Aine."

"And she's..." Mr. Kelly seemed to be processing this new information. "She's your girlfriend? Like, properly?"

"Aye," James nodded, though I could see him struggling with how to deliver the rest of the news. "She's... well, she's actually..."

I caught his eye, giving him an encouraging nod. Might as well get it all out now.

"She's actually pregnant," James finally blurted out. "You're going to be grandparents."

The silence that followed made the previous one seem positively chatty. Mrs. Kelly's hand flew to her mouth while Mr. Kelly just stared, tea forgotten mid-sip.

"Pregnant?" Mrs. Kelly finally managed. "But... you said girlfriend. When did... how long have you..."

"The girlfriend part came after," James admitted, staring intently at his tea. "But I'm committed to her now. To both of them. I want to do this right."

"Both of them," Mr. Kelly repeated slowly. "We're having a grandchild. From our James. Who apparently has a girlfriend."

I took a careful sip of my tea, trying to fade into the background while still offering silent support. Though watching the Kellys try to process their perpetual bachelor son not only having a proper girlfriend but also impending fatherhood was... interesting.

"How far along is she?" Mrs. Kelly finally asked, her voice steadier now. Always practical, Mrs. Kelly.

"Seventeen weeks," James mumbled.

"Seventeen... and you're just telling us now?" There was a hint of hurt in her voice.

"I needed... I mean, I was trying to..." James glanced at me desperately.

"He needed time to process it himself," I offered carefully. "To figure out what he wanted."

"And what you want is... to be with her? To be a father?" Mr. Kelly was studying his son with an intensity I'd rarely seen from him.

"I do," James's voice was stronger now. "I know it's not exactly how you pictured getting grandchildren, but... I actually care about her. And the baby... I want to do this right."

"Oh, my boy," Mrs. Kelly's eyes were getting misty. "Of course we'll support you. Both of you. All of you."

"Tell us about her," Mrs. Kelly leaned forward eagerly, clearly moving past the shock and straight into grandmother mode. "What does she do? Where did you meet her?"

"She works in marketing," James started, looking slightly relieved at their reaction. "We met on the night of St. Paddy's actually..."

"Of course you did," Mr. Kelly snorted, but there was no judgment in it. They'd long ago accepted their son's habits, even if they hadn't approved.

"But it's different with her," James added quickly. "She's brilliant at what she does. Independent. Strong-willed."

"She'd have to be to handle our James," Mr. Kelly said dryly, but there was a hint of pride in his voice now.

"When can we meet her?" Mrs. Kelly asked, and I caught James's slight panic. He clearly hadn't thought that far ahead.

"Maybe let them settle into things first, love," Mr. Kelly suggested, reading his son's expression. "This is all quite new for them both."

I smiled, "And with that I will be taking my leave. I have to go have a chat with my da."

"Oh, and Mary?" Mrs. Kelly asked carefully. "Will you be..."

"Checking that she's keeping her distance, aye," my voice cooled slightly. "Making sure she's not finding new ways to cause trouble."

"Give Connor our love," Mr. Kelly said. "Though I still don't understand why he stays."

"None of us do," I stood, squeezing James's shoulder. "You'll be alright here?"

"Yeah," he nodded, looking more relaxed now that the hard part was over. "Thanks, mate. For everything."

"That's what friends are for," I smiled. "Even if they're not secretly in love with each other."

Imagine, James and I? Never. I laughed as I got back in my car. The whole idea was ridiculous. I pulled out my phone and dialed Da's number.

"Da, it's Jeremy. I'm in town, do you care to meet up?"

"Oh Jeremy, it's so good to hear from you. You're in Drogheda?" His voice brightened.

"Aye. I'll tell you about it when I see you," I said.

"I realize this is probably a big ask, but your mam is making supper and Alan is coming over with his family. Do you care to join us?"

I paused, weighing my options. I didn't want to, but it would be a good way to check on Mary. "Not really, but I will, if we can go to the pub after."

"Aye, absolutely. I'll let Mary know you're coming."

"See you soon," I hung up, grimacing slightly. At least since she hadn't been expecting me, Mary wouldn't have time to poison my food.

I sat in my car for a moment, steeling myself for what was coming. Dinner with Mary and Alan - exactly what I didn't want, but the best way to check that she wasn't plotting anything new. At least Da would be there, and we could escape to the pub after.

The drive to my parents' house felt too short. Every turn brought back memories - some good, but mostly the bitter ones. The church where she'd try to force me into the priesthood. The house where she'd first called Livvie an "Aussie whore."

I pulled up behind Alan's car. Great - the whole family. At least the kids would provide some buffer, though seeing Liam, Kate, and Oisín would be strange. I'd never been very involved in my nephews' or niece's lives, given how things were with Alan.

Da was waiting by the door - probably hoping to warn me about something before I went in. Some things never changed.

"It's good to see you, Jeremy," Da said, hugging me.

I hugged him back. "Good to see you as well."

I followed him into the sitting room.

"Hey you lot, Jeremy is here," Da announced.

"Uncle Jeremiah, it is nice to see you," Liam said formally.

I smiled. "Uncle Jeremy is fine there, lad. And it's good to see you as well. And beautiful little Katie, you're getting so big. Oh, Oisín, you were a wee baby last I saw you."

"Mam says you and Auntie Olivia have children now?" Kate asked.

"Oh aye, you have two wee cousins, Róisín and Killian. They're 2," I said, determined to be kind to the kids. They were innocent in all this. I glanced up at Alan. "Alan..."

"Jeremiah," he replied, his voice ice.

The tension in the room was thick enough to cut with a knife. Aoife busied herself with Oisín, clearly trying to avoid making eye contact with anyone.

"Jeremiah! You made it!" Mary's voice carried from the kitchen, trying too hard to sound pleased. "Dinner's nearly ready."

"Hello Mary," I kept my voice neutral, though I noticed how she didn't come out to greet me. Probably still arranging everything just so - her perfect Catholic family dinner. The irony wasn't lost on me.

"How are Róisín and Killian?" Da asked, clearly trying to ease the tension. "And Livvie?"

"They're grand," I smiled, genuine now. "Rose is all fairy energy, while Killy makes sure everything's properly aligned. And Livvie..." I caught Alan's slight sneer at her name, "she's brilliant as always."

"Still corrupting children with her pagan ways, Jeremiah?" Alan muttered, just loud enough to hear.

"Alan," Da warned sharply. "Not tonight."

"If you care to speak about my wife, I promise you won't like the end results," I said simply. I was not going to tolerate anyone speaking ill of Livvie.

The silence that followed was heavy with unspoken threats. Even the children seemed to sense the tension, Oisín pressing closer to Aoife while Liam and Kate exchanged worried glances.

"Dinner's ready!" Mary called from the kitchen, her timing as calculated as ever. "Everyone come sit!"

Da caught my eye, silently asking if I was alright. I gave him a slight nod. I could handle one dinner - I'd promised Livvie I'd check on Mary, and I intended to keep that promise.

"Jeremiah, I am so happy to have you home," Mary smiled as she served dinner.

"It's Jeremy, and my home is in Ballincollig with my wife and children. But it is good to see Da and my lovely niece and nephews," I said firmly.

"How are my grandchildren?" Mary asked, that familiar possessive tone creeping in.

"They are all sitting right here, ask them," I said pointedly.

"Mary, we've discussed this. Best not to ask about Róisín and Killian after what happened," Connor said, trying to keep her in check.

"But they are my..." Mary tried to argue.

"Mary, enough," Da said firmly.

The tension at the table was suffocating. Aoife busied herself cutting up Oisín's food while Alan pushed his around his plate, neither willing to look at me.

"So, Liam," I tried to focus on the children, "how's school?"

"Grand," he replied carefully, clearly aware of the adults' tension. "I made the football team."

"Did you now? That's brilliant," I smiled, genuinely pleased for him. "What position?"

"Goalkeeper," he seemed to relax slightly. "Though Da says I should focus more on my studies."

"There's time for both," I said, catching Alan's glare. "Balance is important."

"Like how you balance running a salon with corrupting your children?" Alan muttered.

"Alan!" Da's voice was sharp.

"No, let him speak," I set down my fork. "Let's hear exactly what you think about how I raise my children."

The children shifted uncomfortably in their seats. Aoife started to gather them, recognizing the brewing storm.

"Maybe we should take the children to the other room," she said quietly.

"Aye, good idea," Da nodded. "This isn't a conversation for young ears."

Once the children were safely out of earshot, Alan's facade cracked completely. "You let that witch raise them pagan, paint their nails, fill their heads with fairy nonsense-"

"That 'witch' is my wife," my accent thickened dangerously. "And my children are happy, healthy, and loved exactly as they are. Just like Declan is now. He's moving to Cork next month you know? He's moving to be closer to Fionn, his boyfriend that isn't scared to openly love him. Tell me Alan, how is it knowing the true love of your life found another love while you continue to live this charade?"

Alan's face went white, his knuckles tight around his fork. Mary gasped audibly while Da closed his eyes, clearly wishing he was anywhere else.

"How dare you," Alan's voice shook with rage. "After what your wife did-"

"My wife exposed the truth," I cut him off. "Something you never had the courage to do yourself."

"What that evil sidhe did was try to destroy this family. Jeremiah, she is not your family. We are. She took you and Sosaidh away from us. Alan is all I have left and she tried to take him as well," Mary seethed.

"You destroyed this family yourself, Mary," my voice was deadly quiet. "When you drove Trevor away. When you tried to force Sosaidh to stay with her abuser' When you plotted to murder my wife. Livvie didn't take us away - you pushed us away with your hatred."

"Hatred?" Mary's voice rose. "Everything I did was out of love-"

"Love?" I laughed harshly. "Was it love when you planned to kill Livvie? When you tried to force my son into the priesthood to cover Alan's secret?"

"It is always the same thing with you Jeremiah... no matter what that woman does you defend her," Alan said.

"She's done nothing wrong, why wouldn't I defend her? She is my wife, the mother of my children, the love of my life." I took a breath, trying to calm myself. "Look, believe it or not I actually didn't come here to argue. I came to check in and make sure any murderous plots against Livvie are truly well and over. And Alan, I think that is the one thing we can agree on?"

Alan nodded, "Aye, Mam went too far with that, I acknowledge."

"Ok then, can we have a civil discussion about that?" I asked.

"I am not plotting anything," Mary said quietly, though there was still an edge to her voice. "Father Michael has helped me see where I... strayed from God's path."

"Strayed?" I couldn't keep the bitterness from my voice. "That's what you're calling attempted murder now?"

"Jeremiah," Da warned softly, though I noticed he didn't contradict me.

"Look," I tried to keep my voice steady, "I need to know my wife is safe. That my children are safe. That you're not finding new ways to... intervene in our lives."

"I haven't touched a computer since the wedding," Mary's voice was stiff. "I keep my distance, just as you demanded."

"And you'll continue to?" I pressed. "Because if anything happens to Livvie-"

"Nothing will happen," Alan cut in, surprising me. "We're all keeping an eye on that."

"You're watching her?" I asked, not sure whether to be relieved or concerned.

"After what happened at the wedding..." Alan shifted uncomfortably. "None of us want that kind of scandal again. The whole parish knows now."

"The shame of it," Mary muttered, but Da silenced her with a look.

"Your mother stays away from technology," Da assured me. "And from planning anything... extreme. I make sure of it."

"And the church leadership keeps close watch as well," Alan added. "After everything that happened, they're not taking any chances."

I studied them both carefully. Alan might hate me, but he'd always been a terrible liar. They seemed to be telling the truth.

"And no more plots to take my son and force him to be your redo?" I asked.

Mary looked down, "No. I still feel you are making a mistake. That sweet boy belongs in the priesthood, just as you did. But, Connor has made it clear I need to let that go."

"Killy belongs exactly where he is," my voice hardened again. "With his sister, his parents, and a family that loves him exactly as he is. Not as some replacement for what you wanted me to be."

"He's two years old, Mary," Da added quietly. "Let him be a child."

The silence that followed was heavy with decades of expectations and disappointments. My son would never be Mary's do-over, no matter how much she wished it.

"Your wife and son are safe Jeremiah. Whatever I may think of Olivia, and I think you know well what I think of her, I promise, I would never let Mam harm her or your children," Alan promised.

"If there is a hidden laptop or mobile phone..." I started.

"There is none," Mary promised.

"There isn't. Jeremy, I don't even have an internet connection here anymore. Mary has a landline and a flip phone. Most of her days are spent at the church and she has regular counseling with Father Michael," Da added.

I raised my eyebrow, "Not that Father Michael is much better... but he does condemn murder so that is something I suppose."

"Jeremiah!" Mary's scandalized tone at my criticism of her precious priest almost made me smile. Some things never changed.

"Look," I pushed my barely touched dinner away, "I came to make sure my family is safe. I've done that. Now, Da and I are going to the pub."

"You're leaving already?" Mary's voice held that familiar mix of judgment and hurt. "But Jeremiah, we've hardly-"

"What? Hardly what, Mary? Hardly had time for you to remind me how I've disappointed you? How my wife is evil? How my son belongs to the church?" I stood up. "I've heard it all before."



"At least stay for dessert," she tried again. "I made your favorite-"

"My favorite stopped being important the moment you plotted to kill my wife," I cut her off. "Da? Pub?"

"Aye," Da stood, clearly relieved to be leaving. "Alan, stay with your mam?"

Alan nodded stiffly, not meeting my eyes. "Of course."

"Aoife," I called toward the other room, "bring the kids back in. I'm heading out but wanted to say goodbye."

The children filed back in, still looking uncertain after the earlier tension.

"Uncle Jeremiah," Kate stepped forward hesitantly. "Will we ever meet our cousins?"

The innocent question caught me off guard. These children shouldn't have to suffer for their parents' choices. "Maybe someday, love. When they're a bit older."

"And when their mother can behave," Alan muttered, but I ignored him.

"Be good, yeah?" I smiled at the kids. "Liam, good luck with football. Katie, keep growing beautiful. And Oisín... try not to grow too much before I see you again."

"Ready?" Da asked, already heading for the door.

"Aye," I followed him, not looking back at Mary's face. I'd seen that disappointed expression enough times to last a lifetime.

Da and I each took our own cars and met at the pub. We settled into a quiet corner, and I ordered a pint and fish and chips, having barely touched Mary's dinner.

"You did well tonight," Da said after we both had our drinks. "Kept your temper better than I expected."

"Had to," I took a long drink. "Promised Liv I'd just check on things, not start a war."

"And? What do you think?"

"About Mary?" I considered carefully. "I believe her, actually. About not having technology. About staying away. She seemed... different. Defeated maybe."

"She is," Da nodded. "The parish knowing what she planned... it changed things. Even her strongest supporters couldn't defend attempted murder."

"Aye, I heard Pete's parents actually changed churches because of the whole thing and I know James's mam isn't associating with her anymore either," I said.

"The Kellys were particularly upset," Da sighed. "After everything they've done for this family over the years... finding out Mary would go that far..."

"Speaking of the Kellys," I took another drink, "I just left James at his parents'. He's telling them about the baby."

"A baby?" Da's eyebrows shot up. "James? Our James?"

"Aye," I couldn't help but smile slightly. "First proper girlfriend at forty-five, and he's going to be a Da."

"Well," Da shook his head, smiling. "Never thought I'd see the day. James settling down. How's he handling it?"

"About as well as you'd expect," I took another drink. "Terrified of being a Da, even more terrified of actually having feelings for someone. Though he did manage to tell his parents, which is more than I expected today."

"And the girl? What's she like?"

"Aine? She's good for him actually. Strong enough to handle him, smart... works in marketing. And she's not putting up with any of his usual shite."

"Unlike the endless parade of women over the years," Da commented dryly. "Remember when you were young and he'd drag you out as his wingman?"

"Aye," I couldn't help but laugh. "Though I wasn't much better back then. Not until Livvie."

"You were different though," Da said thoughtfully. "Even with Trevor... you were looking for something real. James just wanted conquests."

"Until now," I nodded as my food arrived. "Though watching him try to figure out actual feelings is... interesting."

"Like watching you after you met Livvie," Da smiled. "The way you'd light up just talking about her. Before Mary..." he trailed off, the old pain flickering across his face.

"Da," I set down my fork. "Why do you stay? After everything she's done, everything she's tried to do..."

"It's complicated," he sighed, looking suddenly older. "I failed you children for so long, letting her control everything. Maybe this is my penance."

"Or maybe it's time to stop punishing yourself for her choices," I said quietly.

"Maybe," Da stared into his pint. "But who would watch her then? Make sure she doesn't... slip back into old habits?"

"The church is watching her," I reminded him. "Even Alan's keeping an eye on things. You don't have to sacrifice your happiness to be her keeper."

"And where would I go?" he asked softly. "What would I do?"

"You could move to Cork," I suggested, though I knew he wouldn't. Not yet. "Be closer to the twins. To Sosaidh and Abby. Build a life away from her control."

"The twins," his face softened at the mention of his grandchildren. "Rose was showing me her fairy dance on a video call last week. And Killy... he's so much like you were at that age."

"They'd love having their Daideó around more," I pressed gently. "Instead of just video calls and occasional visits when Mary's at church."

"It's not that simple," Da sighed, but I could see him considering it. "Though I do miss seeing them properly. The way Rose lights up when she dances, how precise Killy is about everything..."

"And they miss you," I said carefully. "Liv does too, you know. She understands why you keep your distance, but..."

"Livvie has been nothing but kind to me," he shook his head. "Even after everything Mary tried to do. The way she still includes me in things, sends me videos of the twins..."

"Because you're family," I said firmly. "Real family. Not Mary's version of it."

"Your mother-" he started.

"Is not my mother," I cut him off. "Niamh is. You're my Da, but Mary... she lost the right to be called my mother long ago."

"Aye," Da nodded slowly. "Niamh... she's been more of a mother to you than Mary ever was. The way she took you in after... and Sosaidh..."

"She loves us," I said simply. "Unconditionally. No judgment, no attempts to change us or control us. Just love."

"The way a parent should," Da's voice was heavy with regret.

"The way you do now," I added quietly. "When Mary's not around, when you can just be yourself with the twins, with all of us... that's the real you, Da. Not the man who has to constantly manage Mary's... episodes."

He was quiet for a long moment, turning his glass slowly. "I'll think about it. Cork, I mean. Not promising anything, but..."

"That's all I'm asking," I finished my pint. "Just think about it. About what life could be like without walking on eggshells."

"Another round?" Da asked, but I shook my head.

"Better not. Need to check in with Liv, let her know how everything went. And I should get to the hotel before it gets too late."

"You could stay..." he started, but we both knew I wouldn't. Not in that house, not with Mary there.

"Next time maybe you can come to us," I stood, pulling out my wallet. "When Mary's on one of her church retreats."

"I'd like that," he smiled, that genuine smile I only saw when Mary wasn't around. "Give my love to Livvie and the twins."

"Always do," I hugged him goodbye. "Think about what I said, yeah?"

The drive to the hotel was quiet, giving me time to process the evening. Mary seemed genuinely contained, but more importantly, Da seemed to finally be considering a life beyond her control.

I texted Liv once I was settled in my room: "All clear. No tech, no plots. Tell you more tomorrow. Love you."

I texted Liv once I was settled in my room: "All clear. No tech, no plots. Tell you more tomorrow. Love you."

Her response came quickly: "Good. The twins miss you. Rose tried to teach Killy a new fairy dance but he insisted it needed proper alignment first."

I smiled, imagining the scene - our perfect chaos and precision. Such a far cry from the tense dinner I'd just survived. The contrast between my chosen family and my birth family had never felt starker.

My phone buzzed again - a text from James: "Parents took it better than expected. Thanks for today, mate."

Two difficult conversations in Drogheda, both somehow ending better than anticipated. Though I knew which family I'd be heading home to tomorrow - the one where love didn't come with conditions, where children could be exactly who they were meant to be, where a tech fairy and a hairdresser had built something real.

"Give the twins a kiss from their Da," I texted Liv. "I'll be home tomorrow where I belong."



"Crimson Shadow"

The morning sun filtered through the window of the playroom as Hunter guided me through our usual meditation. After the chaos of Hawaii, it felt good to be back in our normal routine. Just us, peaceful and centered, Thara watching regally from her pillow.

"Breathe," Hunter's voice was soft, grounding. "Let the tension go."

I focused on my breath, feeling the last bits of vacation stress dissolve. The private beach day had been exactly what we needed - away from Jon's games, from paparazzi, from Harley's increasingly obvious crush on Jake. Just our family, together.

"That's it," Hunter's hands were gentle on my shoulders, easing me deeper into the pose. "Stay present."

Of course the rest of the vacation had returned to the usual tension with Jon. He'd mastered the art of pushing Hunter just enough to irritate him without crossing any lines that would upset Dot. Harley had spent every possible moment with Jake, becoming more convinced by the day that she was in love with him, while Hunter tried not to visibly cringe. I had to admit - inviting Jon's family had been a mistake, one I'd sincerely promised Hunter wouldn't happen again. At least in that moment.

I took another breath. This was my favorite part of our practice - the complete trust, the perfect connection. Hunter had learned exactly how to guide me, how to help me find that place of calm that usually eluded me.

"Good, now, breath of fire for one minute," Hunter directed as I started the breathing exercise. My time at home would be short before Nashville, and I intended to savor every moment with my family. Even with the Death Ranger's presence lurking in the background. At least Billy had set up our command center while we were away - he remained one of the few people I trusted completely.

"Ready for supported child's pose?" he asked, knowing it was my favorite.

I nodded, letting him guide me into position, his body providing the perfect support. Everything felt normal, peaceful...

Until suddenly, it didn't.

My eyes flew open, but everything looked normal. "Something is off," I said as I tried to rock backwards into a squat, but Hunter wrapped his arms around me and kept me on him.

"Shh, everything is ok, just relax," he whispered.

Something in his voice made the hair on the back of my neck stand up, but I couldn't pinpoint why. His hold wasn't too tight, his words were soothing, but something felt... wrong.

"Hunter?" I tried to keep my voice casual. "I think I'm done for today."

"Just a little longer," his hands shifted slightly on my back. "You're carrying so much tension."

He wasn't wrong - between the vacation drama, the looming Nashville trip, and the Death Ranger situation, I was tense. But for the first time in our years of practicing together, I didn't feel that complete sense of safety in his touch.

"Really, I should start getting ready. I have a lot of work to do today. And we're having dinner at Jeremy's tonight," I said, trying again to move away.

"Of course," he released me, his tone perfectly normal.

I stood up, rolling my shoulders, trying to shake off that strange feeling. Everything seemed fine now - Hunter was gathering our yoga mats, moving with his usual grace.

"Want me to start coffee?" he asked, and even that was completely normal. Maybe I was just unsettled from the travel, the time change, the lingering tension from Hawaii.

"Please," I smiled, watching him head toward the kitchen. Nothing in his movements suggested anything was wrong. I was probably imagining things - being back home was just making me hyper-aware of the Death Ranger threat.

Thara jumped down from her pillow, demanding breakfast with her usual imperial timing. As I followed her to the kitchen, I pushed away my unease. We had a busy day ahead - a meeting with Miar, calls about Nashville, dinner with Jeremy and Livvie. No time to dwell on what was probably just post-vacation anxiety.

I found Hunter already starting breakfast - eggs and toast, our usual post-meditation routine.

"What time is Mia coming?" he asked, cracking eggs into the pan.

"Nine," I fed Thara, who was making her expectations very clear. "She's bringing an update on what she and Billy found while we were away."

"About the Celtic Thunder Rangers?" he kept his focus on cooking.

"Yeah, and any Death Ranger activity. Though it's been quiet lately."



"Too quiet?" he suggested, turning to hand me coffee.

"Maybe," I took a sip. "But quiet is better than the alternative."

I pulled out my phone to check messages while Hunter finished breakfast. Mia had texted to confirm our meeting, and Jeremy had sent a reminder about dinner - complete with a promise that Rose would demonstrate her latest fairy dance for us. Back to our normal Cork routine.

I heard footsteps coming down the hall. Harley bounced into the kitchen followed by Arissa carrying Tomi.

"Mom, Arissa woke Tomi up," Harley said, clearly ready to start their usual morning bickering.

"I did not! Marshmallow was already awake. I just got her out of her crib," Arissa defended, settling Tomi in her high chair.

I laughed, "Tomi needs to be up anyway. Did you change her diaper?"

"Yeah, when I got her out of her crib," Arissa confirmed.

"Then it's fine. Dad is making breakfast," I said as Harley got a glass of juice and sat at the table.

"Did you sleep off the jet lag?" I asked the girls. We'd only been back a day, and time changes were always rough.

"Mostly," Arissa yawned, reaching for the juice Harley had just poured. "Though someone was up late texting Kora about Jake."

"Was not," Harley protested, but her blush gave her away.

"Here we go," Hunter set plates in front of the girls, his movements efficient. "Eat up. You both have training today."

"Da da!" Tomi reached for him, but when he scooped her up, she squirmed uncomfortably and started to fuss - unusual for our normally happy baby. Robbie, who usually stuck close to Hunter in the mornings, stayed by my feet instead.

I watched them, our normal morning chaos in full swing. Harley already on her phone (probably texting Kora), Arissa trying to steal her juice, Tomi still fussy even after Hunter settled her in her high chair with some cut-up toast.

"What time is your meeting?" Hunter asked.

"Nine," I reminded him. "Then calls about Nashville all afternoon."

"Training after breakfast," Hunter reminded the girls, though Tomi was still refusing to eat her toast, unusual for our normally voracious baby.

"Don't go easy on them just because we're jet lagged," I smiled, gathering my coffee while Robbie stayed pressed against my legs instead of his usual spot near Hunter.

"We know, we know," they chorused, though Harley was clearly more interested in her phone than her breakfast.

"And Harley? Maybe focus on training instead of texting Kora about Jake?" I suggested gently.

She blushed again but put her phone down. I caught a slight tension in Hunter's jaw at Jake's name, but he said nothing.

"Mia will be here soon," I noted, watching Tomi continue to fuss in her high chair. "We can meet in the command center after you're done training with the girls?"

"Of course," Hunter's smile didn't quite reach his eyes.

"After training can we go to hang out with Kora and Kira?" Harley asked.

"Yeah, Kira said that their mom can pick us up," Arissa begged.

I glanced at Hunter, expecting his usual easy agreement - he typically encouraged the girls spending time with their friends, especially since the move to Ireland. But he seemed to hesitate.

"I don't know..." he started.

"Dad, come on," Harley pleaded. "We haven't seen them since before Hawaii."

"It's fine with me if Kara's picking them up," I offered, noting how Tomi was still refusing her breakfast, Robbie still hovering near my feet.

Hunter paused longer than usual before nodding. "Alright. But training first. And be home in time to get ready for dinner at Jeremy's."

"Yes!" the girls said in unison.

"Actually, the Jordans live right next door to Jeremy and Liv... they can stay there and join us when we get there," I reminded.

Something flickered across Hunter's face - so brief I almost missed it. "Right. Of course."

Tomi chose that moment to start truly crying, pushing away from her high chair with unusual force. Even Harley looked surprised - Tomi was normally such a happy baby, especially around Hunter.

"Maybe she's still jet lagged," Arissa suggested, but Robbie's continued hovering by my legs suggested otherwise.

"Girls, go get ready for training," Hunter said, his voice perfectly normal as he lifted Tomi, who only cried harder. "We'll start in fifteen minutes."

The girls headed upstairs, leaving me with Hunter and our increasingly distraught baby. Even Thara had abandoned her usual regal observation post to press against my legs alongside Robbie.

"Here, let me take her," I reached for Tomi, who immediately calmed once in my arms. "Maybe she is just overtired from the trip."

"Probably," Hunter agreed, though something in his tone... I pushed the thought away. I was being paranoid, still on edge from Hawaii and the looming Nashville trip.

"I should get the command center ready for Mia," I adjusted Tomi on my hip. "You okay with her while I do that?"

"Of course," he reached for her, but Tomi clutched my shirt, refusing to go back to him. Robbie's low growl surprised me - he never growled at Hunter. Ever.

"Or maybe she can help me set up," I suggested quickly, trying to diffuse the sudden tension. "She likes pushing the buttons."

"Right," Hunter's eyes flickered to Robbie, who had positioned himself between us. "Of course she does."

I headed toward the command center, Robbie staying close to Tomi and me, still rumbling softly. This was definitely strange - Robbie and Hunter were usually inseparable, and now...

"Come on, baby girl," I bounced Tomi slightly as I entered the security codes. "Let's get everything ready for Aunt Mia."

Hunter followed us in, making Robbie's head snap around again. "What do you think Mia's found out about those Thunder Rangers?"

His tone was eager - almost too eager - but before I could analyze it, the girls came thundering down for training.

"Dad, we're ready!" Harley called.

"Coming," he replied, but lingered a moment longer, watching me settle Tomi in her play area. "Fill me in right after?"

"Of course," I said, noting how Robbie stayed firmly between us until Hunter left for training.

I could hear Hunter starting training with the girls in the other room - their usual routine of warmups and drills. But Robbie remained with Tomi and me instead of watching training like he normally did.

I pulled up the security feeds Billy had installed, checking that everything was running properly before Mia arrived. Tomi was unusually quiet in her play area, none of her typical happy babbling while she played with her toys.

The camera system showed Mia approaching the gate. I watched her pass each camera.

"Auntie Mia's here, baby girl," I told Tomi, who finally smiled for the first time all morning. Even Robbie's posture relaxed slightly at Mia's arrival on the monitors.

Maybe everything was fine. Maybe we were all just adjusting to being home. Maybe I was letting post-vacation paranoia get to me.

I heard Hunter pause training to let Mia in. Their voices carried from the entrance - normal greetings, though Robbie's ears perked up at Hunter's tone. A moment later, Mia appeared in the command center doorway, Kaya at her heels.

"Welcome back," she smiled, though I noticed her eyes taking in the scene - Robbie's protective stance, Tomi's unusual quiet, my slightly tense posture.

Thara jumped off the console to go sniff Kaya.

"Ugh, it's you again. Hello Thara," Kaya grumbled.

"Kaya, she's just a cat," Mia reminded.

"Oh I'm aware," Kaya said as she turned around and lifted her tail to Thara.

Thara, naturally, maintained her regal composure in the face of Kaya's attitude. The cats' usual dynamic was almost comforting in its familiarity - unlike everything else this morning.

"Hunter's running training?" Mia asked casually, though something in her tone suggested she was noting his absence.

"Yeah, the girls needed to get back to routine after vacation," I adjusted one of the monitors, keeping my voice equally casual. "So, what did you find while we were away?"

"Quite a bit actually," Mia settled into one of the chairs. "Those Thunder Rangers showed up twice more. They seem to appear whenever-"

Hunter's voice from the doorway cut her off. "Taking a break while the girls do their forms." He moved into the room, and I noticed how both Kaya and Robbie tensed. "Don't want to miss any updates about our new... friends."

Mia's expression didn't change, but I caught her slight pause before responding. "Right. As I was saying, they appear whenever the Death Ranger does. Almost like they can sense him."

"Interesting," Hunter leaned against the console. "Any idea who they might be?"

Something about the way he asked that made my skin prickle, but Tomi's sudden cry interrupted. She was reaching for Mia with her usual enthusiasm, though there was something desperate in it today - so different from her normal happiness.

"Come here, sweetie," Mia scooped her up, and Tomi immediately buried her face in Mia's neck. Kaya positioned herself between Mia and Hunter, while Robbie maintained his guard stance.

"The girls will be done with forms soon," Hunter said, his eyes fixed on the security monitors. "We should finish this update quickly."

"Of course," Mia bounced Tomi gently. "As I was saying about the Thunder Rangers - their energy signature is unique. Almost ancient."

"Ancient?" Hunter's interest seemed too intense. "How so?"

I watched him carefully as Mia explained, noting how his hands gripped the edge of the console just a bit too tightly.

Thara picked that moment to pounce on Kaya. Kaya hissed and clawed back as the cat and cat-shaped guardian went at it.

"Thara!" I scolded, but my imperious cat ignored me completely, focused on her attack.

"Kaya, enough!" Mia shifted Tomi to one hip, trying to separate them.

Hunter moved to help, but both cats turned on him with matching hisses, fur standing on end. I'd never seen Thara act like this - she was usually so dignified, even in her disputes with Kaya.

"Dad!" Harley's voice called from the training room. "We finished forms!"

"Coming!" he called back, giving the cats a wide berth as he left. Only then did Thara and Kaya settle, though both remained alert.

"Well, that was interesting," Mia commented quietly once Hunter was gone, still bouncing Tomi who had yet to release her death grip.

"That imperious troublemaker attacked me again!" Kaya bristled, her tail still puffed up. "I am a guardian, not your personal entertainment, you chaos-loving creature!"

Thara merely flicked her tail, looking enormously pleased with herself. Like mother, like daughter when it came to causing chaos.

"Really, Thara?" I tried to sound stern, but we all knew my cat's penchant for stirring things up. Usually her attacks on Kaya were just for fun, but something about this one felt... different.

"Oh yes, laugh it up," Kaya grumbled. "Though I must admit, her timing was... strategic."

"About those Thunder Rangers," Mia cut in, giving Kaya a pointed look. "Their energy signature matches some ancient Celtic artifacts Billy's been researching."

I nodded, trying to focus on the information while part of my mind tracked Hunter's voice in the other room. Everything sounded normal - his usual patient teaching tone, the girls' responses...

"Michelle?" Mia's voice pulled my attention back. "Are you listening?"

"Sorry, just..." I gestured vaguely. "Jet lag, I guess."

"So these artifacts," I forced myself to focus. "What kind of connection are we talking about?"

"Celtic Thunder magic," Mia lowered her voice. "Very old, very powerful. The kind that-"

A crash from the training room interrupted her. I was on my feet instantly, maternal instinct overriding everything else.

"Just knocked over the practice dummy!" Harley called before I could move. "We're fine!"

"The girls are fine," Hunter's voice followed, closer than expected. He appeared in the doorway again. "But maybe we should cut training short today. Jet lag and all."

Tomi whimpered and pressed closer to Mia. Thara, who had been looking smug about her attack on Kaya, suddenly went rigid. Even Robbie's low growl returned.

"Sure," I kept my voice casual. "The girls can head over to the Jordans' early then."

"Great idea," Harley appeared behind Hunter, already reaching for her phone. "I'll text Kora."

"After you shower and change," Hunter reminded her, but something in his tone made both Kaya and Robbie tense again.

"I'll drive them," Mia offered suddenly, Tomi still clinging to her. "I need to head that direction anyway to meet Amber."

I caught her subtle glance my way. "Perfect, thanks Mia."

"Dad?" Arissa appeared, looking between Hunter and the tense animals with confusion.

"Go get cleaned up," he smiled at her, everything about it perfect and normal except... "Then you can head over with Aunt Mia."

Thara chose that moment to launch another attack at Kaya, creating enough chaos that the girls didn't notice how quickly Mia ushered them upstairs.

"Your cat is as chaotic as you are," Hunter commented, watching Thara and Kaya's scuffle with an intensity that seemed off.

"She keeps things interesting," I agreed, adjusting Tomi in my arms as she continued to fuss. "Though usually she's just doing it for fun."

"I can take her," he offered, stepping toward us, but Robbie immediately placed himself between us, hackles raised.

"I've got her," I said quickly. "Why don't you make sure the girls actually shower instead of just texting about Jake?"

His jaw tightened at Jake's name - not Hunter's usual mild annoyance, but something darker.

Hunter left and Mia came back down.

"Something feels weird today. Energy just seems off," Mia said quietly.

I nodded, "I agree, but I can't figure out why."

Kaya jumped on Mia's shoulder to escape Thara, "I feel it too. And not just because that furball is more insufferable than usual."

"Probably just getting settled," I shifted Tomi, who was still unusually clingy. "Anyway, Mia, anything else?"

Mia nodded. "Abby got me a meeting with the Celtic History professor at UCC, Saoirse Riordan. She knows something... more than she's letting on, but I don't know what yet."

"Saoirse Riordan?" I made a mental note of the name. "What makes you think she knows something?"

"Just a feeling," Mia replied carefully. "The way she talks about Celtic history... it's like she's lived it."

Before I could probe further, we heard the girls thundering back downstairs, followed by Hunter.

"All clean!" Harley announced, phone already in hand.

"And actually showered, not just wet hair," Hunter added, his tone perfectly dad-like. But something in the way he watched Tomi in my arms...

"Ready to go?" Mia asked the girls, gathering her things.

"I can take her while you all head out," Hunter offered, reaching for Tomi. "No need for you to hold her while seeing them off."

Robbie's growl grew louder, and even Thara paused her chaos-causing to watch intently.

"It's ok. I got her," I said, something in me not wanting to let my baby go. The instinct was almost primal - keep Tomi close, keep her safe. From what, I couldn't say, but the feeling was overwhelming.

After Mia left with the girls, I retreated to my office, Tomi still clinging to me, Robbie and Thara following close behind. Hunter didn't protest.

The day passed in a blur of phone calls and Zoom meetings. Tomi stayed unusually clingy, refusing to leave my side even for her nap. Instead of her crib, she slept in the playpen in my office, Robbie standing guard nearby while Thara maintained her watch from the windowsill.

By late afternoon, I was starting to wonder if she was coming down with something. She'd never been this clingy. But her forehead felt normal, and aside from refusing to let Hunter near her, she seemed fine. Just... different. Like everything else today.



As dinner time approached, I gathered Tomi and headed to our room to get ready. She sat on our bed, Robbie right beside her, while I picked out clothes. My usual style - jeans and a purple crop tank with a leather crop jacket. Some things never changed, even if everything else felt off.

I dressed Tomi in her new sundress, the one Livvie had gotten her, adding a cardigan since Irish evenings could turn cool even in summer. She was unusually cooperative with getting dressed, almost like she didn't want to be difficult when something already felt wrong.

"You ready babe?" I called out to Hunter.

He appeared in the doorway, and for a split second, something in his smile made my skin crawl. But then it was gone, replaced by his usual warm expression. "You look amazing."

I smiled back, pushing away that moment of unease. "So do you."

He kissed me - everything about it perfect and normal except... something I couldn't name. Then he grabbed the keys, and we headed out.

The drive to Jeremy and Livvie's was quiet - unusually so. Normally Hunter would be asking about my calls, or we'd be laughing about Rose's latest fairy adventures. But tonight there was just... silence. Even Tomi, usually so vocal in the car, stayed quiet in her seat. Thara watched everything intently from her fancy backpack, more alert than her usual regal observation.

I caught Hunter watching me in the reflection of the windshield - something almost calculating in his gaze that disappeared the moment I turned toward him.

"The girls should already be there," I said, just to break the silence.

"Right. With Jeremy." His tone made me glance at him again, but his expression was perfectly neutral as he turned onto their street.

I could see Rose through their front window, probably demonstrating her newest fairy dance for my girls. Everything looked so normal, so familiar - dinner with our best friends, the kids playing together, Jeremy and Livvie's perfect chaos...

But as Hunter parked the car, that nagging feeling from this morning returned full force.

We hadn't even reached the door when Rose burst out, all fairy energy and excitement. "Auntie Mich! Uncle Hunter!" she launched herself at us, purple fairy wings glittering.

I laughed, catching her in a hug. "Hey Fairy Girl."

"Tomi play?" Rose asked hopefully, already reaching for her favorite baby playmate. Usually Tomi would be equally excited, babbling and reaching back for Rose.

"Of course," I said, trying to set Tomi down, but she clung to me with surprising strength, burying her face in my neck. This was definitely unusual - Tomi and Rose were usually happy to play together, their play sessions a perfect mix of fairy magic and baby giggles.

"Baby tired?" Rose asked, her little face concerned. Even she could tell something was off with her usually playful friend.

"Maybe," I adjusted Tomi in my arms as we headed inside. "She's been a bit clingy today."

I caught Jeremy watching us from the doorway, his hairdresser's eye taking in every detail - the way Tomi clutched my shirt, how Thara was unusually alert in her backpack, the tension I was trying to hide.

"Jeremy!" My smile was genuine - it always was with him.

Jeremy opened his arms for me and pulled both me and Tomi into a hug, his familiar warmth instantly comforting. "Missed you Love. Can't wait to hear all about Hawaii."

I hugged him back, feeling some of my tension ease as I settled into my best friend's embrace. This was safe, this was normal - the one person besides Hunter I could completely relax with. "I missed you too, so fucking much. And yes, of course, I'll tell you everything, though I'm sure you read some interesting fictional accounts already."

Jeremy laughed, his accent thick with amusement. "Oh aye. Jon gave them plenty of headline fodder."

That's when I felt it - a tension radiating from Hunter that stopped me cold. He'd never once been bothered by my closeness with Jeremy. He understood our friendship completely, trusted it absolutely. But this... this was different.

Livvie appeared from the kitchen just then, but I barely registered her greeting. My mind was racing, something was off. Had I really pissed Hunter off that much with the Jon thing that he was actually jealous of Jeremy now?

"Come in, come in," Livvie was saying. "Dinner's almost ready."

I followed her to the kitchen, still carrying Tomi who refused to let go. The girls were at the table with Killy, who was ensuring everything was properly aligned. Rose danced around them, full fairy mode as usual. Everything looked so normal, and yet...

"Here, let me take her while you catch up," Hunter offered, reaching for Tomi.

Our baby's whimper and Thara's sudden hiss from her backpack made me hold Tomi closer. "She's fine," I said quickly. "Just being clingy today."

Hunter's expression darkened for just a moment before smoothing out.

I needed to just play normal. I looked at Livvie, pushing aside my growing unease. "Tell me you didn't actually cook."

Livvie laughed, that warm sound that always filled their home. "Bloody hell, no. J has me banned from the kitchen unsupervised. No, I was helping Killy set the table."

"Plates all even," Killy said proudly, his precise nature shining through as he double-checked each place setting's alignment.

I smiled, genuinely warmed by his attention to detail. "It looks great Killy."

"Proper dinner arrangement," he nodded seriously, while Rose continued her fairy dance around the perfectly aligned settings.

"Speaking of dinner," Jeremy called from the kitchen. "Liv, Love, can you help me plate?"

I caught the slight tension in Hunter's shoulders at Jeremy's casual endearment to his wife - something that had never bothered him before. Something that shouldn't bother him at all.

Dinner was its usual chaos - Rose demonstrating her newest fairy dance between bites while Killy ensured his food didn't touch, the girls sharing stories about their day with the Jordans, Livvie and Jeremy's easy banter. Almost normal.

"The pool drama made every tabloid," Jeremy laughed, passing the bread. "Though they all had different versions."

"Jon does love his headlines," I rolled my eyes, settling Tomi more comfortably in my lap since she still refused to sit in her high chair. "Though the private beach day after was perfect."

"Wasn't quite private enough," Hunter commented, his tone just slightly off. "Considering how friendly you were with the staff."

I paused mid-bite. Hunter had never minded my natural friendliness with people - it was part of who I was, part of what he loved about me.

"Speaking of friendly," Harley piped up, "Jake taught me so much about surfing!"

Hunter's expression darkened instantly. "I don't want to hear about Jake," he cut her off with an intensity that made even Harley flinch. This wasn't his usual protective dad concern - this was something harder, colder.

"Sorry Dad," Harley said, looking down.

I looked at him, "Hunter..."

"What?" he snapped.

"Well, either way, we're glad to have you back. Certainly missed you Love," Jeremy said, trying to break the tension.

"I missed you too, so much," I smiled at my best friend, but I could feel Hunter's energy shift beside me. This wasn't his normal comfortable acceptance of my closeness with Jeremy - this was something dangerous.

Tomi whimpered and pressed closer to me, while Thara's quiet hiss came from her backpack near my chair. Even Rose had stopped her fairy dance, looking between the adults with uncertainty.

"Hunter, you ok mate?" Jeremy asked.

The look Hunter gave Jeremy made my stomach twist. There was something wrong in his gaze - something I'd never seen before when he looked at his best friend.

"Fine," Hunter's voice was clipped. "Just tired of hearing about Jake. And other men my wife seems so... fond of."

I stared at him, thrown by the bitterness in his tone. This wasn't like Hunter at all - he'd never been jealous, never questioned my friendships, especially not with Jeremy.

"Love," Jeremy started, but Hunter cut him off with a look that silenced even Rose's usual chatter.

"Don't call her that," Hunter said quietly, dangerously.

Livvie looked at Hunter, "Bloody hell, what the fuck is with you mate?"

The tension in the room was suffocating. Even Killy had stopped checking his plate alignment, while Rose pressed closer to Jeremy. Harley and Arissa exchanged worried glances - they'd never seen Hunter act like this, especially not toward Jeremy.

"Nothing's 'with me,'" Hunter's voice was cold. "I just think some boundaries are in order."

"Boundaries?" Jeremy's accent thickened slightly. "Hunter, what are you-"

"Maybe we should all take a breath," I cut in, trying to keep my voice steady while my mind raced. Something was very wrong here. "It's been a long day, we're all tired..."

Tomi's whimper seemed especially loud in the strained silence that followed. She pressed her face into my neck, something she'd been doing all day whenever Hunter was near.

I took a breath, forcing calm into my voice. "OK, I think we're probably just tired from vacation. Let's have dinner."

"Yes, that's a brilliant idea," Livvie jumped in, her tech fairy instincts clearly sensing the wrongness too.

Jeremy nodded, though I could see the worry in his eyes as he headed to the kitchen to bring in the food. Our weekly family dinners were usually full of laughter and chaos - not this strange, heavy tension.

I hoped that dinner conversation would be a little smoother, but the way Hunter watched Jeremy's every movement told me it wouldn't be.

The next few minutes were filled with the normal sounds of serving food - plates being passed, Rose insisting her carrots needed to be arranged "fairy style," Killy ensuring nothing on his plate touched.

"I heard you and Billy got along well," I said to Livvie, grateful for a safe topic of conversation.

Livvie nodded, her eyes lighting up with genuine enthusiasm. "Yeah! He actually is contracting me to work on some special projects with him. I kinda can't believe it. His approach to coding is fascinating."

"Of course he did. You guys speak the same language. I'm glad he made another friend here," I smiled, remembering how excited Billy had been about finding another tech genius to collaborate with.

"Proper coding," Killy commented, making Livvie laugh.

"Exactly, mo stór," she agreed. "Everything has to be properly aligned in coding too."

I caught Hunter watching this exchange with an intensity that seemed out of place for such a casual conversation. His hand tightened on his fork when Jeremy reached across to help Rose with her food, that strange darkness flickering in his eyes again.

"Did you enjoy Hawaii?" Jeremy asked Arissa, clearly trying to keep the conversation moving normally.

Arissa nodded enthusiastically, "I did! It was so much fun and so pretty. I really like the beach."

"The private beach was the best part," Harley added, then quickly glanced at Hunter, clearly nervous about mentioning anything that might set off another reaction like before.

"The water was so clear," Arissa jumped in, helping her sister steer clear of any Jake-related topics. "And the sand was perfect for building castles."

"Rose build castle?" Rose asked, momentarily distracted from her fairy food arrangement.

"When we go to Australia, we'll build the best fairy castle," Jeremy promised her, but Hunter's subtle shift in posture at their interaction made me hold Tomi just a little tighter.

"Oh right, you guys are going to spend all of September in Australia," I said, trying to focus on normal conversation despite the growing tension I could feel from Hunter.

"Yeah, but don't worry, it won't interfere with my work on your Australian tour. You will have perfect hair for every show," Jeremy smiled, that easy warmth that had always existed between us. "Already worked it all out with your management."

"Fairy hair!" Rose declared, making Jeremy laugh.

"Perhaps not quite that fairy for the shows, mo stór," he told his daughter, but I noticed how Hunter's jaw clenched at the casual way Jeremy and I discussed our upcoming work together.

"Though knowing Michelle, she might actually go for fairy hair," Livvie teased, trying to maintain the light mood despite the obvious undercurrent of tension.

"I always have an ethereal look to me. Between Lydia's amazing dresses and Jeremy perfecting my hair..." I smiled, trying to keep things light.

"You always look perfect, Love," Jeremy agreed automatically - our usual easy banter. But Hunter's reaction was immediate and visceral.

"I said," his voice was dangerously quiet, "don't call her that."

The sudden silence was deafening. Even Rose stopped her fairy movements, while Killy's fork hovered halfway to his mouth, perfectly aligned but forgotten.

"Hunter," I started, but the look he gave Jeremy made the words die in my throat. This wasn't just jealousy or travel stress. This was something else entirely.

"Uncle Hunter mad," Rose said softly, pressing closer to Jeremy.

"No, Fairy Girl, everything's fine," I tried to reassure her, but my voice sounded hollow even to me. Tomi whimpered and burrowed deeper into my neck.

"Is it?" Hunter's voice was cold as he watched Jeremy protectively wrap an arm around his daughter. "Because from where I'm sitting, some things need to change."

"Hunter, mate-" Jeremy started.

"I'm not your mate," Hunter cut him off with a tone I'd never heard from him before. "And she's not your 'Love.'"

Livvie's hand found Jeremy's under the table while I felt my heart racing. Something was terribly wrong.

Arisa and Harley looked alarmed, exchanging worried glances.

"Hey, why don't you take the twins and Tomi to go play in the back garden?" I suggested, keeping my voice light despite my growing unease.

Arisa nodded and reached for Tomi. "Come on Marshmallow."

To my relief, Tomi went to Arissa without protest. Once all the kids were safely outside, I turned to Hunter. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"I don't like how close my wife is with another man," Hunter growled, and that's when I saw it - his eyes. I'd looked into those eyes a million times, seen them in every possible state. I'd seen them when he worked with Lothor, truly believing he was right. I'd seen them when he pretended to be evil during the Wind Ranger attack on DinoThunder. But this... this darkness was different. This was like... Emperor Hunter.

Something clicked in my mind, and I knew exactly how to test my theory. "I'm sorry baby. I didn't mean to upset you. After what happened in Hawaii I should have been more considerate of your feelings. You know you're everything. My Hunter."

His response would tell me everything I needed to know.

Hunter took a breath, "And you're mine, my Michelle."

I felt my breath catch but fought to keep my expression neutral. Hunter would never, ever call me "My Michelle." When I called him "My Hunter," he always responded with "My Love" or "My Heart" - anything but "My Michelle." He knew how triggering that phrase was for me.

This wasn't my Hunter. But someone else had called me "My Michelle" recently - the Death Ranger. He had possessed Hunter's body somehow. But he didn't know that I knew, and that gave me an advantage. I had the element of surprise. I just needed to keep playing along until I could figure out a plan.

"Of course I am," I smiled, letting my hand rest on his arm while my mind raced. I needed to get us out of here before he hurt anyone - especially Jeremy. If this really was the Death Ranger, he'd want nothing more than to destroy my best friend.

"Maybe we should head home," I suggested. "It's been a long day, and we're all tired."

"But you haven't finished dinner," Livvie protested, though I could see her tech fairy mind analyzing every detail of what had just happened.

"I think that's best," not-Hunter agreed, his hand possessive on my lower back.

"And I know the girls were so happy to see their friends today. We should see if they can sleep over at the Jordan's house," I said thinking quick. I needed to keep my daughters safe - away from whatever was wearing their father's face. "They haven't had a sleepover since before Hawaii."

"I can text Kara," Livvie offered, her eyes meeting mine briefly. "I'm sure she won't mind, especially since they're right next door."

"Perfect," I kept my voice casual while my mind raced. Get the girls somewhere safe first, then figure out how to handle... whatever this was. "The girls will be thrilled."

Not-Hunter's fingers tightened slightly on my back, but he nodded. "Fine. But we should go now."

I caught Jeremy watching us, concern evident in his expression. I needed to find a way to warn him without alerting the thing pretending to be my husband.

"Of course," I kept my voice light. "Soon as we know that the girls can stay next door."

Kara's quick agreement to the sleepover was a relief. I headed outside to tell the girls, making sure to keep my tone casual as I explained they could borrow pajamas from Kira and Kora, and I'd bring their clothes tomorrow. I gathered Tomi and Thara's backpack, my heart racing but my face calm.

"Ok, we're out. Thanks so much for dinner. I'll text you later Jeremy," I said, trying to signal with my eyes that everything would be fine.

He reached for me - my best friend who could always read my silent messages. I started to step back, knowing it would anger not-Hunter, but Jeremy pulled me into a hug. "Are you ok, Love?" he whispered, his accent thick with worry.



"I will be, don't worry," I whispered back, just before Hunter's hand clamped around my arm, yanking me away from Jeremy's embrace.

The drive home was tense - Hunter's knuckles white on the steering wheel, Tomi unusually quiet in her car seat, Thara rigid in her backpack. I kept my breathing steady, trying to reach whatever part of my Hunter might still be in there.

Softly, I started singing "This Love" - our song, the first one I ever wrote for him. The one about being his north star, helping him find his way back. If any part of my Hunter was still there, he'd understand.

Not-Hunter's grip on the steering wheel tightened slightly, but I kept singing, watching for any flicker of recognition in his eyes. There - just for a moment, something shifted in his expression.

"That song," he said, his voice strange. "You haven't sung that in a while."

"Just feeling nostalgic," I kept my tone casual. "Thinking about how far we've come."

He reached for my hand. I took it, studying his face. My Hunter was in there somewhere. I just needed to find a way to reach him.

After putting Tomi to bed, I went through my normal nighttime routine, my mind racing even as I kept my movements calm and natural. When I slid into bed beside him, my stomach twisted. I knew what he wanted, but this wasn't my Hunter, even if it was his body.

His arm around me felt wrong - familiar and foreign all at once. The ethical implications made my head spin. Was this a betrayal of Hunter? But it was his body... just not his soul, his essence, everything that made him my husband.

But I couldn't risk refusing. Not with Tomi down the hall, her bracelets keeping her powerless. One wrong move and he might... no. I couldn't even think about that. I had to protect our baby girl until I could figure out how to get my Hunter back.

So I did what I'd done countless times in my career - I acted. I played the role of the loving wife, all while feeling sick inside. Every touch, every response calculated to maintain the illusion. To keep him believing I had no idea anything was wrong.

I'd been on enough movie sets, filmed enough love scenes to know how to fake intimacy. But this was different. This was violation, wearing my husband's face.

Later, lying in the dark, I focused on steadying my breathing, on appearing relaxed while every nerve screamed to run. But I couldn't. Not yet. Not until I had a plan to save both Hunter and Tomi.

I didn't sleep much that night, instead I lay awake going over in my mind what to do about this... about how to get my husband back. The Death Ranger might have his body, but Hunter's soul, his essence - that was stronger than any possession. I'd seen him fight his way back before. I'd been his north star then, and I would be again.

And I would get him back. Somehow.

## "Beyond Crimson"

I was sitting in Tomi's nursery drinking coffee, the early morning light casting shadows across her sleeping face. She was still asleep and I planned to let her sleep as long as I could. Hunter was still asleep too, thankfully. Every creak of the house made me tense, wondering if he was awake, if the thing wearing my husband's face was coming to check on us.

I hadn't told anyone else about the Death Ranger taking over Hunter's body yet. I was afraid Mia wouldn't be able to play it off and I would lose the element of surprise. But I wondered if I shouldn't tell someone... anyone... if Hunter snapped... someone needed to know it wasn't him. The weight of this secret was crushing - watching him with our daughters, seeing him try to maintain Hunter's routines while getting everything slightly wrong. One wrong move and he might...

I pulled out my phone and using the encrypted app Billy made for Ranger communication, my fingers hovered over the keys for a moment before I typed: "Billy, I'm not sure how, but the Death Ranger has possessed Hunter. He's taken over my husband's body."

Seconds later I got a reply: "Are you sure?"

"Positive," I responded, remembering the darkness in Hunter's eyes, the way Tomi refused to go near him, how Robbie growled at his own master. Every instinct screaming that this wasn't my Hunter.

"Did you tell Mia?"

"No! Of course not. I have the element of surprise. She isn't the actress I am." Years of performing had taught me how to hide my fear, how to play along until the moment was right.

"Michelle, you need to tell Mia right away. Right. Away."

I sighed. I knew if I didn't he would, "Fine." I pulled up Mia's number: "I need to talk to you alone. Can we meet somewhere private?"

"I'm at Amber's. She and Trev are both at work and Niamh took Rachel to her cottage so I have the house to myself."

"Awesome. I'll be right over," I replied. I moved quickly but quietly, getting dressed and gathering Tomi's things. Every sound seemed too loud in the quiet house. I got Tomi up and dressed, her sleepy confusion making her mercifully quiet as I stashed Thara in her backpack.

We were out of the house in record time, before Hunter could wake up and question where we were going.

Tomi was still half asleep, cuddled against my shoulder as I drove. I stopped at McDonald's to pick up breakfast, knowing my baby girl would be hungry once she properly woke up. The routine act of ordering food felt surreal against the weight of what I needed to tell Mia.

After that I arrived at the O'Sullivan house and knocked on the door, my heart racing despite knowing Hunter wasn't following us. Mia let me in.

"What's up?" Mia asked, though I could see her analyzing my tension.

I held up the bag, trying for normalcy. "I brought breakfast."

"You may enter. Come on, I just made coffee," she said, leading us inside.

We set out breakfast and I got Tomi happily eating. I let Thara out of her backpack. She and Kaya just stared at each other, their usual chaos temporarily suspended by the tension they could clearly sense.

"So," Mia settled across from me, her eyes searching my face. "What's going on? And don't say nothing - you've got that look."

I glanced at Tomi, happily focused on her breakfast, before meeting Mia's gaze. "Something's wrong with Hunter."

"Wrong how?" Mia's posture shifted slightly, more alert.

"He's..." I lowered my voice, though we were alone. "He's not Hunter. Not really. The Death Ranger... he's possessed him or something. He's in Hunter's body."

Kaya's head snapped up, her tail bristling. "What? When did this happen?"

"During meditation, I think. Yesterday morning. Everything felt wrong suddenly. Tomi wouldn't go near him, Robbie was growling at him..." I took a shaky breath. "Then at dinner with Jeremy and Livvie, he got jealous. Hunter never gets jealous, especially not of Jeremy."

"And you're sure?" Mia leaned forward. "Absolutely sure?"

"He called me 'My Michelle,'" my voice cracked slightly. "Hunter would never... he knows how much I hate that. How triggering it is."

"Why didn't you tell me immediately?" Mia demanded, though she kept her voice low.

"Because you can't act," I admitted. "I needed to keep him thinking I didn't know, and you would have given it away."

"Excuse me?" Mia's eyebrows shot up. "I can't act? May I remind you who hid her own identity from you at first?"

"That's different," I watched Tomi methodically dismantling her breakfast sandwich. "This is Hunter. You'd never be able to act normal around him knowing what he is. He is the one trying to kill you. Your protectiveness would show."

"Oh, and you're handling it so well?" Kaya interjected. "Spending the night with that thing?"

"I did what I had to do to keep my baby safe," my voice was steady despite the sick feeling in my stomach. "The girls are at the Jordans'. I got them out as soon as I could. But one wrong move and he could hurt Tomi. I can't take her bracelets off because she can't control her powers at all, and with them on she's defenseless."

"Fine," Mia crossed her arms. "I might have been... obvious about my suspicions. But you still should have told me sooner."

"I'm telling you now," I said quietly. "Because Billy's right - I need help. I need to figure out how to get my husband back."

"And you're sure it's possession?" Mia leaned forward. "Not mind control or something else?"

"The way he moves is all wrong," I explained. "Like someone trying to operate Hunter's body without really knowing how. Plus..." I hesitated. "The Death Ranger's energy. I can feel it under Hunter's skin when he touches me."

"That's why Tomi won't go near him," Mia watched my daughter, who was now more interested in playing with her food than eating it. "She can sense it too."

"She knew before I did," I admitted. "Started crying the moment he tried to hold her after it happened. Even Thara and Robbie knew something was wrong."

"So what's the plan?" Mia asked. "Because you can't keep playing happy wife with that thing forever."

"Therein lies the problem. I don't have a plan. I just want to keep Tomi safe for the moment," I sighed.

"We should contact the other Rangers," Mia suggested. "Maybe they've dealt with something like this before."

"And risk the Death Ranger finding out we're onto him?" I shook my head. "The fewer people who know, the better. Right now it's just us, Billy, and Kaya. That's enough."

"Michelle," Kaya's tail twitched with agitation, "you can't handle this alone. What if he-"

"What if he what?" I interrupted sharply, glancing at Tomi. "Hurts me? Kills me? Better me than my baby girl. Better me than anyone else."

"That's not-" Mia started.

"Yes, it is," my voice was firm. "Until we figure out how to get Hunter back, keeping Tomi safe is the priority. And that means playing along."

Thara picked that moment to tackle Kaya. If cats could smile, Thara would be. She was clearly enjoying inflicting chaos.

"You insufferable creature!" Kaya hissed, trying to maintain her dignity. "I am a guardian, not your personal entertainment!"

"At least some things are normal," I managed a weak smile, watching my cat torment Kaya with her usual enthusiasm. Even Tomi giggled at their antics.

"Get off me, you chaos-loving menace," Kaya grumbled, but there was less heat in it than usual. Maybe she understood we needed this moment of normalcy.

"Focus," Mia brought us back to the problem at hand. "We need to figure out how to break the Death Ranger's hold on Hunter."

"First we need to understand how he's doing it," I watched Tomi playing with her napkin, her breakfast mostly demolished. "Hunter's fought off possession before - with Lothor. This feels different."

"Different how?" Mia leaned forward while Thara continued her assault on an increasingly annoyed Kaya.

"With Lothor, it was mind control. Hunter was still in there, just... redirected. This is like..." I struggled to find the words. "Like the Death Ranger is actually wearing Hunter's body. Using it. And Hunter's just... trapped inside."

"That's why his movements are wrong," Mia nodded. "He's trying to mimic Hunter's mannerisms but doesn't quite get them right."

"Exactly. Like when he tried to train with the girls yesterday - the forms were technically correct but the flow was all wrong. And when we... were intimate. He was rough... far more so than Hunter ever would be with me. This isn't Hunter under a spell. This is just... a different Hunter altogether."

"You shouldn't have had to..." Mia's voice was soft with understanding.

"I did what I had to do," I cut her off, not ready to deal with those emotions. "The point is, he has Hunter's memories, his knowledge, but none of his... essence. None of what makes Hunter himself."

"Which means we need to figure out where the real Hunter is trapped inside his own body," Mia concluded, while Kaya finally managed to escape Thara's latest attack.

"And how to help him fight his way back," I added quietly, watching Tomi play. "Before the Death Ranger figures out I know. RJ had a similar situation when he and I were together. His wolf spirit took over and he had to fight him from the inside. I'm wondering if this is like that."

"But RJ's wolf was part of him," Mia pointed out. "The Death Ranger is an outside force."

"True, but the principle might be the same. Hunter needs to fight from within while we..." I trailed off as my phone buzzed. Hunter's name lit up the screen.

"Where are you?" the text read.

I kept my voice steady despite my racing heart. "He's awake. I need to respond naturally."

"Took Tomi for breakfast with Mia," I typed back. "You were sleeping so peacefully, didn't want to wake you."

"Let me help," Mia said quietly while we waited for his response. "You shouldn't face this alone."

My phone buzzed again. "Coming to join you."

My heart stopped for a moment. "No," I typed quickly, trying to keep my tone casual. "We're actually heading to meet Amber. Girl time, you know? Maybe take advantage of the quiet house and get some training in?"

The pause before his response felt endless. Mia and Kaya were both tense, watching my face.

"Fine," he finally replied. "Have fun."

"That was close," I breathed, though I knew we weren't really safe. "He's suspicious. He has to be."

"Then we need to move faster," Mia said. "Figure out how to help Hunter fight back before-"

"Before the Death Ranger decides to stop playing house?" I finished grimly, pulling Tomi into my lap. She snuggled close, completely trusting in my ability to protect her. "Yeah. Considering his end goal is to replace my husband entirely and kill you?"

"He won't get the chance," Mia's voice was steel. "We'll figure this out."

"The question is how?" I stroked Tomi's hair, drawing comfort from her warmth. "If Hunter has to fight from within, how do we even let him know we're trying to help? That I know it's not him?"

"Your connection," Kaya said suddenly, pausing her battle with Thara. "You two have always had that energy bond. Maybe you could use that somehow?"

"Without the Death Ranger noticing?" I considered it. "Maybe... maybe through music. Maybe if I use the right lyrics to send a message?"

Mia leaned forward. "That could work. It's subtle enough..."

Kaya jumped on the table to escape Thara, "Hunter was the only person that could get through to you to stop that LA Incident... the power you two have together... it's actually unreal."

"We don't talk about the LA Incident," I grumbled. Those weren't memories I wanted to revisit.

"Kaya is right though... that was the first time I saw your powers combine, how he stopped you from self-destructing. That's when I realized how powerful you two are as a unit," Mia agreed.

"Our connection has always been different," I admitted, holding Tomi closer. "Since the first time we met. The Death Ranger had that connection with Empress Michelle in his world...before his death. He wants that back, with me."

"Then maybe that's the key," Mia said thoughtfully. "Using that connection against him. Helping Hunter fight from the inside while we work from the outside."

"He's trying to recreate what he lost," I said quietly, the realization hitting me. "But he can't. Not really. Because what Hunter and I have... it's unique to us. To our world."

"Exactly," Mia leaned forward. "He might have Hunter's body, his memories, but he can't replicate that connection. No matter how hard he tries."



"Which is probably making him angry," Kaya observed, momentarily distracted from Thara's latest stalking attempt. "The more he fails to create what he had with his Michelle..."

"The more dangerous he becomes," I finished, watching Tomi play with my necklace. "We're running out of time."

Thara jumped on the table and landed on Kaya, batting at her head.

"You insufferable creature!" Kaya hissed, trying to maintain her dignity while being pummeled by my chaos-loving cat. "This is hardly the time!"

"He's already slipping," I said, watching the cats. "That display at dinner... his jealousy over Jeremy. He can't maintain the act perfectly because he doesn't really understand Hunter's relationships."

"And the more he fails to recreate what he had with his Michelle..." Mia started.

"The more likely he is to snap," I finished grimly, just as my phone buzzed again.

"Training done," the text read. "Where are you really?"

My heart jumped, but I kept my voice steady as I showed Mia the message. "He's getting suspicious."

"Still at Amber's," I typed back. "Having coffee with Mia. Want to meet us for lunch later?"

"Give him something normal to focus on," Mia nodded approvingly. "Keep him thinking you don't suspect."

"Lunch sounds good," came his reply. "The pub?"

I hesitated. A public place would be safer, but something about his suggestion felt wrong. Hunter would have suggested the Cantina, or that little cafe we loved...

"He's trying to act like he knows our habits," Mia realized, reading over my shoulder. "But he's getting details wrong."

"Yes, pub is perfect," I typed, though my hands were shaking slightly. "Meet you there at 1?"

Tomi babbled happily, oblivious to the tension, while Thara finally released Kaya from her latest attack.

"Great," his response came quickly. "Looking forward to it."

"He's planning something," I said quietly, tucking my phone away. "That was too easy."

"You can't go alone," Mia's voice was firm. "Let me come with you."

"No," I shook my head. "If he is planning something, I need to know you're safe. Besides..." I looked down at Tomi. "I need you to watch her. If anything happens..."

"Michelle," Mia started, but Kaya cut her off.

"She's right. Michelle needs to know Tomi is protected if this goes wrong."

"Nothing's going to go wrong," I said with more confidence than I felt. "I just need to keep playing along until we figure out how to help Hunter fight back."

"And if he realizes you know?" Mia asked softly.

"Then at least my baby will be safe with you."

"You can't just sacrifice yourself," Mia protested. "Tomi needs her mother."

"And she needs to be alive to have one," I countered, watching my daughter play with her napkin. "If he figures out I know... if he snaps... I need to know she's safe. That he can't use her to control me."

"There has to be another way," Mia insisted.

"If you have any brilliant ideas, I'm listening," I kept my voice low. "But right now, all I can do is keep him thinking everything's normal while trying to reach Hunter somehow."

"And hope he doesn't kill you in the meantime," Kaya muttered, dodging another of Thara's attacks.

I picked up Thara, "He won't. He wants me to replace his Michelle."

"That might be worse," Mia said quietly. "If he can't control you..."

"He'll try to break me," I finished, absently stroking Thara's fur. "I know. But that gives us time. Time for Hunter to fight back."

"If he knows to fight," Mia pointed out. "If he can even hear you through whatever the Death Ranger's doing to him."

"He'll hear me," I said with more confidence than I felt. "He always does. I just need to find the right way to reach him."

Tomi crawled into my lap, displacing Thara, who immediately went back to tormenting Kaya. My baby girl snuggled close, and I held her tighter, drawing strength from her trust in me.

The pub was busy for lunch hour - good, witnesses if anything went wrong, but also more people who could get hurt if he snapped. I spotted him at a corner table, watching the door. His posture was all wrong - too rigid, too controlled. My Hunter always had this easy grace about him.

"Hey baby," I smiled, sliding into the seat across from him. Keep it natural, keep it normal. "How was training?"

"Fine," his eyes tracked my movements. "The house was quiet without you and Tomi."

"She was getting fussy," I lied smoothly. "Needed a change of scenery. And you know how she loves her Aunt Mia."

Something dark flickered in his eyes at Mia's name, but his voice stayed casual. "She's been... clingy lately. With you."

"She's at that age," I shrugged, studying the menu I'd memorized ages ago. "Probably another growth spurt coming."

"Mmm," he reached for my hand across the table. I let him take it, forcing myself not to tense at his touch. This was normal - Hunter and I were always physically affectionate. "I missed you this morning."

"Missed you too," I smiled, letting just the right amount of warmth show in my eyes. Years of performing made it easy to project exactly what he expected to see. "But you looked so peaceful sleeping. And you know how Tomi gets when she's hungry."

"True," his thumb traced patterns on my palm - familiar motion, wrong feeling. "Though next time, wake me. I'll take you both to breakfast."

"Deal," I leaned forward slightly, playing my part perfectly. "Though speaking of food, I'm starving. Know what you want?"

"Besides you?" his smile was almost right, but his eyes... I forced a playful laugh, exactly as I would have at Hunter's flirting.

"Food first," I teased. "Then maybe we can have dessert at home later."

We ordered - he got Hunter's usual without hesitation. At least he'd done his homework there. I kept the conversation light, talking about the girls' training progress, about Tomi's latest attempts at new words, about normal family things.

"So what's the plan for the rest of the day?" he asked, his hand still holding mine across the table.

"Need to work on some lyrics," I said casually. It wasn't a lie - I did need to figure out how to reach my Hunter through music. "Maybe while you have afternoon training with the girls?"

"Always working," he smiled, but something in his tone made me glance up. "Though I was thinking... maybe we could take a break. Just us. Get away for a few days."

My heart jumped, but I kept my expression interested. "Oh? What did you have in mind?"

"Somewhere private," his grip tightened slightly. "Away from... distractions."

Away from witnesses, I translated silently. Away from people who might notice something wrong.

"Sounds romantic," I purred, playing my role. "Though with Nashville coming up I really want as much time with the kids as I can get. I'm going to miss them terribly, especially my baby."

His expression flickered - just for a moment - before smoothing out. "Of course. Family first."

I squeezed his hand, maintaining the performance. "Maybe we can plan something for after I'm back? Take the kids somewhere fun?"

"Maybe," but I could tell he didn't like this deviation from his plans. The Death Ranger wasn't used to considering children in his schemes.

"Or," I suggested, keeping my tone light and flirtatious, "we could have a date night this weekend. The girls love sleepovers at the Jordans'..."

That seemed to appease him somewhat. "I'd like that."

Our food arrived, giving me a moment to study him while he was focused on his plate. Every movement was just slightly off - like someone who'd watched Hunter eat a thousand times but couldn't quite replicate his natural flow.

The next few days were an exhausting dance of deception. I orchestrated every moment carefully - being present but not clingy, attentive but not suspicious. During training sessions, I'd watch from the sidelines, claiming to work on lyrics while actually ensuring he didn't get too

rough with the girls. At night, I'd give him what he wanted, playing the perfect wife while feeling sick inside, then lie awake watching him sleep, terrified of what he might do if I let my guard down.

I made sure Tomi was never alone with him, always finding reasons to keep her close or have someone else around. The girls' training sessions were carefully monitored, though I could tell Harley and Arissa sensed something was off with their father. They'd exchange glances when his movements weren't quite right, when his reactions were slightly delayed.

Every moment was a performance - laughing at the right times, touching him the right way, being exactly the wife he expected. But the strain was starting to show. I barely slept, jumping at every sound, constantly watching for any sign he'd figured out I knew.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, I found a legitimate excuse to get away. I told him I had a meeting about Nashville - not entirely a lie, I did have calls to make. But first, I needed to see Mia. Because after days of this careful dance, I'd finally figured out how to reach Hunter.

We met in the woods behind Trevor's house, far enough that no one would stumble upon us accidentally. Thara shifted restlessly in my backpack while Kaya maintained an unusually serious silence in Mia's. The girls were safely with the Jordans, and I'd left Tomi with my mom. Every instinct screamed to get back to her, but I forced myself to focus.

"You said you have a plan?" Mia studied my face, clearly noting the dark circles under my eyes, the strain of days of pretending.

"Possibly." My voice was rough from lack of sleep, from the constant performance. "Your Soul Severance power... it severs the connection between body and soul momentarily, right?"

"Yeah... why?" Her eyes narrowed with concern.

"If you used it on Hunter, it would kick out the Death Ranger, wouldn't it?" The words came faster now, desperate. Days of watching this thing wear my husband's face, of letting it touch me, of protecting our children from it...

"Well yes, but it would also kick out Hunter..." Mia chose her words carefully. "And the effects only last a moment. There's no guarantee the Death Ranger couldn't take the body back."

"But it could give Hunter a moment to take control and fight back?" I pressed, hands shaking slightly. I hadn't slept properly in days, jumping at every sound, watching his every move.

"In theory, if he isn't too disoriented," Mia admitted.

"Right, but the Death Ranger would be disoriented too, right? Could that allow you to use Spectral Strike on him?" The plan had formed during one of those endless nights, lying beside him, pretending to sleep while actually plotting.

"Soul Severance into Spectral Strike?" Mia's brow furrowed. "That's a really fast turnaround on attacks... I'm not sure I can move that fast, Mich."

"It's the best idea I have and I need my husband back," my voice cracked, the facade finally breaking. Days of perfect performance crumbling as I faced my teammate. "I can't... I can't keep doing this. Letting him touch me, watching him with our kids, seeing him wear Hunter's face while getting everything wrong. I'm scared all the time, Mia. Scared he'll hurt the girls, scared he'll figure out I know, scared I'll never get my Hunter back..."

Tears I couldn't afford to shed in front of him finally spilled over. The exhaustion, the fear, the violation of these past days catching up all at once.

"Hey," Mia stepped forward, pulling me into a hug. "We'll get him back. Somehow."

"I just..." I struggled to get myself under control. I couldn't afford to break down, not now. "Every night, lying there, letting him... I keep thinking about my Hunter trapped inside, watching, unable to stop him..."

"Michelle," Kaya's voice was unusually gentle from Mia's backpack. "You've done what you had to do to protect everyone."

"But what if this plan doesn't work?" I pulled back, wiping my eyes. "What if we only get one shot at this and we mess it up? What if we lose Hunter completely?"

"Then we'll find another way," Mia's voice was firm. "But you're right - we need to try something. You can't keep going like this."

"And the Death Ranger is getting bolder," Kaya added. "His control over Hunter's mannerisms is slipping more each day."

"He's frustrated," I nodded, steadying myself. "Because he can't recreate what he had with his Michelle. No matter how hard he tries, it's not the same."

"Which makes him more dangerous," Mia said quietly. "If he realizes he can't have what he wants..."

"He'll either try to break me into being what he wants," I finished grimly, "or he'll kill me out of spite. Either way, we're running out of time."

"Okay," Mia started pacing, thinking it through. "Soul Severance into Spectral Strike... it could work. But the timing would have to be perfect. And we'd need to make sure Hunter is ready to fight for control in that split second when they're both displaced."

"I can help with that part," I said. "If I can get close enough when you do it, use our connection to help guide Hunter back..."

"That's risky," Kaya interjected. "You'd be vulnerable during the transfer."

"Everything about this is risky," I ran a hand through my hair. "But I can't keep watching that thing wear my husband's face. Can't keep letting him near our children..."

"We'll need a plan," Mia stopped pacing. "A way to get him somewhere private, somewhere we can control the situation."

"He wants to get me alone anyway," I said. "He's most relaxed at home, most confident in his control there."

"Our house," Mia caught on. "Where he thinks he's safest..."

"Exactly. Let him think everything's normal - just another night at home. His guard will be down." The plan was forming clearer now. "The girls can stay at the Jordans' again, Tomi with Mom..."

"And we strike when he least expects it," Mia nodded. "But how do I get in without him sensing me?"

"Through the back," I said. "He doesn't know about the security blind spot Billy created for emergencies. And he's been so focused on mimicking Hunter, on controlling me, he hasn't bothered to really learn the house's weaknesses."

"Using his arrogance against him," Kaya approved. "But the timing would have to be perfect."

"And we'd only get one shot at this," I added quietly. "If it doesn't work..."

"If it doesn't work, he'll kill us both," Mia finished bluntly. "And probably go after the girls next."

"Which is why it has to work," my voice was steel despite my exhaustion. "I'll get him to let his guard down completely. Make him think he's finally won me over."

"How?" Mia asked, though I could tell from her expression she already knew.

"The same way I've been keeping him distracted," I said quietly. "Let him think he's getting what he wants. Let him think his attempts to recreate what he had with his Michelle are working."

"Michelle..." Mia started, but I cut her off.

"I can do this," I said firmly. "One last performance. And this time it'll be worth it because we'll get Hunter back."

"When?"

"Tonight," I decided. "Before he gets any more suspicious. The girls are already at the Jordans', Tomi's safe with Mom... it's perfect timing."

Kaya shifted in Mia's backpack. "You're sure you're ready?"

"I'm sure I can't take another day of this," I answered honestly.

"When should I be there?" Mia asked.

"Now. Follow me home. Stay hidden and wait for my signal," I said, my heart already racing at what we were about to do.

Mia nodded, "Ok, let's do this."

The drive home felt surreal, knowing Mia was following at a distance. I rehearsed in my head what I needed to do - act normal, keep him distracted, give Mia the opening she needed. One last performance, but this time with a purpose.

I pulled into our driveway, noting Hunter's car was already there. Through the window, I could see him in the kitchen - the Death Ranger trying so hard to maintain Hunter's domestic routines.

Taking a deep breath, I grabbed Thara's backpack and headed inside. Everything had to be perfect. We had one shot at this.

"Hey baby," I called out, keeping my voice light as I entered. "Meeting finished early."

"Good," he turned from whatever he was pretending to cook, his movements still slightly off. "House is quiet without the kids."

"Mmm," I set Thara's backpack down, watching my cat slink away to her usual spot. "Kind of nice though. Having the place to ourselves."

His eyes darkened with interest - exactly what I wanted. "Is it?"



I moved closer, letting my hand trail up his arm. Every touch had to seem natural, had to hide how my skin crawled. "You know... we haven't had much alone time lately. Always rushing, always worried about the kids walking in..."

He pulled me closer, and I forced myself not to tense. "What did you have in mind?"

"Maybe we could take advantage of the empty house?" I suggested, playing my role perfectly. "Unless you'd rather finish cooking..."

The stove was off before I finished speaking.

He pulled me toward the living room, and I let him think he was in control. Every step was calculated - I needed him completely focused on me, completely distracted when Mia made her move.

"You seem... different tonight," he murmured as we settled on the sofa, and for a moment I worried he'd sensed something wrong.

"Maybe I'm tired of fighting it," I whispered, the perfect mix of surrender and desire in my voice. "Tired of pretending I don't want this."

His grip tightened possessively - so different from Hunter's gentle touch. "My Michelle..."

The words made my stomach turn, but I kept playing my part. Just a little longer. Just until Mia was in position. I let him pull me closer, every movement a performance.

Through the window behind him, I caught a flash of movement in the growing darkness. Mia was here. Now we just had to time this perfectly.

Suddenly his hand shot to my throat with crushing force, all pretense of being Hunter vanishing in an instant. "You think you're so smart don't you, Purple Ranger? How long have you known?"

"What are you talking about?" I choked out, struggling against his grip. My heart was racing - not just from the pressure on my throat, but from the realization that our plan was falling apart. He'd known. Somehow, he'd known I was playing him.

"Don't," his voice was pure Death Ranger now, cold and brutal. "You've played me for a fool long enough. How long have you known I wasn't your Hunter?" he growled, his grip tightening with each word.

Black spots danced at the edge of my vision. Where was Mia? Had he somehow known about her too? Hunter's face twisted with the Death Ranger's rage was the last thing I wanted to see, but I couldn't look away - somewhere in there, my husband was watching this happen.

"Hunter, baby, I know you're in there... help... me..." I begged, pouring everything into those words - our connection, our love, my desperate need for him to fight back.

His grip faltered for just a moment, something flickering in his eyes. "Michelle..." Hunter's voice, really his, but then the darkness took over again.

"He can't help you," the Death Ranger snarled, but I'd seen it - that moment of my Hunter breaking through. "He's too weak."

"No," I managed, even as his fingers dug deeper into my throat. "He's stronger than you know. Stronger than you'll ever be."

The rage in his eyes intensified, but I caught another flicker of Hunter fighting beneath the surface. I just needed to keep him distracted a few seconds longer...

Mia's Soul Severance attack hit him from behind, the energy filling the room with blinding light. His grip on my throat loosened as both spirits were temporarily torn from Hunter's body. In that split second of chaos, I pressed my hand to his chest, just like during the LA Incident when Hunter had pulled me back from the darkness.

The familiar surge of power was immediate - purple energy radiating from me, meeting the crimson glow that began emanating from Hunter's body. The Death Ranger might have Hunter's memories, but he could never understand this connection, this force that had saved me before.

"Fight him!" I urged, feeling Hunter's essence growing stronger as our energies merged. "Like you fought for me then, fight for us now! There's no power that can keep us apart, remember?"

The combined energy built between us, controlled but intense. This was what had terrified the Death Ranger - this connection he'd lost, this force he could never recreate.

"Get... out..." Hunter's voice emerged, stronger with each pulse of our combined power. "Get out of my head!"

"She's mine!" the Death Ranger tried to maintain control, but against our united strength, he was weakening.

"No," our voices merged as one, purple and crimson light filling the room. "She was never yours. This power was never yours."

The surge of energy that followed was focused, contained - not the city-wide destruction of the LA Incident, but a precise blast that expelled the Death Ranger's presence while leaving our

home intact. Our connection had grown not just stronger over the years, but more controlled, more refined.

The Death Ranger's essence was ripped from Hunter's body in a flash of dark energy, dissipating into nothing as our combined power forced him out. Hunter collapsed forward into my arms, his body trembling but finally, completely his own.

"Michelle," his voice was rough, really his this time. His arms wrapped around me with that familiar gentleness I'd missed so desperately. "Baby, I'm so sorry. I could see everything... I tried to fight him sooner..."

"You're back," I choked out, clinging to him. "You're really back."

"I'm here," he pulled back just enough to cup my face, his touch so different from the Death Ranger's cold grip. His eyes were clear now, filled with that warmth that was purely Hunter. "I felt you... through our connection. You kept reaching for me, even when..."

"Always," my voice cracked. "I'll always reach for you."

Mia stepped forward cautiously. "Hunter? Is it really you?"

"Yeah," he didn't let go of me, but managed a weak smile at her. "Thanks to you both. Though next time someone tries to possess me, maybe we could skip the week of torture first?"

"Next time?" I managed a shaky laugh. "There better not be a next time."

A cold laugh echoed through the room - the Death Ranger's essence still visible as a dark mass of energy near the ceiling. "Oh, there will be a next time. You may have won this round, but you've only proven what I already knew."

Hunter's arms tightened around me protectively. "You lost. Get out."

"Lost?" The darkness swirled menacingly. "No. You've shown me exactly how powerful you are together. The force I felt in my world... it's even stronger here. And when I finally claim it..."

"You'll never have what we have," I cut him off, feeling Hunter's energy pulse in agreement with mine. "You couldn't recreate it then, you can't recreate it now."

"We'll see," the darkness began to fade. "When I'm done, you'll beg for death. Both of you. And your precious children..."

The threat was cut off as Hunter and I instinctively released a blast of combined energy, forcing what remained of his essence to retreat completely.

"If he goes near our kids..." Hunter's voice was deadly.

"He won't," I assured him, though my heart raced at the thought. "We won't let him."

"The girls," Hunter said suddenly, his body tensing. "Tomi..."

"They're safe," I assured him quickly. "The girls are at the Jordans', Tomi's with Mom. I made sure he couldn't..."

"You protected them," he pulled me closer. "You protected everyone. While I was trapped in there, watching him use my body..."

"Hey," I touched his face gently. "That wasn't your fault. You fought him. You kept fighting until we could help you break free."

"But the things he made me do," his voice cracked slightly. "The way he treated Jeremy, how he hurt you..."

"That wasn't you," Mia spoke up firmly. "None of that was you."

"She's right," I met his eyes. "I knew it wasn't you. From that first moment during meditation, I knew something was wrong. The way you move, the way you touch me... no one could ever replicate that. Not even with your memories."

Mia shifted, understanding we needed time. "I'm glad you're okay. I'm going to head out, let you have some privacy. We'll touch base tomorrow and come up with next steps."

I nodded, grateful for her understanding. "Thanks Mia. For everything."

Once she was gone, Hunter and I settled on the sofa, his arms wrapped around me in that familiar way I'd missed so desperately. I laid my head on his chest, letting his heartbeat - his real heartbeat - soothe me.

"I was so scared I lost you," I whispered, clinging to him.

"I'm right here," his voice was soft, his hand stroking my hair the way only he could.

"I am so sorry for what I... I never wanted to..." the words caught in my throat. How could I explain letting that thing touch me, even if it was to protect our family?

"Hey, no. Don't do that," Hunter's voice was firm but gentle. "You did what you had to do to keep our family safe. You have nothing to be sorry for." His arms tightened around me. "I'm sorry you had to do that. It makes me sick... what he did to you... the way he spoke to you."

I shook my head against his chest. "I'm okay. I promise. I have you back. That's all I care about. My Hunter."

"My Love," he replied, pressing a kiss to my head - the simple phrase erasing the memory of the Death Ranger's twisted "My Michelle."

Tomorrow would bring new challenges - telling the girls what happened, figuring out how to explain everything to Jeremy, planning our next move against the Death Ranger. But tonight? Tonight I just needed to be in my husband's arms, feeling our connection, whole and real and ours alone.

"Pretenses"

It had been about a week since we had the Bradleys over for dinner, and Jeremy hadn't talked to Michelle much since. That alone was concerning - they usually texted daily, called several times a week. But lately her responses had been brief, distracted. Coming from someone who normally sent paragraph-long texts about everything from song lyrics to Tomi's latest achievements, the short replies were setting off warning bells.

We were sitting in the back garden, watching the twins play with the dogs. Rose was in full fairy mode, dancing around the yard while Daisy tried to follow her movements. Killy, naturally, was ensuring Peach maintained "proper play formation." The scene should have been peaceful - nice evening, happy children, cold drinks - but I could see the worry etched in Jeremy's face as he nursed his Guinness.

I sipped my mango punch, studying my husband's expression. The way Hunter had acted at dinner... that possessive anger when Jeremy called Michelle "Love" like he always had... it wasn't just un-Hunter-like, it was wrong. Hunter had never once in all these years shown jealousy over Jeremy and Michelle's closeness. He understood their friendship completely.

"You're thinking about dinner again," I said softly, watching Jeremy's grip tighten slightly on his glass.

"Something's wrong," Jeremy's accent was thick with concern. "Michelle never goes this long without properly talking to me. And Hunter..." he shook his head. "That wasn't Hunter at dinner."

"No," I agreed, watching Rose attempt to teach Peach a new fairy dance move. "The way he reacted when you called her 'Love'..."

"Hunter's never cared about that. He knows..." Jeremy trailed off, taking another drink.

"He knows you're her best friend," I finished. "That you two have a connection that has nothing to do with romance."

"Exactly. And Michelle..." he set his glass down, running a hand through his hair. "The way she was watching him, like she was... careful around him. Michelle's never careful with Hunter."

I caught the slight tremor in his voice. Jeremy might style hair for a living, but his instincts about the people he loved were rarely wrong.

"Do you think he's turned abusive? Should we be worried that he will hurt her?" I asked, the worst possibilities running through my mind.

"Hunter?" Jeremy looked shocked at the suggestion. "No, never. He adores Michelle, you know that. I just... I don't understand where this jealousy came from. As long as I've known him, he's never acted like this."

"Da!" Rose's call interrupted us. "Watch fairy dance!"

"Beautiful, mo stór," Jeremy managed a smile for our daughter, but I could see the concern hadn't left his eyes.

"Proper fairy form," Killy added seriously, making sure his sister's movements aligned with whatever precise pattern he'd determined was correct.

I watched our perfect chaos twins, understanding Jeremy's worry. Hunter's behavior at dinner had been so unlike him - the man who was like a brother to my husband suddenly acting possessive and cold. Something had changed, but we had no way of knowing what.

"Hunter is always quiet, but normally very nice. Michelle seemed scared of him when they left," I said.

"That's what worries me most," Jeremy's accent thickened with concern. "The way she tensed when he grabbed her arm... and Tomi wouldn't go near him."

"Even the girls noticed something was off," I added, watching Rose demonstrate her latest fairy move to an attentive Peach. "The way Harley went quiet after he snapped about Jake..."

"I should call her again," Jeremy reached for his phone, but hesitated. "Though if something is wrong... I don't want to make it worse."

The helpless frustration in his voice made my heart ache. Jeremy and Michelle's friendship had always been so natural, so easy. Seeing him worried about pushing those boundaries now...

"Should I go Tech Fairy on them? I can hack their accounts. I'm sure Michelle has better cyber security than most of our friends, but I could still get in," I said.

"No," Jeremy shook his head, though I could tell he was tempted. "We can't invade their privacy like that. If something is wrong... Michelle knows she can come to us. She knows our door is always open."

"Proper dance time!" Killy announced, making Rose pause her fairy performance to adjust her stance.

"I just wish..." Jeremy trailed off, watching our twins. "I wish I knew what changed. Hunter's never been jealous before. He's always understood..."

"I know," I reached for his hand. "But maybe it's just stress? The girls starting school here, Tomi getting bigger..."

But even as I said it, I knew that didn't explain the cold look in Hunter's eyes when he'd pulled Michelle away from Jeremy's hug.

"Do you think something happened with Michelle and Jon in Hawaii that made him jealous?" I asked.

"No," Jeremy's response was immediate, certain. "Michelle wouldn't. And even if Jon tried something... Hunter knows better. He's never doubted her, not even when the tabloids were at their worst about her and Jon."

"True," I watched Rose try to convince Peach to wear fairy wings. "Hunter's always been so secure in their relationship. Remember when those photos came out of Michelle falling asleep on you on set in Oz?"

"Exactly," Jeremy nodded. "Hunter just laughed and said I was a better pillow than the bus seats. He's never..." he stopped, frustration clear in his voice. "This isn't like him, Liv. Something's wrong and I don't know how to help."

"Da! Fairy dance for you!" Rose called, clearly sensing her father needed cheering up.

"Da! Fairy dance for you!" Rose called, clearly sensing her father needed cheering up.

"Show me, mo stór," Jeremy managed a smile, but I could see his mind was still on Michelle.

"Proper alignment first!" Killy insisted, moving to adjust his sister's starting position with mathematical precision.

I watched our perfect chaos twins - Rose's fairy energy and Killy's need for precise order somehow working in perfect harmony. Usually their antics would have Jeremy fully engaged, but tonight his attention kept drifting to his phone, waiting for a message from Michelle that wasn't coming.

"Maybe we should invite them over again," I suggested carefully. "See if last time was just... an off night?"

"Or maybe that would make things worse," Jeremy sighed. "The way Hunter reacted to me calling her 'Love'..."

The memory of Hunter's cold anger made me shiver slightly. Something had changed in our friend, something that made even our usually peaceful home feel unsafe.



Jeremy's phone vibrated with a text. "It's Mich. She asked if we want to go to their place for dinner."

I watched his face carefully as he read the message. After a week of short replies and distance, this invitation felt significant.

"What do you think?" he asked, showing me the text. It seemed normal enough - Michelle's usual casual tone, even a joke about Rose teaching Tomi fairy dances.

"Maybe she needs us to see something," I suggested quietly. "Or maybe things are better..."

"Or maybe Hunter told her to invite us," Jeremy's accent thickened with worry. "To prove everything's fine."

"Proper fairy finale!" Killy announced, reminding us that our children were still performing their carefully aligned fairy show.

"We have to go," I said softly. "If something's wrong... we need to know."

"We have to go," I said softly. "If something's wrong... we need to know."

Jeremy nodded, typing a reply. "Tonight? The twins are supposed to have a sleepover at Niamh's anyway."

"Perfect timing then," I watched him send the message, noting how his hands weren't quite steady. "What did you say?"

"Just that we'd love to come." His phone buzzed again almost immediately. "She says they're grilling. Hunter's doing steaks."

That sounded like Hunter - the California boy who could work magic on a grill. At least that detail felt normal.

"Da! You didn't watch ending!" Rose protested, hands on her hips in a perfect imitation of her fairy indignation.

"Sorry mo stór," Jeremy tucked his phone away. "Show me the grand finale."

But I could tell his mind was already at dinner tonight, wondering what we might find at the Bradleys' house.

Michelle

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After a night of finally being back in my real husband's arms, reality started creeping in. First priority: telling the girls what really happened to their father. They'd been training for situations like this, they understood about Rangers and threats. They deserved to know the truth about why their dad had acted so strangely.

While we waited for them to get back from the Jordans', I sent a text to Jeremy and Livvie inviting them for dinner. We'd need a different explanation for them.

"We're home!" Harley's voice carried through the house.

"Good, come into my office!" I called back, sharing a look with Hunter.

Harley and Arissa appeared in the doorway, both looking wary. They'd been walking on eggshells around their father since that dinner, and it broke my heart.

"Sit down, girls," I said gently. "We need to tell you what really happened with your dad."

The girls exchanged a look that spoke volumes. They'd noticed all the little things wrong in training this past week - the forms technically perfect but lacking Hunter's natural flow, the instructions precise but missing their father's patient guidance. After the way he'd snapped at Harley about Jake, they'd been too scared to mention anything, but I knew they'd sensed something was deeply wrong.

"OK?" Arissa asked cautiously, both girls settling into the chairs but maintaining a slight distance from Hunter that broke my heart.

"It was the Death Ranger... he took possession of my body," Hunter sighed, the pain evident in his voice. "I am so sorry for everything he did and said to you guys. I was trapped in there, watching him use my body, trying to fight back..."

"That's why you were so weird in training," Arissa said softly, understanding dawning in her eyes. "The movements were right but... they weren't you."

"And why you got so mad about Jake," Harley added, her voice small. "Dad would never..."

"Never," Hunter confirmed firmly. "Baby, I am so sorry he scared you like that. That wasn't me - I would never speak to you that way."

"How did you get him out?" Arissa asked, her training kicking in. She was already analyzing the situation, just like we'd taught them.

"Your mom and Mia," Hunter explained, reaching for my hand. "They figured out a way to help me fight him from the inside while they attacked from the outside."

"Is that why we had to stay at the Jordans'?" Harley asked. "To keep us safe while you fought him?"

"Yes," I nodded. "And why Tomi's still with Grandma. We couldn't risk any of you getting hurt if something went wrong."

"But he's gone now?" Arissa's eyes were sharp, assessing. "Completely gone?"

"He's gone," Hunter assured them. "Though he did threaten to come back..."

"Which is why we need you girls to stay extra alert in training," I added.

"Mom, we need powers," Arissa said firmly. "Aunt Mia said she thinks so too. Right now all we have is our training. We need either Sailor Soldier or Ranger powers."

I cringed. Mia and I had already had this argument multiple times - she thought the girls were ready, but I couldn't bear the thought of my daughters facing the kind of dangers we had. They were too young, too innocent still. The memory of my own early days as a Ranger, the price we'd all paid...

"That's not happening," I said, perhaps more sharply than intended. "And Mia knows better than to discuss that with you without talking to us first."

"But Mom," Harley started, "if we had powers, maybe we could have helped Dad..."

"No," Hunter's voice was gentle but firm. "Your mother's right. You're not ready for that responsibility yet."

"We're better trained than most Rangers were when they started," Arissa pointed out logically. "And with the Death Ranger targeting our family..."

"We're not discussing this," I cut her off. "Not now. Right now we need to focus on the immediate problem - what to tell Jeremy and Livvie about why your dad acted so strangely at dinner." I sighed, "I think we just tell them that you were dealing with jet lag and were on edge because of everything Jon did to provoke you. Apologize and hopefully that satisfies them and they move on."

"Will they buy that?" Harley asked skeptically. "I mean, Dad's never gotten jealous of Uncle Jeremy before, even when the tabloids were way worse about you two."

"They have to buy it," Hunter said quietly. "We can't tell them the truth, and they need some explanation for my behavior."

"Plus," I added, "Jon really was pushing buttons in Hawaii. It's not a complete lie."

"When are they coming over?" Arissa asked, clearly still not convinced about the powers issue but willing to let it drop for now.

"Tonight," I said, checking my phone. "And we need to pick up Tomi from Mom's before they get here. Everything needs to seem normal."

"And it will be," Hunter assured the girls. "I'm me again - completely me. No more snapping, no more jealousy."

"Just don't mention any of this to Jeremy or Livvie," I added firmly. "Not even hints or jokes. As far as they know, your dad was just stressed and jet-lagged."

"We know, Mom," Arissa's tone was just slightly exasperated. "Know how to keep Ranger Secrets."

"And Sailor Soldier secrets," Harley added, giving me a pointed look that clearly said the powers discussion wasn't over.

I chose to ignore that look. "Good. Now go get cleaned up. And remember - tonight is about showing Jeremy and Livvie that everything's back to normal."

By the time Jeremy and Livvie arrived, we'd created the perfect picture of family normalcy. Hunter was working the grill, completely at ease in his element, looking exactly like himself again. The girls were playing with Tomi in the yard, their earlier tension gone now that they understood what had happened to their father. Robbie had returned to his usual spot near Hunter instead of hovering protectively around me and Tomi, while Thara had claimed her favorite sunbathing spot on the deck, all imperial attitude restored.

The scene was so perfectly normal it almost made my heart ache - everything back exactly as it should be, except for the weight of the secrets we were keeping. I saw Jeremy hesitate slightly as they came through the gate, clearly uncertain what version of Hunter they'd find tonight.

"Hey Love," I called out, using the familiar greeting deliberately. Hunter didn't even flinch - just smiled and waved at Jeremy with the easy warmth that had been so noticeably missing last week.

"Hey," Jeremy's accent was thick with relief as he hugged me, though I could still feel a slight tension in him - waiting to see if Hunter would react.

"Perfect timing," Hunter called from the grill. "Steaks are almost ready. J, grab a beer?"

The casual invitation - so normal, so Hunter - made Jeremy's shoulders relax slightly. Livvie was watching everything with those sharp tech fairy eyes of hers, but even she seemed reassured by Hunter's easy manner.

Tomi babbled happily when she spotted Livvie, reaching her arms up in that demanding way of hers. Another good sign - our baby girl wanting to be near people again.

"Hello beautiful," Livvie scooped her up, sharing a look with Jeremy. Yes, this was different from last week when Tomi wouldn't leave my arms.

"Uncle Jeremy!" Harley called. "Come see this new move Dad taught us today!"

The girls were playing their parts perfectly - showing that training with Hunter was back to normal, that they weren't afraid of him anymore.

Once the steaks were ready and we'd settled around the patio table, I could feel the moment approaching. We needed to address what had happened, but it had to seem natural, not rehearsed.

Hunter cleared his throat. "J, Liv... I owe you both an apology. The way I acted last week..." he shook his head. "That wasn't me. The jet lag and everything with Jon in Hawaii... I let it get to me in a way I shouldn't have."

"The way I snapped about you calling Michelle 'Love'..." Hunter continued, his voice genuinely remorseful. "That was completely out of line. You're her best friend, you've always been there for her. I had no right to act jealous."

"We were all on edge after Hawaii," I added carefully, reaching for Hunter's hand. "Jon knows exactly how to push buttons, and with the time change and everything..."

"Still," Hunter squeezed my hand. "It was unacceptable. I'm sorry I made you both uncomfortable in your own home."

I watched Jeremy and Livvie absorb this, hoping they'd accept our carefully crafted explanation.

"Mate," Jeremy's voice was warm with relief. "Of course we understand. We were just worried..."

"About both of you," Livvie added, her tech fairy instincts still clearly analyzing everything.

"I know," Hunter nodded. "And I appreciate that. You're family - you had every right to be concerned. I just... wasn't myself."

"But you are now?" Jeremy asked carefully, and I could hear all the layers in that question - his worry for me, his love for his best friend, his need to know things were really okay.

"I am," Hunter assured him. "Completely myself again. No more weird jealousy, no more snapping. Just... back to normal."

Tomi chose that moment to reach for Hunter from her high chair, babbling happily. The simple gesture said more than any words could - our baby girl trusted her daddy again.

"Speaking of normal," Livvie smiled, watching Hunter settle Tomi in his lap. "Rose has a new fairy dance she wants to show Tomi next time you visit."

"With proper alignment," I laughed, grateful for the shift in conversation. "According to Killy's very specific instructions, I'm sure."

"Of course," Jeremy's accent was back to its usual warmth, the tension from the past week finally easing. "Our son takes his fairy dance supervision very seriously."

"As seriously as these two take their training," Hunter added proudly, nodding toward Harley and Arissa. The girls smiled, playing along perfectly - just a normal family dinner, no lingering effects of possession or ranger battles.

I caught Jeremy watching me, that look that said he could still sense something deeper had happened. But he wouldn't push - he trusted me enough to know I'd tell him if I could, if I needed to.

The evening settled into comfortable normalcy - the kind that always filled our home when Jeremy and Livvie visited. Laughter echoed through the living room as Hunter recounted some story about the girls' training, Tomi content in his lap while Thara claimed her usual spot on mine. For a moment, it felt like everything really was back to normal.

Then my wrist vibrated with the distinctive pattern of Billy's Ranger communication app. My heart sank even before I checked it. Of course we couldn't have one peaceful evening.

"Excuse me, need to use the restroom, be right back," I managed casually, catching Hunter's eye as I slipped away. He'd recognize that particular excuse - our code for Ranger business.

In our bedroom, door safely closed, I activated the secure channel. "Yes Billy?"

"Mich, bad news, Death Ranger is at it again," Billy's voice carried that edge I'd learned to dread.

"What now?" My stomach was already knotting.

"He's targeting other Rangers now," Billy said grimly. "He's taken RJ's daughters."

"What?" I felt the blood drain from my face. "RJ? But why? How old are his daughters?"

"Six-year-old twin girls."

"Kids?" The word came out as a horrified whisper. "He's after kids now?"

"Yes. RJ is en route to Ireland now. We have to warn all Rangers. He's escalating and we're all in danger."

The implications hit me like a physical blow. If he was targeting Rangers' children... my hand instinctively pressed against the door, as if I could protect my own daughters through the wall.

"Me... RJ is my ex," I said quietly, the pattern suddenly becoming clear. "Is he after my exes?"

"I had the same thought and if he is..."

"We have to warn Jason and Rocky. Their kids could be next," I said, horror building. The Death Ranger was targeting children - the most effective way to spread fear among the Rangers. And in his twisted mind, going after my exes' kids probably felt like eliminating competition.

"On it," Billy assured me.

"He feeds on fear," I said, the realization hitting me. "And what better way to terrify Rangers than by targeting their children? Plus he gets to hurt people I used to care about..."

"Michelle," Billy's voice was grim. "Don't worry. We'll find them."

"Stay in touch, Mich out," I said as I ended the communication. Now I had to go back out there and act normal until Livvie and Jeremy left. Time to be the amazing actress I knew I was.

I took a deep breath, checking my reflection to make sure no trace of fear showed on my face. Years of performing had taught me how to push down emotions, how to show exactly what people expected to see. Right now, that meant being the perfectly relaxed host, enjoying a normal evening with friends.

Walking back into the living room, I settled next to Hunter on the sofa, my hand finding his. One subtle squeeze communicated everything - danger, Rangers, later. His fingers tightened briefly in acknowledgment, but his laugh at Jeremy's story never faltered.

"Speaking of the twins," Livvie was saying, "Rose has been asking when Tomi can come for another playdate. She's determined to teach her proper fairy dances."

"With Killy's alignment supervision, of course," Jeremy added, making Hunter laugh.

I managed to smile naturally, though my mind was racing with plans to protect our children. "We'll have to set something up soon. And they will have tons of time to play in Australia."

"That's right," Jeremy nodded. "September tour. At least I'll be there to make sure your hair is perfect for every show."

"Though you're staying the whole month," I smiled, grateful for topics that felt normal. "Taking advantage of being in Livvie's homeland."

"Well, someone has to show the twins proper Australian culture," Livvie grinned.

Hunter's hand squeezed mine again - we'd need to figure out how to handle this new threat long before September. But for now, I kept my expression relaxed, discussing tour plans like nothing was wrong.

Tomi babbled sleepily from Hunter's lap, providing the perfect excuse to start wrapping up the evening.

"Someone's ready for bed," Hunter said softly, adjusting Tomi as she snuggled deeper into his chest.

"We should head out," Jeremy stood, reading the room perfectly as always. "Let you get this little one down."

"Thanks for coming," I hugged him tight, trying not to think about how I'd have to start limiting these casual family dinners until we dealt with the Death Ranger's new threat. "It means a lot."

"Everything's good?" Livvie asked quietly as she hugged me goodbye, those tech fairy instincts still analyzing.

"Everything's perfect," I assured her, the lie smooth and practiced. "Just back to normal."

I watched them head to their car, waiting until they were safely out of the driveway before letting my actress mask slip. Hunter was already moving toward me, Tomi still in his arms.

"What is it?" he asked softly. "What happened while you were gone?"

"The Death Ranger," I kept my voice low, even though the girls had gone upstairs. "He's taken RJ's twin daughters."

Hunter's face darkened, instinctively pulling Tomi closer. "His kids? Why?"

"Billy thinks he's targeting Rangers' children to spread fear. And..." I hesitated. "Maybe specifically my exes' kids. Either way, he's escalating."

"Tomi," Hunter whispered, looking down at our sleeping baby. "She's completely defenseless."

"She's sleeping in our room," I said immediately. "Until this is over. The girls at least have their training, but Tomi..."

"She can't even control her powers yet," Hunter finished my thought. "And with those bracelets blocking them completely..."

"Mom?" Arissa's voice from the stairs made us both turn. "What's wrong? We heard you mention the Death Ranger."

I shared a look with Hunter. We'd have to tell them - they needed to be on alert - but our main concern right now was protecting our baby girl.

"Girls, come down here," I said quietly. "We need to update you on the situation."

As they settled on the couch, I noticed how they both immediately assessed exits and potential threats - their training showing even now. At least they had that.

"The Death Ranger's taken RJ's daughters," I explained. "He's targeting Rangers' children."

"Is that why Dad's holding Tomi like that?" Harley asked perceptively, noting how Hunter had shifted to a more protective stance.

"Yes," Hunter confirmed. "You two can defend yourselves if needed. But Tomi..."

"She's sleeping in your room?" Arissa guessed, her tactical mind already working.

"Until we handle this," I nodded. "And I need you both to be extra vigilant. Not just in training, but watching for anything unusual around the house, around your sister."

"We won't let anything happen to her," Harley said firmly, all thoughts of Jake and teenage crushes forgotten in the face of protecting her baby sister.

"Good girls. I'm calling Mia. She and Kaya need to get over here. We need to figure out our next move. If this is the way the Death Ranger is escalating we have to stop him somehow," I said as I pulled out my phone.

"I'll get Tomi settled in our room," Hunter said, standing carefully with our sleeping baby. "Girls, do a perimeter check while your mom calls Mia?"

They nodded, immediately moving to their assigned positions - another benefit of all that training. As they began their security sweep, I dialed Mia.

"He's targeting children now," I said as soon as she answered. "We need you here. Now."

"On my way," she replied instantly. "Kaya's already sensed something was wrong."

I watched Hunter disappear into our room with Tomi, our daughters checking windows and doors with practiced efficiency. We'd trained for so many scenarios, but this - the Death Ranger specifically targeting children - this was different. This was personal.

When Mia arrived with Kaya, we gathered in our bedroom, all of us instinctively positioning ourselves around Tomi's sleeping form. I explained what Billy had told me about RJ's daughters.

"Kids? Sick bastard," Mia growled, her protective instincts flaring. "Using children to spread fear..."

"He knows exactly what he's doing," I said quietly, watching Tomi sleep. "Rangers will do anything to protect their children. The fear, the desperation - it all feeds his power."

"And targeting your exes' kids specifically..." Hunter added, his hand finding mine.

"We need a plan," Mia's voice was steel. "We can't just wait for him to strike again."

Kaya prowled the room's perimeter, her usual disdain replaced by deadly focus. "He's growing stronger. We felt it when he retreated after leaving Hunter's body."

"So we need to act," I said, keeping my voice low near Tomi's crib. "I'm open to ideas."

"What about a power stronger than he is?" Hunter suggested. "Something that could contain him?"

"Like what?" Kaya's tail twitched with interest.

"The Gem of Souls," Hunter said quietly. The name alone carried weight - memories of another battle, another time we'd faced impossible odds.

"That could work," I considered, "but the Gem shattered when we used it against Lothor. We gave the pieces to Cam years ago. There's no guarantee it holds any power now."

Then it hit me. "Wait... the Gem shattered in our world, but Universe D never faced Lothor. Their Gem might still be intact."

"How would we even find it there?" Mia asked, her tactical mind already working.

"Two possibilities," I explained. "Either Drakkon found it, in which case the Empress or her husband might know its location. Or it was never discovered and remains in the Cavern of Spirits."

"Wait," Hunter's voice sharpened. "You want to go to Universe D?"

"It's our best chance," I met his eyes steadily.

"Alone?" The word carried all his fear, all his protectiveness.

"Well, you can't come. You have to stay with Tomi," I gestured to our sleeping baby.

"Not me... but Mia. Or someone else. You need backup."

I sighed, knowing he was right. "Fine. I'll take a team. But we also need to solve the Celtic Thunder Rangers mystery. Their power seems to affect him differently."

"You're right, but how do we find them?" Mia asked.

"The scroll placed their base between Tower and Blarney," Hunter reminded us. "And we have most of their power signature mapped."

"They're drawing from the Grid," I nodded, "same sector as the other Thunder powers. The Celtic magic alters it, but Billy should be able to create a tracking device to get us close."

"So we find the Celtic Rangers, then pursue the Gem of Souls," Mia summarized. "Kaya? Your thoughts?"

"The Celtic Rangers first," Kaya said decisively. "They're here, they're accessible, and their power clearly threatens him. The Gem can be our backup plan if needed."

"Agreed," Mia nodded. "Plus, traveling to Universe D... that's not something we should rush into."

"Especially not with him targeting children," Hunter added, his eyes drifting to Tomi. "We need to focus on immediate protection first."

"Billy's working on the tracking device," I said. "But we need to be careful. If these Rangers are drawing on ancient Celtic power, they might not appreciate us hunting them down."

"They're Rangers," Mia pointed out. "If we explain about the Death Ranger targeting children..."

"Unless they already know," Hunter suggested. "They seem to be one step ahead."

A soft whimper from Tomi made us all pause, but she settled again quickly. Looking at her, so small and vulnerable in our bed, I knew we had to get this right. We couldn't afford any mistakes.

I sighed, "OK, Hunter and I will see if we can track them down. They may be more open to talking to other Thunder Rangers. Mia, you need to keep an eye on Rachel without alerting Trev and Amber. She is the closest thing you have to a child of your own."

"I can do that," Mia nodded, her expression softening at the mention of her goddaughter. "Since I'm staying there anyway I can keep an eye on her without alerting anyone."

"Rachel adores you," Hunter added. "It won't seem strange if you're extra attentive."

"Kaya and I will make sure nothing gets near that baby," Mia's voice held steel. "Even if we can't tell Amber and Trev why."

"The hardest part will be acting normal," I said quietly. "Pretending we're not all terrified of what he might do next."

After Mia left and we'd checked on the girls one last time, Hunter and I settled into bed with Tomi between us. She looked so peaceful, unaware of the danger that had us placing her here instead of her crib.

"You know you have to keep your feelings about RJ in check," I said softly, watching Hunter stroke Tomi's hair. "The Death Ranger will use any emotional weakness he can find."

Hunter sighed, his eyes not leaving our daughter. "I know. But this is bigger than my issues with RJ. This is about children, Mich. He took kids." His voice cracked slightly. "Whatever I feel about RJ doesn't matter right now. We have to stop him. I can work with anyone if it means protecting our daughters."

The quiet determination in his voice reminded me why I'd fallen in love with him - his ability to put others first, to rise above personal feelings when it mattered.

Livvie

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When Jeremy and I got home, we took advantage of our child-free evening by settling in with the Switch 2. I curled up next to him on the sofa, watching him play *Breath of the Wild* - our usual way of unwinding after the twins went to Niamh's.

"Feeling better?" I asked, noting how the tension had finally left his shoulders.

"Yeah... it sounds like Hawaii was more stressful for Hunter than we realized," Jeremy replied, focused on solving a shrine puzzle.

I nodded, though something still nagged at my tech fairy instincts. "Well, it does seem like Jon was goading him a lot... bloody wanker."

"Still," Jeremy's accent thickened slightly. "The way Hunter acted... and Michelle seemed..."

"Different?" I finished, watching him carefully.

"I suppose it's nothing," Jeremy said, though his hands stilled on the controller. "One thing I've come to realize about Michelle is that as much as I love her, there are aspects of her life I can never understand. The pressure of having people constantly photographing every moment of your life is one of them."

"Aye... I can't even imagine the pressure," I agreed. "Though at least here she gets to be normal. It's what she loves about Ireland - nobody cares that she's Michelle Morris."

"True," Jeremy smiled slightly. "The Irish couldn't care less about celebrity. But in Hawaii, with Jon there... the American press was probably all over them again."

I curled closer to him, watching Link traverse Hyrule. "Well, everything seems better now. Hunter's back to himself."

"Yeah," Jeremy returned to his game, relaxing fully for the first time in days. "Back to normal."

"Speaking of normal," I said, watching him attempt the same shrine puzzle for the third time, "have you sorted your schedule for Australia yet?"

"Mostly," Jeremy moved Link into a better position. "Michelle's shows are all set, and I'll work those while you show the twins around."

"Rose is already so excited," I smiled, thinking of our daughter's endless questions about where I grew up. "And Killy's been looking at every book he can find about Australian wildlife."

"Our perfect chaos twins," Jeremy laughed. "I can't wait to see them experience your homeland."

"I just hope they love it as much as I did," I said softly. The thought of showing my children where I came from filled me with a special kind of joy.

"They will," Jeremy assured me, finally solving the shrine puzzle. "Especially with their Mum as their guide."

"Though I'm still not sure about showing them where magpies attacked me," I mused, watching Jeremy navigate toward another shrine.

"Probably best not," he agreed, his accent thick with amusement. "Rose would want to find one herself, and Killy would want to study it up close."

"Speaking of studying things up close," I shifted slightly, "did you notice Tomi seemed better with Hunter tonight? Last week she wouldn't go near him."

"Yeah," Jeremy's relief was evident. "And he was back to his normal self with her. Whatever was bothering him in Hawaii must have really worked itself out."

"Good thing too," I yawned, getting comfortable against his shoulder. "The twins would have been devastated if their Uncle Hunter stayed weird."

"Oi, you falling asleep on me?" Jeremy teased. "We've got the whole house to ourselves and you're going to sleep through my epic gaming skills?"

"Your epic gaming skills?" I laughed. "You've been stuck on that shrine for twenty minutes."

"Oi, I'm being thorough," he protested, but saved the game anyway. "Though maybe we should take advantage of having no tiny voices demanding fairy dances or wildlife facts at dawn."

"Mmm," I agreed, already half asleep against him. "Niamh won't bring them back until after breakfast."

Jeremy set down the controller, pulling me closer. Everything felt right again - our friends were back to normal, our children were happy, and soon we'd be showing the twins my homeland.

As we headed to bed, Jeremy pulled me close. "I love you, mo chroí."

I settled into his arms, feeling completely at home. "I love you too."

"Between Dimensions

The gate buzzer pulled me from sleep, and I instinctively reached for my phone to check the security feed. RJ and Billy were at the gate - a sight that made my heart skip for multiple reasons. I pressed the button to let them drive up, my eyes drifting to Hunter and Tomi. They were still sleeping peacefully, our baby girl curled protectively against her father's chest after a night in our bed.

I hated to disturb them, but we had no choice. Gently, I shook Hunter's shoulder. "Babe, RJ and Billy are here."

Hunter grumbled and pulled Tomi closer, his protective instincts strong even in sleep.

"Come on baby," I coaxed softly.

Hunter grunted as Tomi started to stir, her tiny hands clutching his shirt.

"Go change her," I suggested. "I'll let our guests in."

"Fine," Hunter mumbled, carefully standing with our slowly waking daughter.

I grabbed my robe, Thara following regally as I headed downstairs. The knock came just as I reached the door. Opening it, I found myself face to face with RJ for the first time in sixteen years - not since the day he'd handed me annulment papers with barely a word.

RJ was clearly exhausted and worried - any parent would be. Aside from that he looked good... really good.

"MJ... it's good to see you," he said.

"It's Michelle, and please, come in. I'm so sorry about your daughters," I said, leading them to the living room just as Hunter came downstairs carrying Tomi.

I could feel the tension radiating from Hunter, but his sense of duty as a Ranger would override his personal feelings. Still, his greeting was deliberately neutral. "RJ..."

"Hunter, hi..." RJ shifted uncomfortably.

"I'm going to go make some coffee," Hunter said, carefully transferring Tomi to my arms.

"Who is this?" RJ asked, smiling at her.

"Tomi. Mine and Hunter's youngest," I said, watching his reaction.

"She's beautiful. Looks like you MJ... Michelle," RJ said.

Hunter's head snapped around at my old nickname, a low growl escaping before he disappeared into the kitchen. The sound of coffee beans being ground perhaps a bit more aggressively than necessary carried back to us.

"Billy, did you warn Jason and Rocky?" I asked, bouncing Tomi gently.

"I did, but I was too late. They're headed this way too," Billy said grimly.



"What? No..." My heart dropped. "He got Ollie and Tamera?" The thought of Jason and Kim's son, Rocky and Aisha's daughter - both taken.

Billy nodded. "Yes. All Rangers have been alerted."

"Good. That bastard! He will pay for this," I growled as Hunter returned with coffee for everyone and Tomi's sippy cup.

"What?" Hunter asked, catching my tone.

"Death Ranger has Ollie and Tam," I said quietly.

"Oh for fuck's sake. I'm gonna fucking kill him," Hunter said, settling next to me.

"He's already dead... well, undead," I reminded him.

"I'll kill him again," Hunter's voice was steel.

"So Jason, Kim, Rocky, and Aisha are headed here?" I asked Billy.

He nodded.

"Great. If Aisha's involved that means SPD will be too," I muttered.

"At this point I don't care who's involved. I want my girls back," RJ said, his voice raw.

I nodded. "Of course. We'll get them back. Billy told me they're 6?"

"Yes. Summer and Autumn. My girls." The pain in his voice was palpable.

"I heard the Death Ranger used your wife's memory against you," I said softly. "I'm so sorry you had to go through that."

RJ's face twisted with grief. "Yeah. When I lost Grace two years ago... it was the hardest thing I've ever been through."

I looked at him pointedly.

"Next to losing Aubrey," he clarified quickly.

"What happened to her?" I asked, though part of me didn't want to know.

"She was a yoga teacher. One night on her way home from the studio, she was hit by a drunk driver. The twins were 4 and just like that my whole world changed. She was the love of my life and an amazing mother. I miss her every day," RJ's voice broke slightly.

The silence that followed was heavy. Even Hunter's hostility seemed to soften slightly at RJ's obvious pain. Tomi, sensing the tension, snuggled closer to me.

"The Death Ranger will use that," I said finally. "He'll use Grace's memory, Aubrey's memory - anything to break you down."

"I know," RJ's voice was tired. "He already has. But right now I don't care what he does to me. I just want my daughters back."

"We'll find them," Hunter said, surprising me with the conviction in his voice. "All of them. Ollie, Tam, your girls - we'll get them back."

"Any leads?" I asked Billy, shifting Tomi as she reached for her sippy cup.

"The energy signature is... unusual," Billy started, pulling out some equipment. "It's like he's masking their location somehow, but there are traces..."

"Pocket dimensions... could he be using a pocket dimension?" Hunter asked.

"That would make sense," Billy nodded, adjusting something on his scanner. "Given his ability to move between dimensions, maintaining a pocket dimension would be well within his capabilities."

"And it would explain why we can't track them," I added, bouncing Tomi gently as she started to fuss. "He could have them anywhere - completely separate from our dimension but still accessible to him."

"Is there any way to trace the dimensional energy?" RJ asked, leaning forward. "Find where he's creating these pockets?"

"That's what I'm working on," Billy gestured to his equipment. "The Death Ranger leaves traces every time he moves between dimensions. If we can track those..."

I nodded, "OK, so three things need to happen. One, we need to figure out who those Celtic Thunder Rangers are and why the Death Ranger is susceptible to their power. Two, we need the Gem of Souls from Universe D. And three, we need to find this pocket dimension and get those kids back."

"The Celtic Rangers are our best immediate lead," Hunter said. "They're here, they're accessible, and their power clearly affects him."

"I can help with tracking the dimensional signatures," Billy offered. "But the Gem of Souls... that's going to be complicated. We don't even know if it exists in Universe D."

"And we can't all go looking for it," RJ added. "Not with him targeting our children. We need to split up, coordinate."

"Jason and the others will be here soon," I shifted Tomi as she started reaching for Hunter.

"When they get here I'll take a team with me to Universe D. Jason, Mia, and RJ will come with me. The rest of you will try to locate the pocket dimension. In the meantime, Hunter and I will try to locate the Celtic Thunders. We have a starting point, and they're less likely to feel threatened by other Thunder Rangers than if we all go looking for them."

"Makes sense," Billy nodded. "I can give you a device that will help you track Thunder Ranger power signatures, but I'm not sure what the Celtic magic will do to the reading."

"It's something. We'll go get dressed and be right down," I said, already moving toward the stairs.

Hunter and I headed up, stopping to tell the girls to get dressed and join everyone downstairs. Once in our room, as we started changing and getting Tomi ready, Hunter caught my eye.

"You ok babe?" he asked quietly.

I took a breath and nodded. "Yeah. It's weird seeing RJ again and talking about Aubrey but... I'm ok. Are you?"

"I'll be fine," Hunter said, his voice steady as he helped Tomi with her shirt. "There's kids at stake. I can handle RJ."

"I know you can," I said softly, watching him gently dress our daughter. "That's one of the things I love most about you - you always put others first."

"Even if those others include your ex-husband?" he tried to joke, but I could hear the slight edge in his voice.

"Hey," I touched his arm. "That was a lifetime ago. You're my forever, you know that."

"I know," he pulled me close, careful not to squish Tomi between us. "And right now we need to focus on finding those kids. The Celtic Rangers first?"

"Yeah," I finished pulling my hair back. "We'll start in the area Billy mapped out. Between Tower and Blarney..."

"Da!" Tomi interrupted, reaching for Hunter with her usual perfect timing.

"We should get back down there," I said, hearing more voices downstairs. "Sounds like the girls made it downstairs."

When we returned to the living room, Harley and Arissa were greeting Billy with their usual enthusiasm.

"Good morning girls. RJ, these are our other daughters, Harley and Arissa. Girls, this is RJ," I made the introduction, trying to keep it casual.

"Oh right, your ex-husband," Harley said with her characteristic lack of filter.

I sighed. "Yes."

"Ohhh, you were married to my mom?" Arissa asked, her analytical mind clearly processing this piece of family history.

"A long time ago," RJ shifted uncomfortably, clearly thrown by meeting my teenage daughters. "It's nice to meet you both."

The sound of another car pulling up saved us from any more awkward family history discussions. Through the window, I saw Mia's car.

"Hey Aunt Mia!" Harley called out as Mia entered, Kaya following with her usual regal bearing.

I caught RJ's slight tension at seeing Mia. The last time they'd been in the same room, she'd been trying to kill me. Now she was Arissa's godmother and one of our most trusted allies - even if we still drove each other crazy sometimes. A lot could change in sixteen years.

"Mia," I greeted her, watching both her and RJ carefully. "Thanks for coming."

"Of course," she moved to hug Arissa, then gave RJ a measured look. "Hey Wolf Master."

The awkward energy in the room was palpable, years of complicated history hanging between all of us. But none of that mattered right now - not with children's lives at stake.

RJ looked at her, "You've really changed?"

Mia shrugged, "Not really. I prefer to think of it as matured and grown."

Thara picked that moment to spring on Kaya and tackle her, sending both cat and guardian tumbling across the floor.

"You insufferable creature!" Kaya hissed, trying to maintain her dignity. "I am here for serious business!"

I couldn't help but smile as Thara continued her assault, completely unbothered by Kaya's protests. "Thara's just saying hello."

"Your cat is as chaotic as you are," Kaya complained, attempting to escape only to have Thara pounce again.

Mia smirked, watching Kaya try to maintain her regal bearing while being batted around by my enthusiastic cat.

"Are they always like this?" RJ asked, watching the feline chaos unfold.

"Oh no," Harley grinned. "Sometimes they're worse."

"Can we focus?" Billy interrupted, though I caught his slight smile at Thara's antics. "We have children to find."

I nodded and picked up Thara while Mia picked up Kaya. Thara purred contentedly in my arms while Kaya maintained her glare of wounded dignity.

"Right," I settled into business mode. "Hunter and I will start searching for the Celtic Thunder Rangers today. Billy, that tracking device ready?"

"Here," he handed over what looked like a modified scanner. "It should pick up Thunder signatures, though the Celtic magic might interfere."

"And the rest of us?" Mia asked, still holding a disgruntled Kaya.

"Stay here, protect the girls, and when Jason and Rocky get here, fill them in," I said.

Mia nodded. "I can do that."

"Wait, you're leaving me here alone with her?" RJ asked, disbelief evident in his voice.

I shook my head. "No. The girls will be here and so will Billy. Mia, I need you to protect Tomi."

"Of course," Mia's response was immediate, no trace of her usual snark when it came to our baby girl.

"You trust her to protect your baby?" RJ's skepticism was clear.

"I do," I said firmly. "RJ, you missed a hell of a lot. Mia is a trusted teammate and even family now."

"Aww, you do love me!" Mia smirked.

I rolled my eyes. "Don't push it. Now, everyone knows what to do. Girls, Aunt Mia's in charge. Understand?"

"Yes ma'am," Harley nodded.

With that, Hunter and I headed out to hunt down the Celtic Thunder Rangers. The drive to the woods between Tower and Blarney was quiet, both of us lost in thought about the children in danger. When we finally parked and started walking into the dense Irish forest, the magnitude of our task became clear.

"This is a lot of ground to cover," Hunter said, surveying the vast woodland stretching out before us.

"It is, but hopefully this device can get us closer... at least in the vicinity," I said, activating Billy's scanner.

The first three hours were frustrating. We trudged through muddy paths, climbed over fallen trees, and pushed through dense undergrowth. The scanner would pick up traces of Thunder energy, leading us in one direction, only to have the signal fade or suddenly shift.

"The Celtic magic must be interfering," Hunter said after our fourth false lead, wiping sweat from his forehead. "Or maybe they have some kind of cloaking system."

"Or both," I adjusted the scanner's settings again. "Though these readings are strange - it's like the power signature keeps... moving."

"Could they be mobile?" Hunter suggested, helping me over a particularly treacherous section of ground.

"Maybe, or..." I paused, studying the pattern on the screen. "What if they're not trying to hide from us? What if this is just how their power manifests? Connected to the land itself?"

The device beeped suddenly, a new signature appearing. But before we could track it, it vanished again, leaving us surrounded by nothing but ancient Irish forest.

"Wait," I held up my hand, something tickling at my senses. Years of Ranger experience had taught me to trust these instincts. "You feel that?"

Hunter nodded, already shifting into a defensive stance. "Thunder energy, but... different. Older."

The attack came without warning - two blurs of amber and magenta energy shooting from the trees. Hunter and I rolled in opposite directions, years of training kicking in.

"Thunder Storm, Ranger Form!" Our voices rang out in unison, crimson and violet energy surrounding us as we morphed.

"We're not here to fight!" I called out as I deflected a blast of amber energy. "We're Thunder Rangers too!"

"We are not the same," a female voice responded, the Magenta Ranger launching another attack. Her fighting style was distinctly Irish - movements I'd never seen in any other Rangers.

"The Death Ranger," Hunter said, blocking the Amber Ranger's strike. "We need your help!"

Both Celtic Rangers paused briefly. "The Death Ranger?" the Amber Ranger's accent was thick with concern. "What about children?"

"The Death Ranger... he has taken four children of other Rangers. Please, we need your help," I begged, keeping my stance non-threatening while staying ready to defend.

"We're all Thunder Rangers," Hunter added. "I'm not sure why you split off from the Thunder Academy, but I do know we're supposed to be a team."

The Celtic Rangers took a step back, their body language screaming distrust. It was clear they relied only on each other, had probably been forced to for a long time. But something about the mention of children in danger had caught their attention.

"Your power affects him," I said carefully. "We've seen it. Whatever ancient Celtic magic you've tapped into... it weakens him somehow. We need to understand why."

The Magenta Ranger shifted slightly. "The old powers... they protect against death magic. But why should we trust you?"

"Power down," I said suddenly, letting my Ranger form fade. Hunter shot me a concerned look but followed my lead. "Look. I'm Michelle Bradley, this is my husband Hunter. We're the Violet and Crimson Thunder Rangers from the Thunder Academy in Blue Bay Harbor."

The Celtic Rangers exchanged a look but remained morphed.

"We have three daughters," I continued. "One of them is just a baby. The Death Ranger has already possessed my husband once, trying to get to me. Now he's taking Rangers' children. Please... if you know something that can help us stop him..."

"The ancient powers aren't meant to be shared," the Amber Ranger said, but I could hear uncertainty in his voice.

"We're not asking you to share your powers," Hunter stepped forward. "But four children are missing. If there's anything you know about fighting him..."

"We're not asking you to share your powers," Hunter stepped forward. "But four children are missing. If there's anything you know about fighting him..."

The Amber Ranger suddenly stiffened, then reached up and removed his helmet. "Tiernan Riordan," he said, shock evident in his voice. "I had no idea you were Rangers." Tiernan was one of the construction workers working on building our estate.

The Magenta Ranger followed suit, revealing a woman with striking red hair. "I'm Saoirse Riordan," she said carefully. "Tiernan's wife."

"You're the construction worker," I said to Tiernan, equally surprised by this revelation. Neither of us had sensed he was a Ranger during our previous interactions.

"The ancient Celtic powers... they're not just about fighting," Saoirse explained, keeping a careful distance. "They're about protecting sacred places, ancient magic."

"And the Death Ranger threatens that magic," Tiernan added. "His very existence is an affront to the natural order we're sworn to protect."

"Why is your power different than ours?" Hunter asked.

"Yeah, how come you're separate from the other Thunder Rangers?" I echoed.

Tiernan sighed, "Come with us. We will explain everything."

They led us to a cluster of trees which turned out to be a holographic entrance to their academy... or what was left of it. The main base room they brought us to showed signs of both ancient history and recent destruction.

"Welcome to Ord na Toirnín," Tiernan said quietly.

"Ord na Toirnín?" I asked, the Irish words unfamiliar on my tongue.

"Order of the Thunder," Saoirse clarified, her voice carrying old pain. "My father was the An Seanchaí...what you would call Sensei...here before..."

"...before Lothor destroyed our entire academy," Tiernan finished grimly.

"But... why?" Hunter pressed, confusion clear in his voice. "Why didn't you reach out to us? Why are you so separate from us?"

Saoirse and Tiernan exchanged a look before she spoke. "The separation wasn't recent. Centuries ago, a group of Thunder Ninja masters left Japan, seeking a deeper connection to elemental and spiritual energies. They found that connection here in Ireland, integrating their Thunder powers with ancient Celtic traditions."

"When Lothor came," Saoirse's voice grew heavy with memory, "we had no warning. My father..." her voice caught slightly. "He knew we couldn't defeat Lothor's forces. So he made a choice."

"He sacrificed himself," Tiernan continued, his hand finding Saoirse's. "Used his life force and the ancient Celtic energies to create a protective field around Saoirse. I was close enough to be caught in it too. But the rest of the academy..."

"Everyone else was lost," Saoirse finished quietly. "My father's last act saved us, but we couldn't save them. Now we're all that's left of the Ord na Toirnín. The last guardians of Thunder's oldest magic."

Hunter and I shared a look, understanding the weight of such a loss. We'd faced Lothor too, though differently.

"Look, I know this is a big ask, but let us work with you. Join our team," I said softly.

Hunter stepped forward, his voice carrying years of hard-earned understanding. "When Lothor attacked our academy, my brother Blake and I were all that remained. We closed ourselves off, trusted no one. We even fought against other Rangers because we couldn't see past our own pain and fear."

He glanced at me before continuing. "Michelle helped me realize that being alone was a choice, not a destiny. That having a team, having friends... it didn't dishonor what we'd lost. It honored them by carrying their legacy forward."

"The Thunder Academy thrives today because we learned to trust again," Hunter added quietly. "We can't bring back those you lost. But we can help you rebuild what Lothor tried to destroy. If you'll let us."

Saoirse and Tiernan exchanged another long look - the kind of silent communication that came from years of relying only on each other.

"The Death Ranger," Saoirse said finally. "You said he's taking children?"

"Four so far," I confirmed. "Including twin six-year-old girls. Your power affects him somehow - we've seen it. Whatever ancient magic you're connected to..."

"Death magic has no power over the old ways," Tiernan nodded. "The Celtic traditions we integrated with our Thunder powers... they're rooted in life, in the land itself."

"Which is why he's probably targeting children," Saoirse added grimly. "They represent the purest form of life force. By corrupting that..."

"He grows stronger," I finished, feeling sick. "Will you help us?"

"We can't let him hurt children," Tiernan said firmly. "The ancient ways demand we protect the innocent."

"But working with others..." Saoirse hesitated. "It's been so long..."

"I understand your Thunder powers have evolved into something different," Hunter said gently, "but at our core, we're all Thunder Ninja. We share the same foundation. Maybe it's time to reunite the Power of Thunder - learn from each other, grow stronger together."

Saoirse touched the ancient symbols carved into the wall. "Our traditions... they're all we have left."

"We're not asking you to give them up," I added. "Just to share them. To help us understand this older magic that can fight the Death Ranger."

"And in return," Hunter continued, "we can help you rebuild. Not replace what was lost, but create something new. Something that honors both paths."

Tiernan stepped forward. "The ancient scrolls do speak of strength in unity. Perhaps it's time we stopped hiding in the shadows."



"There's something else you should know," Saoirse said, moving toward what looked like an ancient archive. "The Death Ranger's power... it's not just about death magic."

"What do you mean?" I asked, following her while Hunter and Tiernan examined some of the old symbols on the walls.

"The ancient Celtic powers are about balance - life and death as natural forces. But he feeds on two sources," she pulled out a weathered scroll. "Fear energy, which he harvests from the terror of parents separated from their children. And life force itself, which he can corrupt."

"The children," Hunter turned sharply. "That's why he chose them specifically. Their parents' fear makes him stronger..."

"And their pure life force gives him something to corrupt," Tiernan added grimly. "It's a double assault on the natural order."

"He's growing stronger with every moment those children are missing," Saoirse warned. "Unless..."

"Unless what?" I pressed, hearing the hesitation in her voice.

"Unless we can use our connection to the old magics to track him," Saoirse said, spreading the ancient scroll across a table. "The Celtic powers don't just fight death magic - they can sense it."

"That's how you knew when to appear during our previous encounters with him," I realized. "You could feel his presence."

"Yes," Tiernan moved to join his wife. "But finding him is proving difficult. His energy... it's not quite in our dimension."

"He's using a pocket dimension," I explained. "Keeping the children separate from our reality."

Saoirse and Tiernan exchanged alarmed looks. "A pocket dimension?" Saoirse's voice was sharp with concern. "That complicates things. The ancient powers weren't meant to cross dimensional barriers."

"But combined with our Thunder powers..." Hunter started.

"And Billy's tracking device..." I added, pulling it out.

"It might work," Saoirse nodded slowly. "The old ways combined with your technology. Though there's a risk..."

"What kind of risk?" Hunter asked, though I could tell from his tone that it didn't matter. Not with children's lives at stake.

"Combining our ancient magics with modern technology..." Saoirse hesitated. "It's never been done. The old powers can be... unpredictable."

"We have to try something," I said. "And actually, there might be another option too - the Gem of Souls."

"The Gem of Souls?" Saoirse's eyes widened with recognition. "The mystical artifact?"

"You know of it?" Hunter asked.

"It's mentioned in our oldest scrolls," Tiernan moved to another shelf, pulling out a weathered text. "A powerful relic with connections to the spirit realm."

"We used it once, against Lothor," I explained. "But it shattered. We're hoping to find an intact version in another dimension."

"It could work," Saoirse said thoughtfully, studying the ancient text. "The Gem's power is similar to the old magics - it's about maintaining the natural order, keeping death and life separate."

"But getting to it while the children are trapped..." Tiernan started.

"We'll need to split up," I nodded. "I'll take a small team to Universe D for the Gem - RJ, Jason, and Mia. Hunter will stay here with Billy and the others to work on finding the pocket dimension. With your powers helping them track the Death Ranger's energy..."

"Your powers seem to affect him more than any of ours," Hunter added. "If you'll work with us, we might be able to locate where he's keeping the children."

"While you search another dimension for a mystical artifact," Tiernan said thoughtfully. "It's ambitious."

"We don't have much choice," I said grimly. "He's growing stronger every moment, feeding off the parents' fear and the children's life force. We need to move on both fronts."

Saoirse studied the ancient text again before looking at her husband. After a moment, they both nodded. "We'll help. The old ways demand we protect the innocent."

"Are you ready to meet some other Rangers? We have to work as a team and we don't have time to waste," I said.

"It's been a long time since we've worked with anyone else," Tiernan admitted. "But you're right. The children come first."

"Jason and the others should be at our house by now," Hunter said. "Along with Billy's tracking equipment."

"And RJ," I added. "His twin daughters were the first taken. Then Jason's son and Rocky's daughter..."

"Children should never be used as weapons," Saoirse's voice hardened. "Let's go. The sooner we start working together, the sooner we can find them."

Tiernan gathered a few of the ancient texts. "These might help us understand how to track his death magic. Shall we?"

I nodded. "Meet us at our estate. You know the way."

Tiernan nodded.

On the drive home, I glanced at Hunter. "Did not see that coming."

"What? Our contractor and his wife being the mysterious Rangers we were looking for? Yeah, same."

I sighed. "What even is our life sometimes?" Then a thought hit me. "We should have talked to Harley before we left. With all the tension between her and Rocky right now, and how she feels about Tam..."

Hunter nodded. "I know, but there isn't time to coddle Harley's feelings right now. We'll check in when we can, but she needs to learn that being a Ranger or Soldier means putting personal feelings aside sometimes. I have to work with Rocky and RJ despite my feelings for them. We do what we have to do for the greater good. The sooner she learns that, the better."

"You're right... I know you are. This is just a lot for her... she's never had to think like a Ranger before," I said.

"You hadn't either, until you had to. You figured it out. So will she," Hunter said simply.

I nodded, knowing he was right. We pulled up to our estate and opened the gates, the Riordans' car following behind us.

As we walked into the house, the tension was immediately palpable. RJ was pacing near the window while Jason sat with his head in his hands, Kim's hand on his shoulder. Rocky and Aisha stood together against the wall, her SPD uniform making me cringe internally - the last thing we needed was Space Patrol Delta involved in this. Billy was setting up equipment while Mia watched the girls, who were huddled together on the couch.

All eyes turned to us as we entered, then shifted to the Riordans behind us.

"Everyone," I said, taking charge of the situation despite my distaste for the SPD presence, "meet Tiernan and Saoirse Riordan, the Celtic Thunder Rangers. They're going to help us."

"The mysterious Rangers who've been appearing?" Billy looked up from his equipment with interest.

"The ones whose power actually affects the Death Ranger?" Jason added, standing.

I noticed Harley's surprised recognition of Tiernan, but before she could say anything, Mia's voice cut through the tension.

"Saoirse?!" Mia exclaimed. "I knew it! I knew there was something off about you!"

"Ms. Black... you're a Ranger too?" Saoirse's eyes narrowed. "I sensed some power in you... you're tied to the Death Ranger."

"I most certainly am not!" Mia bristled, Kaya leaping protectively into her arms. "I'm not even a Ranger. I'm Sailor Nemesis, Soldier of Death."

Kaya's eyes fixed on Saoirse with that unnaturally intelligent stare only a guardian could manage.

"Soldier of Death?" Tiernan stepped forward, tension radiating from him. "That's dangerously close to-"

"Not that kind of death," I interrupted quickly. "Mia maintains the natural order. She's nothing like the Death Ranger."

"She's one of us," Hunter added firmly. "And Arissa's godmother."

"A Soldier, not a Ranger?" Saoirse studied Mia with new interest. "The ancient texts mention other warriors..."

"We can discuss magical semantics later," Billy cut in. "Right now we need to focus on finding these children."

"Billy's right," Jason said, his voice tight with worry. "What's the plan?"

I took a deep breath. "We split into two teams. I'll take Mia, Jason, and RJ to Universe D to find the Gem of Souls. The rest of you work with the Celtic Rangers to track the pocket dimension using their connection to the old magics."

"And SPD's resources," Aisha added, making me fight back another cringe.

"Absolutely not," I cut in sharply. "I don't want SPD anywhere near this. Their rules and regulations have no place here. The Death Ranger has no rules and regulations, neither do we."

"Michelle, this isn't the time to..." Rocky started.

"No, don't 'Michelle' me," I interrupted, my voice hard. "SPD is not to involve themselves. Is that clear?"

The room went quiet at my tone. They all knew my feelings about Space Patrol Delta - their bureaucracy, their protocols, their tendency to make situations worse with their rigid procedures. We couldn't afford that kind of interference, not with children's lives at stake.

"That's my daughter out there," Aisha said quietly, but with steel in her voice.

"Exactly," I met her gaze. "Which is why we need to move fast, not wait for SPD approval on every action. You know I'm right, Aisha. As a mother, not as an officer."

She held my stare for a moment before her shoulders dropped slightly. "Fine. No official SPD involvement."

"Now that that's settled," Hunter stepped in smoothly, "we need to coordinate these teams. Billy, what do you need to integrate the Celtic Rangers' power signatures into your tracking system?"

"The ancient texts might help," Tiernan offered, setting them carefully near Billy's equipment.

"How long before you can head to Universe D?" Jason asked me, his voice tight with parental worry.

"As soon as Mia's ready," I said. "RJ?"

"I was ready yesterday," RJ's response was grim, his worry for his daughters evident in every line of his face.

"Let's do this," Mia nodded, Kaya already alert at her feet.

"Billy, where's the drop off point?" I asked, mentally preparing myself for what was to come.

"Saturn Palace," Billy said, adjusting some coordinates. "You'll need to talk to the Empress first."

I sighed heavily. "Lovely. Okay, fine. We go in as civilians, but everyone be ready to Morph or Transform at a moment's notice. We don't know what version of our world we're walking into."

Hunter pulled me into his arms, his embrace grounding me as always. "Be careful, baby. Come home to me."

I kissed him, trying to memorize the feeling. "I promise. You keep our girls safe."

"I promise," he kissed me back. "I love you."

"I love you too," I whispered against his lips before turning to our daughters.

I hugged each of them tightly - Harley trying to act tough, Arissa analyzing everything as usual, and Tomi clinging to me with complete trust. The weight of what we were about to do, of stepping into another universe while the Death Ranger threatened this one, settled heavily on my shoulders.

Billy began the portal sequence, the familiar energy crackling to life. Mia, Kaya, Jason, RJ, and I exchanged one final look with our loved ones before stepping through. Whatever waited on the other side, it wouldn't be our world anymore.

The portal deposited us on a stone path leading to Saturn Palace. The structure loomed before us, dark and imposing against this universe's sky - familiar yet alien. Everything here felt slightly off, like a photo negative of our world.

"So this is Universe D's Saturn Palace," Jason said quietly, taking in the differences.

"Getting in won't be easy," I warned. "The Empress won't be expecting us. And even though she's... changed since marrying this world's Jason, security will be tight."

"Changed how?" RJ asked, clearly trying to wrap his head around the concept of alternate universes.

"She's not exactly the villain she used to be," Mia explained, Kaya alert at her side. "But she's still dangerous. And she has no idea about the Death Ranger or what he's doing in our world."

"So how do we approach this?" Jason asked, his tactical mind already working.

"Carefully," I said, studying the palace defenses. "Very carefully. We need to convince her to help us. Follow me... I know this palace like the back of my hand. It can't be that different from mine."

I led them along a less obvious path toward the east entrance, where the guard rotation would be changing soon - if this universe maintained similar protocols to mine. The familiar architecture felt wrong somehow, twisted by subtle differences that made my skin crawl.

"Guards at the third and fifth towers," Mia murmured, Kaya silently scouting ahead.

"Different uniforms than your palace guards," Jason noted. "More militant."

"This universe's Michelle never fully shed her Empress tendencies," I explained quietly. "Even after choosing a better path. Stay close, and let me do the talking. Having another Jason here might be... complicated."

RJ's hand tightened on his morpher. "How do we know she won't just attack first, ask questions later?"

"We don't," I admitted. "But we're out of options."

Using every bit of stealth training I had, I guided our group through the palace corridors. Some muscle memory remained from my own palace layout, and more importantly, I knew how Arion thought. Even in this universe, my head guard would maintain certain protocols, certain patterns.

The side entrance to the throne room was exactly where I expected it to be. I motioned for the others to wait while I peered inside. There they were - the Empress on her throne, but not alone like she would have been in her darker days. This universe's Jason sat beside her, and between them... their Harley. The sight made my heart twist slightly.

"Happy little family you got there, Empress..." I said, stepping into view.

The reaction was instant - her hands raised, crackling with familiar purple lightning. I matched her stance perfectly, our powers mirror images of each other.

"Identify your Universe in the next three seconds or I will fry you," she demanded, though I caught the slight recognition in her eyes.

I smirked, knowing we were at an impasse. "It would be a stalemate at worst. Universe A."

The Empress lowered her hands, her expression darkening. "You again."

"Me again," I laughed without humor. "Though believe me, I wouldn't be here if it wasn't important."

The Empress's eyes shifted behind me, narrowing dangerously when she spotted Mia. "You... you're the one who murdered my husband. I should have you executed for betraying me."

"Newsflash," Mia's voice dripped with characteristic sarcasm, Kaya bristling at her feet. "I did you a favor. The Emperor was going to kill Sailor Mars, and..." she gestured to this universe's Jason, "looks to me like you upgraded."

Our Jason stepped forward before the tension could escalate further. "This is getting us nowhere. Please, hear us out."

Emperor Jason - and seeing him in imperial regalia was jarring - studied us for a moment before nodding. "Harlyn, why don't you go get some fresh air and let us talk to our guests."

"Yes sir," Princess Harlyn replied, and watching her leave - this other version of my daughter - made my chest tight.

The Empress's eyes never left us. "Fine, you have my attention. Talk, but make it fast."

"So yeah, about your first husband. He's not quite as dead as you think," Mia started.

I rolled my eyes, "Tactful as always Mia."

"What are you talking about, Nemesis?" The Empress asked, tension evident in her voice.

"So yeah, about your first husband. He's not quite as dead as you think," Mia started.

I rolled my eyes. "Tactful as always, Mia."

"What are you talking about, Nemesis?" The Empress asked.

"Some of Drakkon's loyalists used his leftover tech to attempt to resurrect Emperor Hunter," I explained carefully. "But what they created... it's something twisted and dark. They call it the Death Ranger - a corruption of the Morphin Grid that shouldn't exist. He's fixated on killing Mia and taking me as your replacement. He sees your marriage to Jason as a betrayal, and he wants vengeance. He wants to recreate what he lost."

"Hunter is alive?" The Empress's voice shook slightly.

"No, not alive," Mia clarified grimly. "Not dead either. Undead. He's a twisted version of what he was in life, if you can believe that's possible."

The Empress stood slowly, power crackling around her. "My Hunter..."

"Not your Hunter," I said quickly. "A corrupted shadow of him. And we need your help to stop him."

Emperor Jason's hand found hers, steadying her. "What kind of help?"

"The Gem of Souls," I said. "In our universe it was shattered fighting Lothor. But if you have one here... we think it might be able to stop him."

"The mystical artifact?" Emperor Jason asked. "What makes you think it could help?"

"It's our best theory right now," I explained. "Its power seems connected to the spirit realm. We're hoping it might be strong enough to contain him, or at least weaken him."

"He's taken our children," RJ spoke up, his voice raw. "My daughters, Jason's son. We have to try something."

The Empress's eyes snapped to RJ, then to our Jason. "He's targeting children?"

"Four so far," our Jason confirmed grimly. "Using their life force to grow stronger while feeding off their parents' fear."

I watched the Empress process this, saw the conflict in her eyes. This wasn't the same woman who had once ruled through fear - her marriage to Jason, her own daughter, had changed her. But facing a twisted version of her first husband...

"The Gem is hidden," she said finally. "Protected by ancient magic."

"But you know where it is," Mia pressed.

"Not exactly," the Empress admitted. "I've heard of it, but I'm not sure if Drakkon ever found it. Jase?"

Emperor Jason shook his head. "It wasn't among the artifacts we found in his vault after his defeat. Though that doesn't mean he didn't have it hidden elsewhere." He paused thoughtfully. "But if he'd had it, he would have used it against me in our final battle. Which suggests it was never found."

"Which means it would still be in the Cavern of Souls," I said, the implications settling heavily.

"Is that good or bad?" RJ asked.

"I know how to get there," I explained grimly, "but the mountain of lost ninjas isn't exactly a pleasant place."

"And Earth here isn't like yours," Emperor Jason added. "It's still rebuilding from Drakkon's reign. The planet's in chaos."

"Great..." Mia grumbled.

"We don't have much choice," I said firmly. "How do we get to Earth?"

"You don't without us and I haven't decided if I'm helping you yet," the Empress said simply.

Her words hung in the air, heavy with implication. Of course - she controlled the transportation between planets in this universe. And facing a corrupted version of her first husband... I understood her hesitation.

"Children's lives are at stake," Jason said quietly. "Whatever he was to you once, this isn't that Hunter anymore."

"He's right," I added. "I know what Hunter meant to you - to us. But this thing wearing his face... it's not him. It's not even close."

The Empress and Emperor exchanged a look that carried years of understanding. Whatever she decided, it was clear he would support her.

"You're asking me to help the woman that killed my husband find a power that can trap his soul for all time?" The Empress's voice was cold. "Why in hell would I do that?"

Mia sighed. "I'm sorry I killed your husband. It wasn't my intent, but I couldn't let him kill Mars."

"Children are at stake," RJ pleaded, his voice raw with parental fear.

"Please, Empress," our Jason added. "Help us."

"What happens to the Gem once you trap his soul?" she asked, her eyes calculating.

"We secure it, ensure he can't escape," I said carefully.

"I want him here, where he belongs," the Empress's demand was immediate. "Once you trap him, you bring me the Gem."



"Yeah, fucking right," Mia scoffed. "So you can release him and start his reign of terror again? Not happening."

"Then I'm not helping," the Empress countered, power crackling around her hands.

"Wait," Emperor Jason stepped forward, his hand on his wife's shoulder. "Michelle..."

The Empress tensed. "Don't. You know what he meant to me."

"I do," he said quietly. "But I also know what Harlyn means to you. And in their world, children like her are in danger."

I watched the conflict play across her face - my face, but shaped by different choices, different pain. She looked at her husband, then back at us.

"You have children," she said to me suddenly. "How many?"

"Three," I answered. "Including Harley... the same age as yours. I can't let him take her too."

That hit home - I could see it in her eyes. The memory of her own daughter, of choosing love over vengeance, of building something new with Jason.

"If we help you," she said finally, "I want your word that once he's contained, you'll let me... say goodbye. Properly this time."

"Just goodbye," Mia said firmly. "The Gem stays with us."

I studied the Empress - this other version of myself who had found her own path to redemption.

"You have my word. You deserve that much."

"Then we'll help," Emperor Jason said, squeezing his wife's hand. "But Earth isn't safe. You'll need protection."

"We can handle ourselves," RJ started, but the Empress cut him off.

"You don't understand. This isn't your Earth. The chaos here... you'll need guides who know the terrain. Jason and I will accompany you. You will need our help."

The implications of having both Jasons and both versions of me on this mission weren't lost on anyone. But she was right - this wasn't our Earth. Between Drakkon's aftermath and whatever waited in the Cavern of Souls, we needed all the help we could get.

"What about Harlyn?" our Jason asked. "Who protects the palace?"

"Celeste and Arion can handle things for a few days," Emperor Jason said. "And Harlyn has more protection than most realize."

"When do we leave?" RJ pressed, the worry for his daughters evident in every word.

"I'll have Arion prepare the teleporter right away," Emperor Jason replied.

"First," the Empress stood, her imperial robes shimmering. "I need to change into something more practical for mountain climbing."

"And then?" Mia asked, Kaya alert at her side.

"Then we teleport to what's left of the Wind Ninja Academy," I said. "The Cavern of Souls should be near there - assuming its location in this universe matches ours, and if Drakkon's destruction hasn't completely altered the landscape."

The Empress nodded, clearly filing away this information about the Cavern's location. Between our Ranger powers, Mia's Sailor abilities, and both versions of myself... we had plenty of firepower. The real challenge would be navigating this twisted version of Earth.

When the Empress and Emperor returned, they'd transformed from imperial rulers to warriors. Her outfit was all sleek dark purple leather that seemed to absorb light - pants that allowed for easy movement paired with a fitted halter top, her long hair pulled back in a high ponytail that emphasized her sharp features. Gone were the flowing robes of authority, replaced by practical battle gear that somehow still managed to look regal.

Emperor Jason had exchanged his formal wear for black woven leather pants and a sleeveless red and gold top that showed he hadn't let imperial life soften him. They both moved differently now - less ceremonial, more predatory. This wasn't the Empress and Emperor of Saturn heading out with us; these were the warriors who had survived Drakkon's reign and rebuilt from the ashes.

"OK, let's go," Emperor Jason said, and his voice carried the weight of someone who knew exactly what horrors awaited us on his Earth.

Arion led us to the teleportation chamber - a vast room filled with technology that looked both familiar and alien. This wasn't Zordon's tech or even Billy's; this was something else entirely, probably leftover from Drakkon's reign but modified for their use.

"The coordinates are set for what remains of Blue Bay Harbor," Emperor Jason explained, checking the control panel. "It's... not what you remember."

"Nothing is what we remember here," the Empress added grimly. "Drakkon's forces hit the ninja academies particularly hard."

RJ shifted impatiently. "As long as we can get to the Cavern..."

"We will," I assured him, though the look the Empress and Emperor exchanged made my stomach tighten. Whatever waited for us on their Earth, it was bad enough to make even them nervous.

"Everyone ready?" Emperor Jason's hand hovered over the activation switch.

Mia pulled Kaya closer to her. "As we'll ever be."

The teleportation beam enveloped us in familiar golden light, but when it faded, the world that greeted us was anything but familiar.

The landscape that materialized around us looked like something from a post-apocalyptic nightmare. Where Blue Bay Harbor should have been standing, there were only ruins - twisted metal and crumbling concrete stretching toward a sky that seemed permanently tinted with ash.

"What..." RJ's voice trailed off as he took in the devastation.

"Drakkon's forces didn't just defeat the ninja academies," Emperor Jason said quietly. "They obliterated them. Made examples of them."

"The Wind Ninja Academy would have been that way," the Empress pointed toward what might have once been mountains. "About three miles."

"Watch your step," our Jason warned, noting the unstable ground beneath our feet. "And stay alert. We're not alone out here."

As if to emphasize his point, something moved in the shadows of a nearby ruin. Kaya's fur bristled as she pressed closer to Mia.

"What kind of resistance should we expect?" I asked, watching both versions of myself instinctively shift into defensive stances.

"Survivors," the Empress said grimly. "Not all of them friendly. And creatures... things Drakkon's experiments created. They still roam free."

As we picked our way through the ruins, Emperor Jason fell into step beside his counterpart, curiosity evident in his expression. "It's clear you're not married to Michelle... but you mentioned a son. Who with?"

Jason smiled. "Kim. We have one son. Ollie."

"Kim?" Emperor Jason's surprise was genuine. "Wow, never thought of her like that. She was my battle partner in taking down Drakkon but that was it."

"Our worlds are very different," Jason replied simply.

"Clearly," the Empress interjected, studying me with those unnervingly familiar eyes. "You still married to Rocky?"

I tensed, memories of another life flickering through my mind. "No, actually. We divorced. I'm remarried."

"To whom?" she asked, though something in her expression suggested she already knew.

I hesitated, knowing how this would land. "Hunter."

The Empress stopped walking, power crackling briefly around her hands before Emperor Jason's touch steadied her. The irony wasn't lost on anyone - in this universe, she'd lost Hunter and found happiness with Jason. In ours, I'd found my way to Hunter while Jason built a life with Kim.

"You married him?" the Empress's voice was tight, and I understood the real source of her pain. Here we were, asking her to help trap her Hunter's soul forever, while I had my own Hunter waiting for me back home - alive, whole, loving.

"Our worlds are very different," I said softly. "And I know what we're asking of you..."

"Do you?" she cut me off. "You get to go home to him. I'm being asked to help ensure I never see mine again."

"A corrupted version of him is threatening children," Mia started, but both me and Emperor Jason shot her warning looks.

"Movement," Emperor Jason cut in, gesturing to our left. "Three o'clock."

We all dropped into defensive stances, the personal dynamics forgotten as shadows shifted among the ruins. Something that might have once been human emerged, its form twisted by what I could only assume were Drakkon's experiments.

"Stay close," the Empress commanded, purple energy crackling around her hands. "They hunt in packs."

The creatures moved with unnatural speed, their forms shifting in ways that defied physics. I counted at least five of them circling our group.

"Back to back," Emperor Jason ordered, both versions of himself falling into identical defensive stances. "Don't let them separate us."

"Ready to morph if needed," our Jason added, his hand on his morpher.

The first creature lunged - all twisted limbs and too many teeth. The Empress's energy blast caught it mid-air, sending it crashing into a pile of rubble. But three more immediately took its place.

"It's Morphin' Time!" I called out, making a split-second decision about which power to use.

"Ninja Storm, Ranger Form!" I opted for my Purple Wind Ranger power - the Master Morpher meant I could always switch if needed.

"Jungle Beast, Spirits Unleashed!" RJ's voice carried the desperate energy of a father fighting to save his children.

"Tyrannosaurus!" Jason's familiar call echoed through the ruins.

"Nemesis Mystic Power!" Mia's transformation lit up the area as Kaya darted for cover in the rubble, knowing when to stay clear of a fight.

The Empress and Emperor remained unmorphed, but their combined power crackled through the air with familiar intensity. Whatever these things were, they'd picked the wrong group to attack.

The creatures attacked in unison, moving with an eerie coordination that suggested intelligence behind their mutations. My Wind Ranger powers gave me the agility I needed to dodge their unnaturally long limbs while striking back with precise ninja moves.

RJ's Wolf Spirit tore through two of them while Jason's veteran fighting style proved effective even against these twisted opponents. Mia's death magic seemed to particularly affect them - perhaps because they were already corrupted versions of life.

But it was the Empress and Emperor who truly commanded the battle. Their movements were perfectly synchronized, years of fighting together evident in every attack. Purple energy merged with red and gold in devastating combinations.

"Behind you!" I called to our Jason as another wave emerged from the ruins. These ones looked different - more mechanical than organic.

"They're adapting," Emperor Jason warned, his power flaring brighter. "Don't let them touch you directly!"

The mechanical creatures moved differently than the first wave - faster, more precise. I spun to avoid one's attack, but its arm extended unexpectedly, catching me off guard. The impact sent me crashing into a concrete slab.

"MJ!" RJ's shout carried that old protective instinct as he leaped between me and the advancing creature. His Wolf Spirit manifested with particular ferocity, tearing through the mechanical monstrosity.

"Thanks," I managed, accepting his hand up. "Though it's Michelle now, remember?"

"Right, sorry," he helped steady me. "Old habits."

The Empress's eyes narrowed at our exchange, but another wave of creatures demanded her attention before she could comment.

"We need to move!" Emperor Jason called out. "The Academy ruins are just ahead, and these swarms will keep coming!"

"Form up!" our Jason ordered, falling naturally into leadership mode. "RJ, Michelle - take point. Mia, cover our six. Your Majesties in the center."

The Empress looked like she might object to being protected, but Emperor Jason's hand on her arm stopped her. He understood the tactical sense - they knew this terrain better than any of us.

We fought our way forward through the ruins, the creatures growing more numerous but also more desperate, as if they knew we were approaching some boundary they couldn't cross.

"The Academy had protective wards," the Empress explained between energy blasts. "Some of them still hold, even after... everything."

"Almost there," Emperor Jason pointed to what looked like the remains of an ornate gate. "Once we cross that threshold-"

A mechanical creature suddenly burst from the ground directly under my feet. Before I could react, both RJ and the Empress had blasted it, their combined power turning it to ash.

"Still watching out for me?" I couldn't help but quip to RJ.

"Always," he answered simply, though we both caught the Empress's sharp intake of breath at the exchange.

The protective barrier was visible now - a shimmering veil of ancient ninja magic that had somehow survived Drakkon's destruction. As we approached, the creatures became more frenzied, hurling themselves at us with suicidal intensity.

"Through the gate!" Emperor Jason called. "Now!"

We sprinted the final distance, Mia's death magic clearing a path while both Jasons covered our flanks. The moment we crossed the threshold, the creatures pulled back, howling in frustration.

"They can't cross," the Empress confirmed, watching them prowl the boundary. "The wards may be damaged, but they still repel Drakkon's corrupted creations."

I powered down, the others following suit as we took in our surroundings. The Wind Ninja Academy - or what was left of it. Where Lothor had merely captured its inhabitants, Drakkon had utterly demolished the place. Yet somehow, the ancient power still lingered.

"The Cavern of Souls' entrance should be this way," I said, trying to orient myself in this twisted version of familiar grounds. "Assuming the mountain's internal structure is still intact."

As we picked our way through the ruins, RJ fell into step beside me. The others spread out slightly, giving us space - even the Empress, though I could feel her watching.

"You know," RJ said quietly, his voice heavy with old regret, "I never meant to hurt you, MJ. I really am sorry about how things ended. I heard what happened to you after... I thought about reaching out, but I didn't want to make it worse. I know I really hurt you."

I nodded, the old pain rising despite the years between then and now. "You broke me, RJ. I wanted a life with you, a family. When we got married and I found out I was pregnant with Aubrey... I thought I was going to have it all. Then I lost Aubrey and you..."

"About that..." his voice cracked slightly. "I should have been there for you when you miscarried. I never should have left you alone in the hospital. It was just so much..." RJ trailed off, the memory clearly still painful for him too.

"It was a lot for me too," I said softly. "But it was a different time. We're different people now."

"Yeah," he managed a weak smile, though his eyes held years of regret. "Seeing you with Hunter earlier... you seem happy. Really happy."

"I am," I said honestly. "And you will be too. We're going to get Summer and Autumn back, RJ. His eyes filled with gratitude and something else - maybe recognition of how far we'd both come from those younger versions of ourselves who'd hurt each other so badly, who hadn't known how to handle loss together. "Do you ever think about her? What she could have been?"

"Aubrey?" I nodded, feeling that familiar ache. "Yeah, all the time. She would be 15 now."

The weight of that number hung between us - fifteen years of birthdays never celebrated, milestones never reached. A daughter we'd both loved and lost before we ever got to meet her.

"When the twins were born," RJ said quietly, "I almost named one of them Aubrey. But it... it didn't feel right. Like I didn't have the right anymore."

"You did," I assured him. "She was your daughter too. But I understand. When I was pregnant with Harley, I thought about using it as a middle name, but..." I trailed off. "Some names carry too much history."

"I see her sometimes," RJ admitted softly. "In my dreams. She has your smile."

Before I could respond, the Empress's voice cut through our moment. "The Mountain of Lost Ninjas should be just ahead. If it's still accessible."

I caught her watching us with an unreadable expression - probably trying to reconcile this version of my life with what she knew of her own universe. But children's lives were at stake. We needed to focus.

The mountain brought back memories I hadn't touched in over twenty years. The last time I'd been here, Hunter and Blake were searching for the Gem of Souls, convinced it would help them avenge their parents' deaths. Hunter and I were on opposite sides then, though our hearts had already started pulling us together. Fighting him had torn me apart inside.

The mountain's reputation was well-earned. Home to the spirits of fallen ninjas, it had tested us severely that day. We'd prevailed, but the battle had left its mark.

"Be careful," I warned, recognizing the telltale silence that preceded an attack. "The mountain's guardians - undead ninjas - they'll be coming for us any second now."

"Undead ninjas?" RJ tensed. "Like the Death Ranger?"

"Not exactly," I explained, scanning the mist that had started gathering around us. "These are ancient spirits, bound to protect this place. They're not corrupted like-

"Like my husband," the Empress finished, her voice sharp. "Though I'm starting to wonder if there's much difference."

"There is," Emperor Jason said quietly. "These spirits serve a purpose. They maintain balance."

A low whisper echoed through the ruins, and the mist began taking solid form. Dozens of gray figures materialized around us, their movements fluid despite their spectral nature.

"Don't let them surround us," our Jason called out. "Michelle, you've faced them before. What's the play?"

"They're strong, but not invincible," I said, reaching for my morpher again. "And they're testing us as much as fighting us. Stay together, stay focused on why we're here."

The first spirit struck with supernatural speed, its attack aimed at Mia - perhaps sensing her connection to death magic. But Kaya was faster, intercepting the blow while Mia transformed.

"It's Morphin' Time!" I called out again, this time choosing my Thunder powers. Against these spirits, the connection to the mountain might help. "Thunder Storm, Ranger Form!"

The others morphed quickly, but the Empress and Emperor remained in their battle gear, their combined energy creating a shield against the spectral attacks.

"They're stronger than before," I noted, blocking a strike that would have taken my head off. "Or maybe Drakkon's influence affected them too."

"Everything here is corrupted," Emperor Jason confirmed, his power flaring brighter. "Even the ancient magics."



A spirit ninja phased through RJ's Wolf Spirit like it was nothing, forcing him to dodge at the last second. "How did you beat them last time?"

"We worked together," I said, remembering that day clearly. "As a team. Put aside our differences and fought as one. That's how we proved ourselves worthy."

"Then that's what we do now," our Jason called out between attacks. "We show them we're united in our purpose!"

The spirits pressed in closer, their attacks becoming more coordinated. But this time, we were ready. We had something worth fighting for - children's lives hanging in the balance. And maybe that's exactly what these guardians needed to see.

"Form up!" our Jason commanded. "Circle formation, just like the old days!"

We moved as one - Rangers, Soldier, and imperial rulers alike. The spirits swirled around us, their attacks coming from all angles, but our combined defenses held.

"Now!" I called out, recognizing the pattern from years ago. "Everyone, channel your power together!"

RJ's Wolf Spirit merged with Jason's Tyrannosaurus energy. Mia's death magic, usually so solitary, wove together with my Thunder power. And the Empress and Emperor's combined force wrapped around it all, creating something entirely new.

The resulting energy blast tore through the spirits' ranks, dispersing their ghostly forms. For a moment, the mist hung heavy in the air, then slowly dissipated, leaving the path to the cavern clear.

"That's how we did it last time," I said, catching my breath. "Working together."

"The entrance should be just ahead," Emperor Jason noted, helping the Empress maintain her footing on the unstable ground. The mountain's structure had clearly suffered during Drakkon's reign.

RJ was already moving forward, his parental instincts driving him toward our goal. The rest of us followed, the weight of our mission hanging heavy in the air.

The Cavern of Spirits opened before us, remarkably untouched compared to the destruction outside. There, on a stone pedestal, sat the Gem of Souls - its crystalline surface gleaming with that same otherworldly light I remembered from years ago.

RJ reached for it, his hand trembling slightly. "This what we're looking for?"

I nodded, memories of another time, another desperate mission, flooding back. "That's it. Just as it was all those years ago on our Earth."

The Empress studied the Gem with skeptical eyes. "What makes you think this is going to work?"

"It has to," I replied, though I understood her doubt. We were betting children's lives on a theory, a hope. But sometimes hope was all we had.



"We should head back," our Jason said, eyeing the cavern entrance. "Before those spirits decide to test us again."

"Or before more of Drakkon's creatures find us," Emperor Jason added grimly.

RJ carefully wrapped the Gem in a cloth from his pocket, handling it like it might shatter at any moment. Given what happened to our universe's version, I couldn't blame him.

"Wait," the Empress's voice stopped us. "Before we leave... I want to know exactly how you plan to use this. How you think you can trap him."

I shared a look with Mia. We'd discussed theories, but nothing concrete. "The Gem responds to spiritual energy," I started carefully. "And the Death Ranger, he's not fully in our dimension. He exists somewhere between life and death..."

"Which is why my death magic affects him," Mia added. "And why the Celtic Rangers' ancient powers can hurt him."

"So you're guessing," the Empress's voice was sharp. "You're planning to trap my husband's soul based on a theory."

"He is already trapped," Emperor Jason said quietly. "In whatever twisted form Drakkon's technology created. This might actually free him."

The Empress's power crackled dangerously. "Free him? The man who helped me conquer worlds? Who stood beside me while we crushed anyone who opposed us?" Her laugh was bitter. "Don't pretend he was some noble hero, Jason. Even you know better."

Emperor Jason didn't flinch. "No, he wasn't. Neither were you. But this twisted version they're fighting... it's not even the man we knew. It's a corruption of him."

"And now it's threatening children," I added carefully, knowing I was treading dangerous ground. "Whatever your Hunter was - whatever you both were - he never targeted innocent kids."

The Empress's eyes flashed, but she didn't deny it. Even at their most brutal, they'd had lines they wouldn't cross. Rules of engagement, twisted as they might have been.

"Let's get back to the palace," she said finally, her voice cold. "Before I remember who I used to be."

But as we turned to leave, a familiar chill washed over me - the same feeling we got whenever the Death Ranger was near. From Mia's sudden tension and Kaya's growl, I knew they felt it too.

"He's here," Mia hissed, Kaya's fur standing on end.

"Impossible," the Empress snapped. "He shouldn't be able to cross dimensions."  
will."

The temperature in the cavern dropped further, frost crystallizing on the stone walls. Both Jasons moved into defensive positions while the Empress's power flared brighter, more volatile.

"Give me the Gem," Hunter's voice echoed through the cavern - familiar but wrong, hollow. "And I'll tell you where the children are."

"You're lying," RJ growled, his Wolf Spirit manifesting instinctively.

The Death Ranger materialized from the shadows, his corrupted armor seeming to absorb what little light remained. His gaze fixed on the Empress with a mixture of disgust and rage.

"The mighty Empress," he sneered. "How far you've fallen. Trading our empire for domesticity with Jason Scott of all people. Pathetic."

The Empress's breath caught, her power flickering with emotion. "Hunter..." her voice cracked slightly. "What did they do to you? This isn't... this isn't who you were meant to be."

"Look at what you've become," the Death Ranger moved closer to the Empress, ignoring the rest of us. "Playing house with Jason, pretending to be reformed. But I remember who you really are, Michelle. The power we shared. The worlds we conquered."

Emperor Jason stepped forward protectively, but the Empress held him back with a slight gesture.

"Come home," the Death Ranger extended his hand to her. "Leave this weakness behind. Together, we can rebuild what we lost."

"The children," I cut in, trying to draw his attention. "Where are they?"

His helmet turned toward me briefly. "A replacement," he sneered. "A pale imitation. When I have my real wife back-"

"You're not taking either of them," Mia's voice rang out, death magic crackling around her hands.

The Death Ranger's attention snapped to her, his posture shifting from persuasive to predatory. "Nemesis. Still interfering where you don't belong."

"Hunter," the Empress's voice was soft, drawing his focus back. "The children. Please. This isn't who we were, even at our worst."

The Death Ranger laughed bitterly. "Our worst? You mean at our best. With Drakkon gone we could take the entire Solar System, and then beyond. Join me my love. Remember who you truly are, not this meek shadow you've been made into by him."

Emperor Jason stepped forward. "Stay away from her!"

"Or what?" The Death Ranger's voice dripped with contempt. "You'll love her into submission like you did before? Turn her soft, domestic? The woman I married would have crushed worlds for power, not played princess in a palace."

The Empress's power flared, but I caught the conflict in her eyes. This wasn't just some corrupted version of Hunter to her - this was her husband, offering her a path back to who she used to be. And part of her, however small, was tempted. I couldn't blame her. If she was anything like me, Hunter was the love of her life and any version of him was more tempting than living without him.

"Michelle," Emperor Jason's voice was gentle but firm. "Remember Harlyn."

The name seemed to snap something back into place in the Empress's eyes. Her daughter - the reason she'd chosen a different path in the first place.

"The children," she said again, stronger this time. "Where are they, Hunter?"

"Safe," he replied, extending his hand to her again. "Join me, and we'll raise them as our own. Build a new empire, stronger than before."

"By corrupting their life force?" RJ's voice shook with barely contained rage. "By feeding off their parents' fear?"

"Power requires sacrifice," the Death Ranger's helmet turned slightly toward RJ. "Something my wife once understood perfectly."

"And something I learned to reject," the Empress said quietly. "For Harlyn. For myself."

"Harlyn is my daughter! Not his!" The Death Ranger roared, his corrupted power flaring with rage. The temperature in the cavern plummeted further, ice crackling across the stone floor.

Emperor Jason stepped forward protectively, but the Empress held up her hand. "You're right," she said softly. "She is your daughter. Which is why I know the real Hunter would never want her to see this version of her father. Would never want her to know you've become something that preys on children."

"I'm offering her everything!" His voice echoed through the cavern. "Power, destiny, her true heritage-"

"You're offering her darkness," the Empress cut him off. "And I won't let you corrupt our daughter the way Drakkon's technology corrupted you."

I felt the energy shift in the cavern - the Death Ranger's rage building to something dangerous. RJ clutched the Gem tighter while Mia's death magic crackled in response to the growing threat.

"If you won't join me in life, you will join me in death," his voice was ice as he launched an attack at the Empress.

Emperor Jason moved to shield her, but the Empress's power met the Death Ranger's attack head-on, purple energy clashing with corrupted darkness. The force of their collision shook the entire cavern, loose rocks raining down around us.

"We need to get out of here!" our Jason shouted over the chaos. "The whole mountain's going to come down!"

"Michelle!" Emperor Jason called to his wife, but the Empress was locked in battle with her corrupted husband, neither willing to yield.

"RJ, protect the Gem!" I ordered, channeling my Thunder powers to help stabilize the cavern's structure. "Mia, we need cover!"

"You can't run from me," the Death Ranger's voice echoed as Mia's death magic filled the air with shadows. "I'll follow you across every dimension until you're both mine again!"

"Oh shut up!" Mia's voice carried years of frustration. "Shadow Grasp!"

Her attack caught the Death Ranger mid-stride, dark tendrils wrapping around his corrupted form. We all knew it wouldn't hold him long - it never did - but it gave us the seconds we needed.

"Now!" Emperor Jason barked into his communicator. "Arion, emergency extraction!"

The teleportation beam enveloped us just as the Death Ranger broke free, his roar of rage cut off as we materialized in Saturn Palace's receiving chamber. The Empress immediately stumbled, her composure finally cracking. Emperor Jason caught her, pulling her close as she trembled in his arms.

Watching them, I couldn't help but wonder if my Hunter would ever have to face a corrupted version of me. The thought made my heart ache.

"We need to get you back to your universe," Emperor Jason said, still holding the shaking Empress. "Before he follows us here."

"He won't come here yet," the Empress's voice was raw. "He'll wait... let me think about his offer. That's how-" she caught herself. "That's how Hunter always was. Strategic."

"The Gem?" RJ asked anxiously, still clutching the wrapped crystal.

"Intact," I confirmed, though my attention was split between him and the Empress. Despite everything she'd built here - her new life, her redemption, her family - seeing Hunter again had shaken her to her core. I understood that all too well.

"Arion," Emperor Jason called to his head guard. "Prepare for an immediate dimensional transfer. And double the palace security. If he does come here..."

"He won't get near Harlyn," the Empress straightened, her mask of control sliding back into place. But I caught the slight tremor in her hands, the way her power flickered uncertainly.

"Michelle," I started, but she cut me off.

"Just... just stop him," she said quietly. "Whatever it takes. Don't let him corrupt anyone else's children the way Drakkon corrupted him."

"I promise," I nodded, understanding the weight of what she was asking. Not just to stop him, but to free whatever remained of the man she'd loved.

"We'll keep our universe safe. You go to yours and stop him once and for all," Emperor Jason said.

The portal hummed to life behind us, its energy signature calibrated to return us home. RJ clutched the Gem closer, while Mia and our Jason moved into position.

"Thank you," I said to the Empress. "Both of you. I know what this cost you."

She met my eyes - my eyes, but shaped by different choices, different pain. "Just remember," she said softly, "sometimes loving someone means letting them go."

The portal's energy wrapped around us, and the last thing I saw was Emperor Jason holding the Empress close as she faced the choice she'd made to protect both our worlds.







"Past and Present"

I held onto that last kiss as long as I could, watching Michelle and the others disappear through the portal. The energy signature faded, leaving behind that hollow silence that always followed dimensional travel.

"Alright," Billy said, already turning back to his equipment. "Tiernan, Saoirse - I need to understand exactly how your powers interact with the Death Ranger's energy signature."

I forced myself to focus. Michelle was handling her part of the mission; I needed to handle mine.

"The pocket dimension," I said, moving to study Billy's monitors. "What do we know so far?"

"Not enough," Saoirse admitted, joining us while Tiernan carefully opened one of their ancient texts. "The old magics can sense him, but tracking him to another dimension entirely..."

"Dad?" Arissa's voice carried that tone she got when her mind was racing ahead of everyone else's. "What if we're thinking about this wrong? What if it's not about tracking him, but about tracking the children's life force?"

I shared a look with Billy. Sometimes I forgot my oldest daughter was probably more strategic than all of us combined.

"What are you thinking, Arissa?" I asked, recognizing that focused look..

"Well," she stepped closer to Billy's equipment, carefully avoiding looking at Rocky and Aisha.

"The Celtic Rangers can sense his corruption, right? But they can also sense life force - that's part of their whole protecting sacred places thing."

Saoirse nodded slowly. "The ancient ways are connected to life itself."

"So instead of trying to track his death energy," Arissa continued, "what if we track the pure life force of the kids? It would stand out against his corruption like... like light in darkness."

"That... might actually work," Billy's fingers flew across his keyboard. "If we calibrate the sensors to look for that kind of energy contrast-"

"It could lead us right to them," Tiernan finished, already pulling out another scroll. "There are old tracking spells that work on similar principles."

I put my hand on Arissa's shoulder, proud of her quick thinking, but my attention was split. From the corner of my eye, I watched Harley, seeing the familiar tension build in her shoulders every time Rocky moved closer to Billy's workstation. My middle daughter had her mother's tells when she was holding back anger - that slight clench of her jaw, the way her fingers curled into fists at her sides.

"While we wait for Billy to do his thing..." Rocky took a step toward her. "Har, can we talk?"

The look Harley gave him was pure ice - Michelle's expression perfectly reflected on our daughter's face. "I thought I told you, I have nothing to say to you."

"Harlyn Nicole DeSantos, I am still your father," Rocky's voice carried that authoritative tone that I knew would only make things worse.



Harley's eyes flashed dangerously as she crossed her arms. "No, you aren't actually. You never were. And my name is Harlyn Nicole Bradley now." Her voice rose slightly, years of hurt spilling out. "Hunter is my real dad. You made your choice when you chose her-" she gestured sharply at Aisha "-and Tamara over me."

"I didn't choose anyone over you, Harley," Rocky pleaded, but I could hear the frustration building in his voice.

"Like hell you didn't." Harley's words carried Michelle's steel. "Hunter isn't just my biological father, he's also my dad... more than you've been for a really long time. I get why you're here, but focus on the mission and leave me alone."

I saw Rocky's face darken at what he perceived as disrespect, his hand starting to rise. "Rocky," I cut in, my voice carrying a clear warning as I pulled Harley close. "Back off. Now."

Harley was trembling slightly against me, though whether from anger or hurt, I couldn't tell. Probably both. I kept my arm around her shoulders, a silent reminder that she wasn't alone in this.

"We need to focus," Billy cut in, his voice deliberately neutral. "Arisa's theory about the life force tracking - Saoirse, can you sense any trace of the children's energy from here?"

Saoirse moved away from the tension, closer to Billy's equipment. "It's faint, but... there's something. Tiernan?"

Her husband nodded, both of them closing their eyes in concentration. The ancient Celtic symbols on their armor began to glow faintly.

A soft "mama?" from across the room drew my attention. Tomi had toddled over, her big blue eyes watching all of us with that peculiar baby intensity. The simple word, her constant refrain since Michelle left, hit like a physical blow.

I scooped her up with my free arm, holding both my daughters close while Arissa worked with Billy. "It's okay, baby girl," I murmured, though I wasn't sure if I was reassuring Tomi, Harley, or myself.

"I'm getting something," Saoirse's voice cut through my thoughts. "The children's energy... it's like looking at stars through dark water. Distorted, but there."

"Can you tell where?" Billy asked, adjusting his equipment to match whatever readings the Celtic Rangers were getting.

"Not exactly, but..." Tiernan paused, his brow furrowed in concentration. "They're alive. All of them. The Death Ranger hasn't started corrupting their life force yet."

"Yet?" Rocky's voice was sharp with parental fear.

I felt Harley tense against me again, but before anything could escalate, the temperature in the room suddenly dropped. That familiar cold that always preceded-

"Everyone down!" I shouted, pulling my daughters closer as shadows began gathering in the corners of the room. I steeled my mind. I wasn't going to let my evil doppelganger possess me again.

"Girls, get behind Billy's forcefield," I ordered quietly, pushing Harley toward Arissa while keeping Tomi secure against my chest. "Now."

The Celtic Rangers moved into defensive positions while Billy activated his protective barriers. Aisha and Rocky flanked the equipment, their hands hovering near their morphers.

"Well, isn't this touching," my own voice, twisted and hollow, echoed through the room. "The family man. The devoted father. How... domestic."

The Death Ranger materialized from the shadows, his corrupted armor seeming to absorb the light around him. But something was different about his energy - it felt stronger, more volatile.

"Where are the children?" I demanded, trying to keep his attention on me while Arissa guided her sisters to safety.

"Safe," he replied, his helmet tilting slightly. "For now. Though I wonder... how safe are yours?"

"You're not getting anywhere near my children," I growled through gritted teeth as I held Tomi close. Her tiny hands clutched my shirt, and I could feel her trembling.

"Where is my beloved Michelle? And Mia... I don't sense their presence here," Death Ranger said, sounding confused.

The temperature dropped further as his energy flared with sudden understanding. "Ah... seeking help from another dimension? How desperate you've become."

I caught Saoirse and Tiernan exchanging looks, their ancient powers already responding to his corrupted energy. But something in his tone set off warning bells. He seemed almost... pleased.

"You really think I can't follow them?" he asked, and though I couldn't see his face behind that helmet, I could hear the cruel smile in his voice. "That I can't track my wife across dimensions?"

My blood ran cold. Michelle. He was going after Michelle.

"Track them?" Tiernan stepped forward, his Celtic powers flaring. "You'll have to get through us first."

The Death Ranger's laugh was hollow, echoing. "You think your ancient magic can stop me? I've transcended dimensions themselves."

"Dad," Arissa's voice carried that tone she got when she'd figured something out. "He's trying to distract us. Keep us from tracking the children while he-"

"Clever girl," the Death Ranger cut her off. "Just like your mother. Speaking of whom..."

He began to fade into shadows, and I knew - I knew - where he was going. What version of Michelle he was about to confront was the only question.

"Billy!" I shouted, but the Death Ranger's voice lingered even as his form disappeared.

"Choose wisely, Hunter. Stay and protect your precious daughters... or follow me to Universe D. But you can't do both."

The silence that followed felt suffocating. Tomi whimpered against my chest while Harley and Arissa exchanged worried looks from behind Billy's forcefield.

"He's bluffing," Rocky said. "He wants to split our forces."

"No," Saoirse's voice was grim. "His power... it's strong enough to cross dimensions now. He's going after them."

I looked down at Tomi's tear-streaked face, then at my older daughters. Michelle's last words echoed in my head: "You keep our girls safe."

"I can't leave them," I said, the words tasting bitter. "Michelle would never forgive me if anything happened to our daughters."

"Then we'll go," Tiernan stepped forward. "The Celtic powers affect him. We can-"

"No," Billy cut in. "We need your powers here to track the children. Without you, we lose our only lead."

Kim nodded. "Billy's right. Mich has her team. Jason, RJ, and Mia will protect her. We have got to stay here and fulfill our side of the mission."

Arissa looked at me, her eyes carrying that same determined glint her mother got when she'd made up her mind about something. "Dad, I don't care what Mom said, we need some sort of power now. Ranger Power or Sailor Power, something."

The words hit hard. Michelle and I had agreed - no powers for the girls until they were older. After everything we'd been through as Rangers, we wanted them to have normal childhoods. But nothing about this situation was normal.

"She's right," Harley added, moving to stand beside her sister. "That twisted version of you is out there threatening both our family and others. We can't just sit here defenseless."

I looked at my daughters - Arissa's strategic mind already working through possibilities, Harley's fierce protective instinct showing in every line of her stance, even little Tomi sensing the gravity of the moment as she clung to me.

"Michelle is going to kill me," I muttered. "Arissa, I need the Crimson Thunder Ranger powers...even if I wanted to, I don't think we can Morph at the same time."

"Actually," Billy spoke up, moving to a secure panel in his lab. "I might have a solution for that."

My eyes narrowed as he entered a complex security code. "Billy..."

"I've been working on this for a while," he explained, retrieving what was unmistakably a Master Morpher. "After seeing how effectively the Master Morpher works for Michelle, and remembering Tommy's success with his, I started developing them for other Rangers who've held multiple power sets."

"You knew this day was coming," I said, not really a question.

Billy nodded. "The girls were always going to need powers eventually. And having multiple Rangers able to access the same power set through Master Morphers actually helps stabilize the grid. It's more efficient than trying to maintain separate access points for each power signature."

Arisa was already studying the device with intense interest. "So Dad could use this to access all his power sets, and his original morpher would be free for..."

"For his heir to the Crimson Thunder power," Billy finished. "If that's what you decide."

I sighed, adjusting Tomi in my arms as I looked at my older daughters. "I have Michelle's original Violet Thunder Morpher."

"Dad, it's time," Arissa said, her expression so much like her mother's when she'd made up her mind about something important.

Harley nodded, standing shoulder to shoulder with her sister. "We're ready."

Looking at them - Arissa's quiet determination, Harley's fierce protectiveness - I saw echoes of Blake and myself at their age. We'd been young too when we first received the Thunder powers, thrust into responsibility by circumstances beyond our control.

The Master Morpher felt heavy in my hand as Billy passed it to me. Michelle would understand, I told myself. She'd be angry, worried, protective - but she'd understand. Sometimes being a parent meant making impossible choices to keep your children safe.

"The Thunder powers," I said carefully, "they're about more than just strength. They're about family, about protecting what matters most."

"The Thunder powers," I said carefully, "they're about more than just strength. They're about family, about protecting what matters most."

I shifted Tomi to Kim's waiting arms, then reached for my original morpher. The familiar weight of it brought back memories of watching my daughters train, seeing how naturally they each gravitated to their respective Thunder styles.

"Arisa," I held out the Crimson morpher. "You've always understood the Crimson Thunder style, its balance of power and precision. This belongs to you now."

Her hands were steady as she took it, the power already resonating with her training. Then I pulled Michelle's Violet morpher from its secure case at my belt.

"Harley." Our eyes met as I extended it to her. "You've mastered the Violet Thunder techniques just like your mother. This power is part of who you are."

"But Dad," Harley's voice caught slightly. "Won't Mom be mad?"

"Probably," I managed a small smile. "But she'll understand. Sometimes protecting our family means breaking our own rules."

The girls exchanged looks, then took their stances - positions they'd practiced countless times in training, now ready for real power behind them.

I gripped the Master Morpher, feeling its different energy compared to my original. "Ready?"

My daughters nodded, and for a moment I saw them as they were in the dojo - training, learning, preparing for a day I hoped wouldn't come so soon. But here we were.

"Thunder Storm, Ranger Form!" Our voices rang out in unison.

The familiar surge of Crimson power felt different through the Master Morpher, but no less potent. When the light faded, three Thunder Rangers stood where there had been none - Crimson, Violet, and Crimson again, but somehow distinct.

Arissa flexed her hands in her new Ranger gloves, while Harley shifted into a defensive stance that was pure Michelle.

"The power..." Arissa's voice held wonder beneath her helmet. "It's like the thunder itself is running through my veins."

"It gets easier to control," I started, but was cut off by Billy's equipment suddenly blaring an alert.

The Celtic Rangers' heads snapped up in unison. "We found them," Saoirse announced. "The children - we can sense them clearly now."

"But reaching them..." Tiernan's voice was grim. "They're surrounded by pure death energy. We can't breach it without Nemesis's power."

Billy's alert system continued to blare. "We've got another problem. The Death Ranger is attacking downtown Ballincollig, and he's not holding back."

"Looks like things didn't go his way in Universe D," Kim's satisfaction was evident in her voice.

"He's never been this bold," I said, studying the attack pattern on Billy's screen. "Attacking in broad daylight, in the middle of town... he's escalating."

"We have to stop him before he levels Ballincollig," Billy warned, his fingers flying over the controls.

"Someone needs to stay with Tomi," Arissa said, her new Ranger instincts already focusing on protecting the vulnerable.

"I'll stay," Aisha stepped forward. "I don't have an active morpher."

I felt Harley tense beside me. "You're going to protect my baby sister?" Her voice carried years of distrust.

"This isn't about personal feelings anymore," Aisha met Harley's helmeted gaze steadily.

"You're a Ranger now. We're a team, whether we like it or not."

Kim carefully transferred Tomi to Aisha's arms while the rest of us prepared for battle. My daughters' first morphed fight would be against a corrupted version of me - not exactly how I'd hoped to ease them into Ranger life.

"Billy, teleport us to the city center," I ordered, already planning how to keep my daughters out of the Death Ranger's direct line of fire.

"Coordinates locked," Billy confirmed. "Teleporting now."

The familiar sensation of teleportation wrapped around us, and seconds later we materialized in downtown Ballincollig. The scene that greeted us was chaos - screaming civilians, crumbling buildings, and that hollow laugh I was starting to hate.

The Death Ranger stood in the center of the destruction, his corrupted armor seeming to drink in the fear around him. He turned as we appeared, his helmet tilting slightly at the sight of three Thunder Rangers.

"Well," his voice carried cruel amusement. "Isn't this interesting? Giving children powers to fight your battles, Hunter? Michelle will be so disappointed."

I stepped in front of my daughters instinctively. "Leave them out of this."

"But they've chosen to join our little game," he said, power crackling around him. "And I do so love family reunions."

"It's ok Dad. We're ready for this," Arissa assured me. My heart clenched seeing her in that modified version of my uniform - the skirted Crimson Thunder suit making her look both fierce and impossibly young at the same time.

Harley moved to flank her sister, Michelle's Violet Thunder power adapting to her smaller frame in a similar style. They stood together like they'd been doing this for years, not minutes. Training kicking in despite the circumstances.

"Touching," the Death Ranger's voice dripped with mockery. "The next generation of Thunder Rangers. But tell me, children... has Daddy taught you how to handle this?"

He thrust his hand toward a nearby building, death energy crackling through the air. Civilians screamed as the structure began to crumble.

"Harley, force field!" I shouted, knowing Michelle had trained her in defensive techniques. "Arissa, help me clear the area!"

My daughters moved without hesitation, Harley's Violet Thunder powers creating a barrier while Arissa and I rushed to evacuate the civilians. The Celtic Rangers materialized nearby, their ancient magic already working to contain the Death Ranger's corruption.

"Kim, Rocky - get those people clear!" I called out, watching Harley strain to maintain her force field as debris rained down. Her power was strong, but raw, untested.

"You can't protect everyone," the Death Ranger taunted, gathering more corrupted energy. "Not the civilians, not your precious daughters, and certainly not my Michelle."

"She's not yours," Arissa's voice carried steel as she finished evacuating her section. "She's our mom."

The Death Ranger's attention snapped to her, and my heart stopped. "Brave words from a child playing dress-up in Daddy's colors."

"We're not playing," Harley shot back, dropping her force field now that the civilians were clear. She moved to stand beside her sister, their Thunder powers crackling in sync.

"Girls," I started, but they were already moving - executing the combination attack they'd practiced countless times in training, but now with real power behind it. Crimson and Violet energy spiraled together, catching the Death Ranger off guard.

He staggered back, actually seeming surprised by their coordinated assault. "Well," he recovered quickly, "perhaps this will be more interesting than I thought."

"Thunder Staff!" my daughters called in unison, their weapons materializing with a confidence that made my chest tighten with both pride and fear.

The Death Ranger blocked Arissa's first strike, but Harley's follow-up attack forced him to dodge, creating an opening her sister immediately exploited. Their teamwork was flawless - years of training together showing in every move.

"The children have teeth," he mocked, though I caught something else in his voice. Uncertainty? "But you're still just cubs playing at being warriors."

"Crimson Thunder Blaster!" Arissa called out, switching tactics as Harley's Thunder Staff kept him engaged.

"Violet Wind Whip!" Harley's secondary weapon crackled with energy, forcing the Death Ranger to divide his attention.

"Celtic Strike!" Saoirse and Tiernan's combined attack caught him from behind while he was focused on the girls. The ancient magic tore through his corrupted energy, making him stumble.

"Now!" I called out, channeling my own Thunder power through the Master Morpher. "Thunder family style!"

Three generations of Thunder techniques hit him simultaneously - my experience, the girls' raw power, and the Celtic Rangers' ancient magic. For a moment, it seemed like we might actually have him.

Then the temperature dropped dramatically.

The air crystallized around us, frost spreading across the pavement in unnatural patterns. The Death Ranger's corrupted energy pulsed, darker than before.

"Enough games," his voice had lost all trace of mockery. "You want to play happy families? Let me show you what real power does to families."

He thrust both hands outward, death energy spiraling toward my daughters. I moved to intercept it, but the Celtic Rangers were faster, their ancient magic creating a barrier.

"The old ways still deny you," Tiernan challenged, though I could hear the strain in his voice.

"The old ways," the Death Ranger snarled, "are about to die." His power surged again, and this time I felt it - that same energy signature he'd used when he possessed me before.



"Dad!" Arissa's warning came just as the cold started seeping into my bones. Even through the Master Morpher, I could feel him trying to take control.

"Get back!" I ordered the girls, fighting against the invasion. "All of you, get-"

But Harley and Arissa moved closer instead, their Thunder powers suddenly wrapping around me like a shield. The familiar energy of my daughters, channeled through their mother's and my powers, pushed back against his corruption.

The Death Ranger recoiled as my daughters' Thunder energy merged with mine, creating something he couldn't corrupt. Something pure, born of family bonds rather than stolen power.

"This isn't possible," he hissed, his corrupted armor crackling with unstable energy. "Those powers aren't meant to-"

"Work together like this?" Arissa's voice was steady despite her obvious exhaustion. "Guess you don't know everything about Thunder ninja techniques."

"Or about real family," Harley added, her Violet Thunder power still intertwined with her sister's Crimson energy around me.

The Death Ranger's posture shifted, and I recognized the tell - he was preparing to retreat.

"Your children may have saved you this time," his voice carried a promise of future violence.

"But what about the others? The ones trapped in my pocket dimension, growing weaker by the hour?"

He faded into shadows before we could respond, his hollow laugh echoing behind him. The temperature gradually returned to normal, though the destruction around us remained as evidence of his attack.

"Dad?" Arissa's voice shook slightly as she powered down. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I assured her, powering down as well. Both girls looked exhausted - their first morphed battle had been against one of our most dangerous enemies. "You both did amazing."

"The Thunder powers," Harley said, demorphing and leaning against her sister. "They're stronger than I expected."

"And more draining," Arissa added, though her eyes still held that analytical gleam. "But Dad, what he said about the other children getting weaker..."

"We need to get back to base," Kim cut in, already activating her communicator for teleport.

"Figure out our next move."

"Without Mia?" Rocky asked, helping clear some debris. "He said we'd need Nemesis's power."

"Then we prepare everything else," I said firmly. "So when Michelle and the others get back with the Gem, we're ready to move immediately."

The teleport beam engaged, taking us back to base. Tomi's happy "Dada!" as we materialized helped ease some of the tension, though I couldn't shake the Death Ranger's words about the children growing weaker.



Now we just had to wait for Michelle to return - and hope whatever happened in Universe D had given us an advantage.

"The girls need to rest," Kim said, watching Harley and Arissa try to hide their exhaustion. "First morphed battle takes a lot out of you, especially against an enemy that powerful."

"We're fine," Harley protested, but her voice betrayed her fatigue.

I picked up Tomi from Aisha, nodding my thanks. "Kim's right. You both need to recover your energy. We don't know when we'll need to fight again."

"But the other children-" Arissa started.

"Are counting on us to be at full strength when we make our move," I finished. "You've proven yourselves as Rangers. Now prove you can make tactical decisions."

The Celtic Rangers moved to their meditation position, still focusing on maintaining their connection to the children's life force. Billy was already back at his equipment, analyzing data from the battle.

"Dad?" Harley's voice was quieter now. "Do you think Mom will be mad? About the powers?"

I looked at my daughters - new Rangers born from necessity, just like their parents had been. "She'll understand. Sometimes being a parent means making hard choices."

"And sometimes," Aisha added carefully, "being a Ranger means trusting your team. All of your team."

Harley met her eyes for a long moment before nodding slightly. It wasn't forgiveness, but it was a start.

Once the girls had gone upstairs to rest, Rocky approached me, tension radiating from every movement.

"You know I love her. Blood or not, she is my daughter," Rocky said, his voice tight with emotion.

"She doesn't see it that way," I shifted Tomi in my arms, keeping my voice level. "And she's almost thirteen. She can make these decisions for herself."

Rocky scoffed, bitter anger breaking through. "You and Michelle must be loving this. Ever since Michelle admitted Harley was your daughter and not mine, you've both been trying to erase me from her life. I guess you win."

"Oh, step off, Rocky," I fought to keep my temper in check, conscious of Tomi watching us with those big blue eyes. "I was always willing to co-parent with you. I was willing to do anything as long as it was in Harley's best interest. Forcing her to have a relationship with you that she doesn't want isn't even close to her best interest."

"Don't talk to me about her best interest," Rocky stepped closer, but Kim moved between us. "You weren't there for the first seven years of her life."

"Because I didn't know," I reminded him, my voice sharp despite Tomi's presence. "Michelle didn't tell either of us the truth back then. But the moment I found out-"

"The moment you found out, you started trying to replace me!"

"No," I cut him off. "The moment I found out, I started trying to be there for my daughter while respecting the relationship she had with you. You're the one who started pulling away when she needed you most. When you started building your new life with Aisha-"

"Don't bring my fiancée into this," Rocky warned.

"Why not? Isn't that what this is really about? You've been so focused on your future with Aisha and Tam that Harley felt pushed aside. That's not on me, Rocky. That's not on Michelle. That's on you."

The tension in the room was suffocating. Billy and the Celtic Rangers pretended to be absorbed in their work, while Kim kept her position between us, ready to intervene if needed.

"You don't get to judge my choices," Rocky's voice was dangerously low.

"No," I agreed. "But Harley does. And she has."

"I'm sure she had no help from you in that judgment," Rocky shot back, his voice bitter.

"Actually, she didn't," I shifted Tomi as she started to fuss, sensing the tension. "Michelle and I encouraged her to get to know Aisha and Tam better. She didn't want to. And do I need to remind you that when you found out the truth, you tried to keep Harley from me unless I agreed to keep her away from Michelle?"

Rocky's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Because she lied about the paternity of our daughter. She is a selfish person not capable of being a good mother. Harley would have been better off if you took her and left Michelle, but you let yourself get roped in by her again."

The accusation against Michelle made my blood boil. I handed Tomi to Kim before I did something I'd regret.

"Listen carefully," I kept my voice low, controlled. "You don't get to question Michelle's ability as a mother. Not when I see how much all three of our daughters love and trust her. Not when I watch her tear herself apart trying to protect them every single day."

"She-"

"No, you're going to hear this," I cut him off. "Michelle made a mistake years ago. One mistake, born out of fear and trauma that none of us fully understood at the time. But she's spent every day since then trying to make things right. Meanwhile, you've spent years trying to punish her for it, using Harley as a weapon."

"That's not-"

"It is. And the worst part? You're so focused on hurting Michelle that you can't see how much you're hurting Harley in the process."

The Celtic Rangers had stopped pretending to work, watching the confrontation with obvious concern. Billy moved closer to his equipment, probably ready to teleport us apart if needed.

"One mistake? You must not be able to count. Michelle has made way more than that," Rocky countered, his voice dripping with disdain.

"And she is trying to atone for all of them," I shot back, my patience wearing thin. "She is growing as a person. Michelle isn't the woman you knew anymore - she's an amazing person who's finally able to be who she truly is without you or RJ trying to make her fit into a box she doesn't belong in."

The truth of it hit home - this wasn't just about Harley. This was about Rocky's inability to accept that Michelle had become someone stronger, someone who didn't need his approval or fit his expectations anymore.

"The person she 'truly is' seems to change depending on which man she's with," Rocky sneered.

Kim stepped forward, Tomi still in her arms. "That's enough, Rocky. We have children missing, including your stepdaughter. This isn't the time."

"The person she 'truly is' is someone that just wanted to be loved and was willing to cram herself into a box to be loved," I said, years of watching Michelle struggle with others' expectations fueling my words. "The difference between me and you and RJ is that I never had a box for her to fit in. I let her be Michelle, and I love her. All of her. I never tried to make her give up her career and play housewife like you did."

The truth of it hung heavy in the air. Michelle - brilliant, fierce, complex Michelle - had spent years trying to reshape herself to meet others' expectations. Until she finally found the freedom to be herself, all of herself, without compromise.

"You think you know her so well," Rocky started, but I cut him off.

"I know she's out there right now, in another dimension, fighting to save children - including your stepdaughter. While you're here, trying to rehash old grievances instead of focusing on the mission. And yes, I know her in ways you can't comprehend."

"I am trying to save my daughter... Harley... from you and Michelle," Rocky said, his voice hard with conviction.

"Save her?" My laugh held no humor. "From what? From having a mother who would die to protect her? From having a father who accepts her exactly as she is? The only person Harley needs saving from is you - the man who keeps trying to force her to be the daughter he imagined instead of loving the daughter she actually is."

The temperature in the room seemed to drop, but this time it wasn't from the Death Ranger. This was years of tension finally breaking through.

"Hunter," Kim warned softly, but I wasn't done.

"You want to know why Harley chose us? Because we never asked her to choose. You did that. Every time you attacked her mother, every time you tried to control her relationships, every time you put your new family ahead of her needs - you made that choice for her."

Rocky took a step forward, fists clenched. "You have no idea what it's like to raise a child for seven years, love them with everything you have, only to find out-"

"That they're not biologically yours?" I cut him off. "No, I don't. But I do know what it's like to find out you have a daughter you never knew about. To want to make up for seven years of lost time while trying not to disrupt the life she already has. To watch her hurt because the man who raised her suddenly started treating her differently once he knew the truth."

"I never-"

"Never what? Never made her feel like she wasn't enough? Never made her feel like she had to compete with Tam for your attention? Never made her feel guilty for wanting to know me?"

Billy cleared his throat. "Guys, the energy readings are spiking again. The Death Ranger-"

"Is out there somewhere," I finished, forcing myself to focus. "With four kids who need us to get our heads in the game. So either help us find them, or step aside. Because right now, that's all that matters."

"Fine, this isn't over," Rocky mumbled, the threat clear in his voice.

"It never is with you," I sighed as I took Tomi back from Kim. "I'm going to feed Tomi. I'll be back."

My youngest daughter snuggled against my chest as I carried her toward the kitchen, her presence helping to calm the anger still simmering beneath my surface. Sometimes it was hard to believe this was my life now - three daughters, a wife I loved more than anything, and endless complications from the past that never seemed to fully resolve.

I settled Tomi into her high chair, pulling out some of the chicken and vegetables I had prepared earlier. Watching Tomi happily tackle her lunch, I couldn't help but think about the other children - trapped somewhere between dimensions, their parents sick with worry. Whatever issues Rocky and I had, whatever drama still lingered, it had to wait.

Right now, we had kids to save. And somewhere in another dimension, my wife was fighting to make that possible.

I was watching Tomi eat when Kim came into the room. "You ok?"

"Yeah," I sighed, wiping some sweet potato from Tomi's chin. "Just worried about Michelle. About all of them."

"She can handle herself," Kim said, leaning against the counter. "And she's got Jason with her."

"It's not that," I admitted, watching Tomi methodically demolish her lunch. "She's face to face with another version of me. One who went dark, who became everything we fight against. I know what that does to her - seeing any version of me corrupted."

"Because of what happened when the Death Ranger possessed you?"

"Because she believes in me. In who I am. Every time she faces a darker version..." I trailed off, remembering the fear in her eyes when the Death Ranger had taken control of me.

"Hunter," Kim's voice was gentle but firm. "Michelle knows who you are. The real you. Whatever twisted version of you she's facing in Universe D, it doesn't change that."

"I know," I handed Tomi another piece of chicken. "But after everything with Rocky just now... sometimes I wonder if he's right. If I'm just another man trying to shape her into what I want."

"Are you serious?" Kim actually laughed. "Hunter, you're the only man in her life who's ever let her just be herself. The rest of us have watched her bloom since she's been with you. Even Jason says she's finally the Michelle she was always meant to be."

Tomi chose that moment to proudly show me her half-eaten vegetables, momentarily lightening the mood.

"You know what the difference is?" Kim continued, watching me clean Tomi's face. "You don't love Michelle despite who she is. You love her because of who she is. All of her - the warrior, the mother, the celebrity, even the parts of herself she used to try to hide."

"She never had to hide anything from me," I said softly, remembering how different that made me from the others. Where they'd tried to pull her away from her entertainment career, I'd always supported her music and acting. I understood it wasn't just what she did - it was part of who she was, had been since she was ten years old.

"Exactly," Kim smiled. "And that's why Harley chose you too. You let both of them be exactly who they are."

The next few hours dragged by slowly. We took shifts monitoring Billy's equipment while the Celtic Rangers maintained their connection to the children's life force. Arissa and Harley rested, recovering their strength for whatever came next. I split my time between checking on them and keeping Tomi occupied, trying not to count the minutes since Michelle and the others had left.

"Dad?" Arissa appeared in the doorway, looking more refreshed. "Any word from Mom yet?"

"Not yet, sweetheart. But she'll be back soon."

I hoped I sounded more confident than I felt.

"Dad?" Arissa appeared in the doorway, looking more refreshed. "Any word from Mom yet?"

"Not yet, sweetheart. But she'll be back soon."

"I've been thinking," she said, that familiar analytical look crossing her face. "About what the Death Ranger said regarding the children's life force growing weaker. If we combine what we know about his death energy with the Celtic Rangers' ability to sense life force..."

She trailed off as a familiar energy signature filled the room. The dimensional portal was opening.

"Everyone, positions!" I called out, shifting Tomi to Kim while Harley appeared at her sister's side. The girls moved instinctively into defensive stances, their new morphers glinting on their wrists.

But it was Michelle who emerged first, followed by Jason, RJ, and Mia with Kaya at her heels. They looked battle-worn, and something in Michelle's eyes told me they'd faced more than just a simple retrieval mission.

"Did you get it?" Billy asked immediately.

RJ held up a wrapped bundle, his hands trembling slightly. "We got it. But we weren't the only ones in Universe D."

Michelle's eyes found mine, then narrowed slightly as she caught the gleam of unfamiliar technology on our daughters' wrists.

"We will talk later," I said, recognizing that look in her eyes. "First, what happened? I know the Death Ranger was headed to Universe D too to look for you."

"Oh, he found us," Mia said as she picked up Kaya, the guardian cat still bristling from whatever they'd encountered. "And apparently, he's not a fan of his wife remarrying Jason in any universe."

Michelle moved to hug our daughters, her embrace lingering a moment longer than usual. Whatever had happened in Universe D had shaken her, though she was trying not to show it.

"The Empress helped us," she said finally, pulling back to look at the girls. "Even though... even though it meant helping us trap her Hunter's soul forever."

"That couldn't have been easy for her," I said quietly, understanding the weight of such a choice.

"No," Michelle's voice was soft. "It wasn't. But she made the right choice. Just like we have to now."

"We managed to locate the pocket dimension, but it's protected by death energy..." Saoirse started, her Celtic powers still pulsing faintly as she maintained the connection.

"...so you need me to get through it. Now you trust me enough to let me help," Mia's voice dripped with sarcasm as Kaya jumped from her arms.

"Mia..." Michelle's warning tone was familiar - the one she used when they didn't have time for attitude.

"Yeah, yeah. Fill me in," Mia rolled her eyes, moving toward the Celtic Rangers.

"While they do that," Michelle's eyes locked onto mine, "we need to talk... now."

I swallowed hard. After everything that had happened with the Death Ranger's attack, I knew giving the girls powers had been the right call. But trying to explain that to my wife, who had been very clear about waiting until they were older... I handed Tomi to Kim and followed Michelle toward the study, feeling like I was walking to my own execution.

Michelle

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I waited until Hunter closed the study door behind us before turning to face him. The familiar weight of exhaustion from dimensional travel and battle pressed down on me, but that wasn't important right now.

"Morphers," I said quietly, trying to keep my voice steady. "You gave our daughters morphers."

"Michelle-"

"We agreed to wait. We agreed to let them have normal childhoods for as long as possible." The image of the Empress's face when she talked about her Harlyn flashed through my mind. "What happened?"

"The Death Ranger attacked," Hunter's voice was calm, reasonable - which only irritated me more. "He was trying to possess me again. The girls... they saved me. Their Thunder powers created some kind of shield."

I closed my eyes, remembering when Hunter had been possessed and how awful that had been. "Start from the beginning. Tell me everything."

I was trying to allow the logic to settle in, but I was so furious. I had specifically told the girls no. They were too young. Hunter had decided this without me, made this massive parenting decision while I was literally in another dimension.

"Billy had been working on a Master Morpher for me," Hunter started explaining. "Like yours, like Tommy's. When the Death Ranger attacked-"

"Stop," I cut him off, opening my eyes to glare at him. "You're telling me Billy knew about this? Had been planning for this?"

"Michelle-"

"No, I want to know how long this has been in the works behind my back. Because I remember being very clear about waiting until they were older. I remember us agreeing on that."

"We did agree," Hunter's voice remained frustratingly calm. "But circumstances changed. When he attacked, when he threatened our girls directly..."

"So you just decided to override everything we discussed? Everything we agreed on about protecting their childhood?"

"Their childhood?" Hunter's voice finally showed some heat. "Michelle, our daughters haven't had a normal childhood since the moment the Death Ranger appeared. Arissa's been analyzing battle strategies since this started. Harley's been training harder than ever. Even Tomi senses when something's wrong."

"That doesn't mean-"

"They needed to be able to defend themselves," he cut me off. "You weren't here. You didn't see how close he came to-" His voice caught slightly. "He was going to take them, Michelle. Just like the other children."

The fear in his voice hit me hard, making me remember the Empress's face when she talked about protecting her daughter. But still...

"You should have waited for me," I said, though some of the anger was fading. "This wasn't a decision you should have made alone."

"You're right," he admitted. "But you should have seen them, Michelle. They were ready. They've been ready. And they fought him off - together, as a team. Just like we used to."

I sank into the study's armchair, suddenly exhausted. "The Thunder powers?"

"Crimson and Violet. They each gravitated to their styles naturally, just like they were meant to."

I sighed, "I still don't like it and I wish to the Gods you would have waited to discuss this with me, but what's done is done."

"I know you're angry," Hunter moved closer, his voice softening. "But after what happened in Universe D... you must understand why I couldn't risk leaving them defenseless."

The memory of the Death Ranger's corrupted energy, the way he'd tried to tempt the Empress back to darkness, made me shudder slightly. "He came here? While I was gone?"

"Full attack in the middle of town," Hunter confirmed. "The girls handled themselves better than I could have hoped. But Michelle..." He knelt in front of my chair, taking my hands. "What happened over there? What aren't you telling me?"

I looked into his eyes - warm, loving, so different from the hollow darkness I'd seen in his counterpart. "The Empress... she had to watch her Hunter become something terrible. Had to choose between the man she loved and doing what was right."

"Are you ok?"

I fell forward into his arms, all the fear and tension from Universe D finally breaking through. "I can't lose you. I love you, Hunter. You're my everything."

He held me close, one hand stroking my hair the way he always did when I needed grounding. "Hey, I'm not going anywhere. I promise."

"You didn't see him there," I whispered against his chest. "What Drakkon's technology did to him... how it twisted everything he was, everything they had together. And the way he looked at her, like she'd betrayed him just by choosing to live, to move forward..."

"I'm right here," Hunter's voice was firm, steady. "The real me. The one who loves you, who loves our girls, who's never going to let some corrupted version of myself tear our family apart."

The familiar scent of him, the strength in his arms, helped push back the memories of that cold, hollow voice in Universe D. But we couldn't stay here, taking comfort in each other. Not with children's lives at stake.

"We have to get those kids. If Mia can get us into the pocket dimension..." I started, pulling back reluctantly from Hunter's embrace.

"Not that easy," Mia's voice cut through as she entered without knocking - as usual. "He moved them. We're back to square one. When the Celtics locate them again, we move."

"He must have realized we were on to him somehow," Kaya added from her perch on Mia's shoulder, her tail twitching with agitation.

I shared a look with Hunter. "The attack in town... it wasn't just about the girls, was it? He was buying time to move the children."

"Which means he knows we have the Gem," Hunter's voice carried the same realization. "He's going to make this as difficult as possible."

"Of course he is," Mia's voice dripped with sarcasm. "Because why make anything easy when you can be a dramatic death-powered pain in the ass?"

My phone's vibration cut through the tension. Jeremy. In all the chaos, I'd completely forgotten about my non-Ranger life. I put it on speaker. "Hey!"

"Mich? Oh bloody hell, where have you been?" Jeremy's worried voice filled the room.

"Just been busy. You know how it is. Life of an international celebrity," I tried to keep my voice light, casual.

"So did you not hear? There was some sort of attack in town. There's rumours of Power Rangers being seen. Can you bloody believe it? Fucking Power Rangers! Like from comic books. Not sure what actually happened but the town has gone mad. The Gardai are saying it may have been a terrorist attack."

I caught Hunter's eye, taking a steadying breath. "Oh wow... yeah, I'm fine. Just out here at home. Guess I'm far enough from town I didn't notice anything. Are you ok?"

"Aye, fine. Just don't know what the hell is going on out there."

"Well, stay in for now until the Garda figure it out. I have to make some calls, but I'll check in later, love you."

"Love you too."

As I hung up, the weight of my double life pressed down harder than usual. "I hate this."

Hunter's hand on my shoulder was warm, grounding. "I know, babe. I know."

The lies never got easier, even after all these years. Especially to people like Jeremy, who'd been there for me through so much.

We headed downstairs and found Kim, Jason, RJ, and Rocky standing around the kitchen counter eating while we waited for word to move out. Something felt off about the atmosphere, but I was too drained from Universe D to analyze it.

"You doing ok?" Jason asked me, his eyes carrying that brotherly concern I'd come to rely on over the years.

I nodded, "I'm fine. Are you?"

Jason nodded, but I could see the worry lines around his eyes. His son was still out there, trapped in some pocket dimension with the other children. The forced casualness of everyone eating sandwiches while we waited felt surreal - like we were all pretending this was just another mission, not our children's lives at stake.

My eyes drifted to where Tomi was contentedly playing with her toys in her playpen, blissfully unaware of everything happening around her. Or what her older sisters had faced today - a thought that still made my stomach clench.

"MJ," RJ's voice was soft as he moved closer, that old familiar tone making Hunter tense beside me. "Can we talk for a minute? About what happened in Universe D?"

"Whatever you need to say to my wife, you can say it here," Hunter's voice carried a warning edge.

I touched Hunter's arm gently. "It's fine. RJ's just worried about his girls."

"It's not just that," RJ stepped closer, his hand reaching for my shoulder in that casual way he used to have with me. "After everything we saw there, everything with the Empress and her Hunter... I just wanted to make sure you're okay. I know how hard that must have been for you, MJ."

The old nickname hung in the air between us, loaded with history. Hunter's entire body went rigid beside me, and I could feel the temperature in the room drop - though this time it wasn't from the Death Ranger.

"I appreciate the concern," I said carefully, stepping back from RJ's reach.

"And her name is Michelle," Hunter added, his voice carrying that dangerous edge I hadn't heard in years.

"Right, sorry... Michelle," RJ amended, though something in his tone suggested the slip wasn't entirely accidental. "I just... after seeing what that version of Hunter became, I wanted to make sure-"

"That what?" Hunter cut in. "That your ex-wife is okay? That you can swoop in and play protector? As if you can make up for when you abandoned her before?"

"Hunter," I warned softly, feeling the tension building. We didn't need this right now, not with children's lives at stake.

"No, let him speak," RJ's stance shifted slightly. "Clearly something's bothering you."

"Damn right... you try to act like this high and mighty zen master, but it's all performative, just like your 'love' for Michelle was. When she lost your child... when she needed you most you

abandoned her in the hospital," Hunter's words hit like physical blows, bringing up memories I'd tried so hard to bury.

"You have no idea what that was like," RJ's calm facade cracked slightly. "Losing Aubrey-"

"Don't," I cut in sharply, my voice shaking.

The kitchen went deadly quiet. Kim had moved to block the doorway where Harley and Arissa might hear, while Jason looked ready to physically separate everyone if needed.

"MJ," RJ's voice softened. "I never meant-"

"But you did," Hunter's arm went around my waist, steadying me. "You left her alone to deal with that grief. To rebuild herself without you. So don't stand there acting concerned about her now."

"I'm not trying to defend what I did, but regardless of what you think there was a time I did love MJ and I always cared about her," RJ said.

"Enough with the fucking nickname. Her fucking name is Michelle," Hunter snapped, and before I could react, his fist connected with RJ's jaw.

"Hunter!" I grabbed his arm as Jason jumped between them. Kim pulled me back while Rocky moved to help restrain RJ, who was already moving to retaliate.

"Both of you, stop!" I demanded, my voice carrying every ounce of command I'd learned as a Ranger Trainer. "We have children missing, and you're acting like teenagers?"

The sound of Tomi starting to cry cut through the tension like a knife.

I moved to pick up my daughter, her little arms wrapping around my neck as she sniffled. The familiar weight of her helped ground me, remind me what was really important right now.

"I said what I have to say. We're done here Wolf 'Master,'" Hunter's voice was cold as he wrapped his arms around both me and Tomi, making it clear where his priorities lay.

The protectiveness in his embrace, the way he positioned himself between me and RJ - it should have irritated me, but after everything I'd seen in Universe D, it just made me grateful. Grateful that my Hunter was still himself, still the man who loved us enough to fight for us, not try to control us.

RJ's jaw was already starting to bruise, but the look in his eyes suggested this wasn't over. Not by a long shot.

"Everyone out," Kim ordered, her leadership voice brooking no argument. "Billy's lab. Now. Michelle, you stay here with Tomi until she calms down."

Jason practically marched RJ out while Kim gestured for Hunter to follow. He hesitated, clearly reluctant to leave me.

"Go," I said softly. "I've got her. And we need to focus on finding those kids."

Hunter pressed a kiss to my temple, then one to Tomi's head, before following the others. The kitchen felt suddenly quiet, just me and my baby girl who was gradually settling down in my arms.

"Dada," she whimpered, and my heart clenched.

"I know, baby," I bounced her gently. "Daddy's just worried about a lot of things right now." Like his corrupted counterpart, like our older daughters having powers, like the fact that RJ still couldn't seem to let go of the past.

The sound of footsteps made me tense, but it was just Arissa in the doorway, her new morpher catching the light.

"Mom?" Arissa's voice was careful. "Are you okay?"

I looked at my oldest daughter - so perceptive, so much like me in ways that sometimes scared me. "I'm fine, sweetheart. Just... a lot happening."

"We heard," she said quietly, moving closer. "About Aubrey. I didn't know... I mean, Harley never told me you lost a baby."

My breath caught. Of course they'd heard - these walls weren't exactly soundproof. I shifted Tomi to my hip.

"It was a long time ago," I managed. "Before you, before your dad and I... it's not something I talk about."

"Is that why you were so against us getting powers?" she asked, that analytical mind of hers making connections. "Because you've lost a child before?"

I glanced at the morpher on her wrist - still so new, still untested in my eyes. "That's part of it. But your father seems to think you're ready. Both of you."

"We are ready, Mom," Arissa said with a confidence that reminded me so much of Hunter. "The Thunder powers... they feel right, like they were always meant to be ours."

"You haven't seen us morphed yet," Harley added from the doorway. She'd been so quiet, I hadn't heard her approach. "But Dad says our forms adapted to us naturally."

I shifted Tomi as she reached for her sisters, remembering what Hunter had told me about their battle - how they'd worked together, how their powers had manifested. But hearing it from them, seeing the pride and determination in their eyes...

"The Crimson and Violet styles," I said softly. "You've both always been drawn to them."

"It's who we are, Mom," Harley moved to stand beside her sister. "We're Thunder ninjas. We always have been."

Looking at them standing together - Arissa's quiet strength, Harley's fierce determination - I saw echoes of Hunter and Blake, of the Thunder ninja legacy they carried. But I also saw my daughters, who'd grown up so much faster than I'd wanted them to.

"Show me," I said finally. "Show me what you can do. Let's get those kids back."

Arissa smiled and nodded as we headed down to the command center to join the others. The tension from earlier still hung in the air, made worse by the bruise forming on RJ's jaw.

"We're clearly not getting anywhere tonight," I said, assessing everyone's exhausted faces. "We need to call it and regroup in the morning."

"I'm not calling it till I have my girls back," RJ's voice was stubborn.

"You're no good to them if you don't get some rest," I countered, falling naturally into trainer mode. "None of us are."

"She's right," Aisha spoke up. "Rocky and I have a hotel nearby."

I nodded, shifting Tomi who was starting to doze. "Kim and Jase, you can take our guest room."

"I'll stay down here and keep monitoring," Billy said from his station. "I'll alert everyone if anything changes."

"You'll need someone to take shifts with you so you can rest too," RJ added, pointedly not looking at Hunter. "I'll stay and help monitor."

"Good, now we have a plan," I said, taking charge before anyone could object. "Mia, head back to the O'Sullivans and check in on Rachel. Riordans, contact us if you discover anything."

Everyone nodded, the exhaustion of dimensional travel and battle finally catching up. Tomorrow would be soon enough to deal with everything else - the personal drama, the new powers, the lingering tensions. Tonight, we all just needed to breathe.

As everyone filed out, Hunter's hand found the small of my back, a gesture both protective and possessive after everything that had happened. I could feel him watching RJ settle in with Billy, clearly unhappy about the arrangement but too tired to argue.

"Girls, bed," I said firmly, noting how Arissa and Harley were trying to linger, probably hoping to show me their powers. "There will be time for everything else tomorrow."

"But Mom-" Harley started.

"Listen to your mother," Hunter backed me up. "You both used a lot of energy today. Rest while you can."

As we headed upstairs, Tomi already asleep against my shoulder, I caught Kim's knowing look. She'd seen the whole dynamic play out - the ex-husband trying to reassert himself, the current husband marking his territory, the daughters caught in the middle of all this complicated history.

Once in our room, after getting Tomi settled between us in the bed, I turned to Hunter. "We need to talk about everything that happened today. All of it."

"The powers or the punch?" His attempt at humor fell flat as I gave him a look. "Sorry. I know I shouldn't have lost my temper."

"He was baiting you," I said softly, watching Tomi sleep peacefully between us. "The nickname, the concerned ex-husband act... he knew exactly what he was doing."

"I just..." Hunter's hand found mine across the pillow, his voice tight with old anger. "Hearing him call you 'MJ' like nothing's changed, like he didn't abandon you when you needed him most... like he didn't try to force you to be someone you're not..."

"Hunter-"

"You deserve better than that," he said quietly. "You always did. And watching him try to play the concerned ex, acting like he has any right to worry about you after what he put you through..."

I squeezed his hand, understanding the protective rage that had driven that punch. Hunter had been there after RJ left, had seen firsthand how broken I'd been. He was the one that stopped me from leveling Downtown LA during the LA Incident. He'd never tried to change me, never asked me to be anything but myself.

"You saved me," I said softly. "Not just from myself that day in LA, but from becoming someone I wasn't meant to be. RJ wanted the perfect zen master's wife, Rocky wanted the perfect housewife... but you just wanted me."

"Because you're perfect exactly as you are," Hunter's thumb traced patterns on my palm. "Fierce, complicated, sometimes terrifying," his lips quirked slightly, "but always, completely you."

"And now our daughters have our powers," I said, watching Tomi's peaceful sleep between us. "The Crimson and Violet Thunder."

"They're ready, Michelle," his voice was gentle but firm. "I know we wanted to wait, to let them have normal childhoods, but... they're our daughters. Nothing about their lives was ever going to be normal."

I thought about the morphers I'd seen on their wrists, remembered how naturally they'd both taken to their respective Thunder styles in training. "Tell me about watching them morph for the first time."

"Tell me about watching them morph for the first time."

Hunter's expression softened, pride mixing with something deeper. "It was like... like watching the power recognize them. The way the Crimson energy just wrapped around Arissa, how natural the Violet looked on Harley. They didn't hesitate, didn't falter. They just... knew."

"Like the power was always meant for them," I said quietly, remembering how it felt the first time I accessed the Violet Thunder power.

"Exactly. And when they fought together..." he paused, his hand tightening slightly around mine. "They moved like we used to, like Blake and I did. Perfect sync, covering each other's weaknesses, amplifying each other's strengths."

I watched his face in the dim light, saw the complex mix of emotions there - pride in our daughters' strength, fear for their safety, determination to protect them while letting them grow.

"I'm still not happy you did this without me," I said finally. "But I understand why you did."

"I know," he shifted carefully, mindful of Tomi between us. "And I promise, next time there's a major parenting decision involving Ranger powers, I'll wait until you're back from other dimensions."

I smiled despite myself. "Hopefully there won't be a next time."

Hunter sighed, his expression growing serious. "How are you? I know you haven't seen RJ in over 15 years."

I nodded, feeling old memories stir. "Yeah. It's weird. It has stirred up old pain, but it's not like I never think about him. I wrote songs about him. Every time I perform 'God Takes Care of Your Kind' I think of him." The song had poured out of me the day after he served me the annulment papers, all my anger and hurt crystallized into lyrics that still resonated with audiences years later.

Hunter smirked. "I like that song."

I laughed quietly, remembering the particularly biting verses. "Only because of that one line about his... shortcomings."

Hunter chuckled softly. "Exactly."

I rolled my eyes. "RJ is my past, just like Rocky is. You're my everything. We're going to get those kids back, defeat the Death Ranger, and get our lives back."

Hunter leaned carefully over Tomi to kiss me. "Count on it. I love you."

"I love you too," I said as I turned out the light.

"Death's Reminder"

Sleep had been elusive all night, my mind too alert for any sign of trouble. I'd stationed Kaya in Rachel's nursery - a cat watching over her drew far less suspicion than her Godmother hovering all night. At least it had been quiet, no sign of the Death Ranger's corrupted energy.

The sound of movement downstairs finally drew me from my restless vigil. Kaya padded into my room, a silent confirmation that everyone was up and Rachel was safe. I scooped her up, drawing comfort from her familiar warmth as we headed down to join the O'Sullivans.

"Good morning!" Amber's voice was impossibly cheerful, her appearance somehow flawless despite the early hour. Sometimes I wondered if my friend was actually human.

"Morning. Need coffee," I managed to grunt, still not fully awake.

Amber's laugh was light, understanding. "Working on it."

Ellie bounded over, tail wagging enthusiastically as she looked up at me and Kaya. My guardian cat shot me a withering look that clearly said 'don't you dare put me down near that creature.'

"Hey Ellie," I reached down to pat her head, carefully keeping Kaya elevated.

"Think Kaya and Ellie will ever be friends?" Amber asked, passing me a blessed cup of coffee.

I chuckled, watching Kaya's regal displeasure. "Not likely. Kaya doesn't have friends. Sometimes I wonder if she even likes me."

I could feel Kaya's frustration at having to maintain her 'normal cat' act in front of Amber and Trev, especially when there was so much we needed to discuss.

"She reminds me a lot of Thara. Same Catitude," Trev laughed.

Kaya's expression promised retribution for comparing her to a regular housecat. I quickly changed the subject before my guardian decided to forget her cover.

"So Amber, how are things coming for the launch next month?"

"Right on schedule. We'll be ready for London Fashion Week in plenty of time," Amber's face lit up with excitement.

Watching my best friend's dreams finally taking shape made me even more determined. The Death Ranger wasn't going to destroy this for her - not her career, not her family, not anything. I'd make sure of that.

"So what are you doing today?" Amber asked, pulling me from my dark thoughts.

I shrugged, maintaining casual. "Michelle said something about wanting me to listen to some songs she's been working on."

"You and Mich almost seem friendly these days," Trev said over his tea.

I rolled my eyes and scoffed, keeping up our usual dynamic. "No fucking way! She happens to be the mother of my god child and we share a profession. That's it."

"The art of frenemies," Trev laughed.

"Well, if you have time for lunch let me know," Amber offered.

I smirked. "Why? So you can try to sell me on leaving New York for Cork permanently?"

"I mean, it makes SO much sense!" Amber exclaimed, her enthusiasm familiar.

"I'm a city girl."

"Cork is a city," Amber countered.

I shook my head. "I'll think about it. As for lunch, maybe. I'll let you know. How's my goddaughter this morning?"

Trevor handed Rachel to me. "Absolutely perfect as always."

Looking down at the sweet infant in my arms, I felt that fierce protectiveness surge. "Yes, she is. She's so beautiful." The Death Ranger would never touch her - I'd make sure of that.

"I'm going to take her out back to Mam's cottage," Trev said, taking her back.

I kissed her head, trying to keep my worry hidden. "You be good for your Mamo."

Trev smiled. "She always is."

"I have to get ready for work. Want to come chat while I do my makeup?" Amber asked.

I nodded and followed her to her makeup room. Ellie curled up at Amber's feet while Kaya claimed the window sill, maintaining her regal disdain for the fluffy white dog.

"Are you ok Mia? You've seemed worried lately," Amber said, studying me in her vanity mirror.

I sighed, crafting a truth wrapped in omission. "Just... Mich. She's a lot and I've been spending so much time with her lately so I can see Arissa. And Mich is hard to take on a good day. She's been super stressed with her schedule being as crazy as it's been. And her ex-husband is in town."

"Jon?" Amber asked, pausing with her mascara.

"Actually Rocky and RJ. Rocky came to see Harley and RJ just happened to be in Ireland and let Mich know he was in town. She hasn't seen him since he gave her annulment papers so it's been tense," I explained, sticking as close to truth as I could.

"No. Way. Two of her ex-husbands? Yeah, that would stress anyone out! How is Hunter handling it?" Amber asked.

"As well as Mich. He hates Rocky for upsetting Harley. He hates RJ for how he treated Mich when they were married," I said.

"Upsetting Harley?" Amber's curiosity was piqued.

I nodded, carefully navigating the complicated family dynamics. "Yeah... he came to see Harley because she refuses to visit him. She feels like Rocky chose his new fiancée and stepdaughter over her. She wants him to leave her alone, but he won't."

"Oof, that's rough," Amber replied, blending her eyeshadow. "But I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to meet RJ. The man that asked Mich for an annulment... I am so curious."

I laughed, thinking of the Wolf Master's carefully cultivated image. "He's... interesting. Think Zen hippie meets tech guru."

"Weird combination."

"Yeah, but so is our resident tech fairy," I replied.

Amber laughed. "True. I bet Livvie would like him."

"Someone Michelle doesn't like? Yeah. Probably."

Amber paused, considering. "Ever notice how most of us women aren't terribly fond of Michelle? It's the guys that like her. Except Hal."

"Oh, I've noticed. It's like she has Jeremy, Trevor, and Hunter under some kind of spell," I nodded.

Kaya's attempt to cover her derisive scoff with a sneeze was almost comical. Sometimes my guardian cat's opinions were far too obvious.

"OHHHH! You should invite RJ to join us all at the Cantina!" Amber's eyes lit up with mischief as she applied her lipstick.

I laughed, though the idea held a certain appeal. "Do you want Michelle to kill me?"

Amber's grin turned positively wicked. "Tell her it was my idea. I just want to see her reaction when she shows up and RJ is there. Like the time she showed up at the Cantina with Ramsey just to watch Trev squirm. Give her a taste of her own medicine."

I smiled, remembering Amber telling me about that particular evening and the chaos it had caused. "And this is one of the many reasons you're my best friend. I will see what I can do."

"Perfect," Amber looked satisfied with both her makeup and her plan.

I woke up and headed downstairs, leaving Hunter sleeping peacefully with Tomi curled in his arms. The smell of coffee drew me to the kitchen, where I found RJ nursing a cup, the bruise on his jaw from Hunter's punch now a vivid purple.

"Good morning... how's that jaw?" I asked, moving to pour my own coffee.

RJ looked at me, his expression just shy of hostile. "I'll live. Hunter was way out of line."

I raised my eyebrows. "Oh, and you weren't?"

He paused, something shifting in his expression. "You know, I get that I wasn't a great husband to you, but you got your revenge."

"What are you talking about?"

"That song. 'God Takes Care of Your Kind.' You think I didn't hear it?" His glare intensified.

"That particular line?"

I couldn't hold back my smirk. "Oh... so you did hear that. Always wondered."

"Yeah, I heard it. It was a low blow," RJ said.

"The lowest," I said, pointedly glancing downward.

He glared harder. "You also know it's untrue."

"Is it? I mean, I guess it's relative and compared to... say... Hunter..."

"You really want to do this?" RJ's voice carried a warning.

I shrugged, enjoying his discomfort perhaps more than I should. "You brought it up."

"Real mature, Michelle," RJ's voice was tight. "Is this who you are now? Taking cheap shots?"

"No, this is who I've always been. You just never wanted to see it." I took a sip of my coffee.

"You wanted the perfect zen master's wife, someone to fit into your little Wolf Pride fantasy. When I wouldn't - couldn't - be that person, you walked away."

"That's not-"

"You left me alone in a hospital bed," my voice dropped low. "After we lost our daughter. Don't you dare try to rewrite that history now."

Something flickered in his eyes - regret maybe, or just discomfort at being confronted with his past actions. "I couldn't handle it."

"And I could? I had to handle it alone because you ran away. So yes, I wrote a song about you. Several actually. That's what I do - I turn pain into music. You knew that when you married me."

"I knew a lot of things when I married you," he said quietly. "I just didn't understand them."

"No, you didn't," I agreed, leaning against the counter. "You knew I was a performer, but you didn't understand what that meant. You knew I had a temper, but you thought you could zen it out of me. You knew who I was, RJ, you just didn't want who I was."

"And Hunter does?" There was something bitter in his voice.

"Hunter never tried to change me. He's never asked me to be anything other than exactly who I am." I set my coffee down. "Even when that means dealing with ex-husbands who can't seem to let go of the past."

"Speaking of letting go," RJ's eyes narrowed. "That song isn't the only thing you wrote about me. 'You Ain't Right' hit pretty hard too."

I couldn't help but smile. "That one was actually fictionalized and I didn't mention your... other shortcomings. Though I notice you didn't mention 'Remnants.' Too close to home?"

The sound of footsteps on the stairs cut off whatever he was about to say. Hunter, with Tomi in his arms.

The sound of footsteps on the stairs cut off whatever he was about to say. Hunter, with Tomi in his arms.

"Morning, baby," I said, moving to take our daughter. Hunter's eyes moved between RJ and me, assessing the tension in the room.

"Everything okay in here?" Hunter asked, his voice carefully neutral despite the way his jaw tightened at seeing RJ.

"Just discussing my musical catalogue," I said lightly, bouncing Tomi. "RJ's a fan, apparently."

"Michelle-" RJ started, but Billy's voice cut through our comms.

"Everyone to the command center. Now. The Celtic Rangers have something."

I handed Tomi back to Hunter. "Get the girls up. I'll head down."

"Be careful," Hunter said quietly, and I knew he meant more than just the immediate situation. The look RJ was giving us spoke volumes.

"Always am," I pressed a quick kiss to Hunter's lips, perhaps a bit more demonstrative than necessary, before heading toward the command center. Whatever the Celtic Rangers had found, it had to be better than this awkward kitchen confrontation.

The command center was already crowded when I arrived. Saoirse and Tiernan stood with their eyes closed, their Celtic powers creating a faint glow around them. Billy was frantically typing at his console while Kim and Jason huddled over readings.

"What have we got?" I asked, noting how RJ kept his distance as he entered behind me.

"The pocket dimension," Saoirse said, her voice strained. "We can sense it more clearly now. The children's life force signatures are weaker, but distinct."

"He's anchored the pocket dimension to a specific location in our realm," Tiernan added. "Using it as a sort of... tether."

"Where?" RJ demanded, parental fear evident in his voice.

"The old Thunder Academy grounds," Billy confirmed, studying his readings.

My heart stopped. Of course - where else would a corrupted version of Hunter create his dimensional prison? "That's not just about convenience," I said. "He's sending a message."

"To who?" Kim asked.

"To me," Hunter's voice came from the doorway. He'd gotten the girls up quickly - Arissa and Harley stood beside him, their new morphers glinting on their wrists. "He's trying to corrupt everything the Thunder ninja legacy stands for."

"How did he find the old Thunder Academy grounds? They were so hidden even Hunter and I had a hard time finding them," I said.

"Because he's been watching," Saoirse said grimly. "Following our movements, learning our secrets. When we revealed ourselves to help fight him..."

"We inadvertently led him right to it," Tiernan finished. "The ancient grounds still hold powerful magic, even in ruins. He's using that to anchor his pocket dimension."

"And the Celtic Thunder magic is amplifying his death energy," Billy added, studying his readings. "That's why the children's life force signatures are growing weaker."

I caught Hunter's eye across the room, seeing my own worry reflected there. The Death Ranger wasn't just imprisoning children - he was corrupting ancient Thunder traditions that predated even our own academy.

"The good news is that Tiernan and I are tied directly to those ruins," Saoirse explained, her Celtic powers still pulsing faintly. "Our power is connected to that sacred ground. If he's using it as a tether for his pocket dimension, we can trace that connection."

"But we still can't break through to the pocket dimension because of his death energy shield," Kim pointed out, frustration evident in her voice.

"That's where I come in," Mia announced as she descended the stairs, Kaya at her heels. Something in her stance told me she'd already left Rachel safely protected.

"Ok, so what's the plan?" Jason asked, his tactical mind already working.

The pieces were starting to come together - Celtic magic to locate them, Nemesis power to breach the death shield, and the Gem of Souls waiting to trap him. Now we just had to coordinate all of it without losing any more children's life force in the process.

"We'll need to move fast," Mia said, Kaya taking up her usual perch on her shoulder. "The longer those kids are exposed to his death energy, the weaker they get."

"We stay together," I said firmly. "We have no idea what we're walking into in that pocket dimension. The moment we breach his shield, he'll know."

"Agreed," Jason nodded. "We go in as one unit, ready to split if needed, but no one goes in alone."

Billy cleared his throat, pulling something from a secure compartment. "Speaking of being ready..." He held out what was unmistakably another Master Morpher to Aisha. "Yellow Saber-toothed Tiger and Bear power. Just in case."

Aisha's eyes widened slightly as she took it. Rocky nodded.

"Billy will open the portal then the Celtic Rangers and I breach the shield," Mia continued, "but everyone needs to be ready to move the second we're through. He'll be coming to check any disturbance in his defenses."

"And we'll be waiting," Hunter said grimly. "All of us."

I looked around the room - Rangers old and new, different powers and traditions united for one purpose. The Death Ranger might have ancient ground as his anchor, but we had something stronger: each other.

"We stay together," I said, the tactical plan forming clearly in my mind, "but we need three teams ready to split if necessary. Jason, you'll lead Kim, Rocky, and RJ. You're backup for my team if needed - that's Mia, Hunter, Saoirse, and Tiernan. We focus on the Death Ranger when he shows, keeping him away from the children."

I turned to our tech expert. "Billy, you lead Aisha, Harley, and Arissa. Your priority is getting those kids out and maintaining our exit strategy. We can't risk getting trapped in his pocket dimension."

The familiar rhythm of co-leading with Jason felt natural, like sliding back into a well-worn groove. Even after all these years, we still worked in sync, understanding the strengths and capabilities of our teams without need for explanation.

"One more thing," I said, turning to RJ. "You need to hand over the Gem of Souls to Hunter."

RJ's hand instinctively went to where he'd been keeping the wrapped crystal. "Why? I can-"

"Hunter's the only one here who's ever successfully channeled its power," I cut him off, keeping my voice professional despite the tension from our earlier confrontation. "When we used it against Lothor, it was Hunter who managed to tap into its energy. We can't risk experimenting now - not with children's lives at stake."

I could see RJ wanting to argue, probably more out of principle than actual tactical disagreement. But Jason nodded, backing me up.

"She's right. We need someone with experience handling its power. This isn't the time for trial and error."

RJ looked at the Gem, then at his daughters' photo on Billy's monitor. Finally, he held it out to Hunter. "Just... get our kids back."

Hunter took the Gem carefully, and I felt that familiar surge of energy - like the crystal recognized him somehow. "We will. All of them."

"Do we need Saturn or Purple power for this?" I asked, weighing my options. Each had their strengths - Saturn's cosmic force versus the vast array of Ranger powers my Master Morpher could access. Years of collecting purple power signatures had given me an arsenal of choices, each with its own tactical advantages.

Jason considered for a moment, his tactical mind working through the scenarios. "Saturn, for now. But keep your Master Morpher handy just in case. We might need to switch strategies depending on what we find in there."

I nodded, tucking my Master Morpher securely away while ensuring my transformation bracelet was ready. The familiar weight of both powers was reassuring - knowing I had access to either

my Sailor abilities or any of my numerous Ranger powers depending on what the situation demanded.

"Ok, ready?" Jason asked.

"Ready!" we all replied in unison.

"It's Morphin' Time! Tyrannosaurus!" Jason's voice rang out clear and strong.

"Pterodactyl!" Kim's command followed immediately.

"Triceratops!" Billy's voice echoed through the chamber.

"Saber-toothed Tiger!" Aisha's power signature activated next.

"Zeo Ranger 3, Blue!" Rocky's declaration joined the chorus.

"Thunder Storm, Ranger Form! Power of Thunder!" all five Thunder Rangers synchronized our morphing sequence.

"Jungle Beast, Spirits Unleashed!" RJ's wolf spirit manifested with his words.

"Nemesis Mystic Power, Make Up!" Mia's transformation phrase filled the air.

"Saturn Mystic Power, Make Up!" I completed the sequence.

Once transformed, Kaya assumed command of the operation center. "I'll coordinate from here. When I open the portal, you'll need to move fast. Ready, Nemesis?"

"Ready," Mia confirmed.

Kaya's paws moved with surprising precision across the control panel. The portal materialized, and immediately we felt the oppressive force of the death shield.

"Shit, that's intense," Kim said as we all instinctively stepped back.

"I got this," Mia summoned her Scythe. "Obsidian Armor!" The dark crystalline protection formed around her, beginning to absorb the shield's energy.

"Be ready, Saoirse," Tiernan called. "Once she weakens it enough..."

I watched Mia struggle against the death energy, her armor gradually breaking down the barrier.

"Just... a little... more," Mia ground out.

"NOW!" Tiernan shouted.

The Celtic Rangers raised their Thunder Staffs in perfect sync. "Celtic Thunder Blast!"

The force field shattered like dark glass, leaving the portal clear.

"Be careful. And good luck," Kaya's voice followed us as we rushed through, not knowing what twisted reality awaited us on the other side.

The pocket dimension materialized around us - a twisted version of the Celtic Thunder Academy grounds. Where the real ruins held ancient power and dignity even in decay, this version felt

wrong, corrupted. Dark energy pulsed through the stone like black veins, and the air itself seemed to resist our presence.

"The children," RJ's voice was tight with urgency. "Can you sense them?"

Saoirse and Tiernan closed their eyes, their Celtic powers reaching out. "This way," Saoirse indicated toward what had once been the main training grounds. "But their life force... it's so weak."

"He's waiting for us," Hunter said grimly, the Gem of Souls casting a faint glow through its wrapping.

"Let him wait," I replied, falling into position. "Everyone remember the plan. Stay together until we have to split. Billy's team, be ready to move the moment we locate those kids."

The ground beneath our feet trembled slightly, and that familiar cold began seeping into the air. The Death Ranger was coming - and this time, we were in his domain.

The temperature dropped further as shadows began gathering at the center of what had once been the sacred training grounds. The Death Ranger materialized slowly, almost theatrically, his corrupted armor seeming to drink in what little light remained.

"Welcome," his hollow voice echoed unnaturally in the pocket dimension. "I was wondering how long it would take you to find this place."

"Where are the children?" RJ demanded, but Jason's hand on his shoulder kept him from rushing forward.

"Safe. For now." The Death Ranger's helmet tilted slightly. "Though their life force grows weaker by the minute. Such pure energy... it feeds my power so perfectly."

"This ends now," Hunter's voice carried that dangerous edge I knew well. "You want to corrupt the Thunder legacy? You'll have to go through all of us."

"All of you?" The Death Ranger's laugh sent frost spreading across the ancient stones. "Look around. You're in my domain now. Where every shadow, every breath of air answers to my will. And you brought me such wonderful gifts - the Gem of Souls, the Celtic Rangers, and of course..." his helmet turned toward me, "my beloved Michelle."

"Oh fuck off! I'm not yours and I never will be," I growled in disgust.

The Death Ranger's laugh made my blood run cold. "We'll see."

"Enough games," Jason stepped forward, assuming his natural leadership stance. "You're outnumbered and we have ways to counter your death energy now."

"Do you?" Dark energy began swirling around him, but his confidence seemed more arrogant than tactical. "Your numbers mean nothing in this realm. Here, death itself bends to my will."

I felt Hunter tense beside me, the Gem of Souls pulsing faintly in response to the Death Ranger's corrupted power. This wasn't exactly how our enemy had planned things, but he was clearly ready to adapt, to use our presence to his advantage.

"Last chance," Hunter's voice carried warning. "Release the children."

"Why would I do that?" The Death Ranger's power crackled around him. "Their pure life force feeds my power so perfectly. And now..." his helmet turned toward our group, "I have so many more options to choose from."

The temperature dropped further as he took a battle stance, dark energy gathering around his corrupted armor. He might not have planned for this confrontation, but he certainly wasn't afraid of it.

"I am so fucking sick of you!" Mia's voice carried all her frustration as her death magic flared. "Spectral Strike!"

The attack caught him off guard, dark energy clashing with Nemesis power as he was thrown backward. I seized the opening immediately, channeling my own cosmic energy.

"Static Field!" My attack hit while he was still reeling from Mia's strike, the electromagnetic pulse disrupting his corrupted power signature. For a moment, his armor seemed to flicker, showing the vulnerability we needed.

Hunter stepped forward, the Gem beginning to resonate with the weakened death energy. But before he could act, the Death Ranger's laughter echoed through the pocket dimension.

Hunter stepped forward, the Gem beginning to resonate with the weakened death energy. But before he could act, the Death Ranger's laughter echoed through the pocket dimension.

"You think these parlor tricks can stop me?" His armor crackled as he regained his footing. "I've transcended death itself. Your powers are nothing compared to-"

"Oh my god, shut UP!" Mia interrupted, readying another attack. "You're like a broken record with the death speech."

"The children," Billy's voice cut through the tension. "Their energy signatures are getting stronger - he's drawing more power from them."

I looked at Billy. "Can you locate them while we keep him busy?"

Billy nodded, but the Death Ranger's next words chilled me to the bone.

"By all means, find them," he taunted. "But ask yourselves - what happens to their life force when you try to separate them from my power? Are you willing to risk that?"

I glared, "You're bluffing. Billy, take your team and find them."

"Am I?" The Death Ranger's corrupted energy pulsed stronger. "Their life force is bound to my power now. One wrong move and-"

"Shadow Grasp!" Mia's attack suddenly bound the Death Ranger in tendrils of dark energy. "Go! We've got this asshole!"

As Billy's team moved out, Jason's group flanked left while Hunter and I took position on the right. I channeled my Saturn power through my staff, feeling the familiar crackle of energy.

"You really think you can multitask?" he mocked, fighting against Mia's shadows. "Fight me while trying to save them? When every moment brings them closer to-"

"Static Field!" My attack hit him full force, the electromagnetic disruption making his corrupted armor flicker momentarily again.

The Death Ranger staggered under the combination of Mia's shadows and my electromagnetic disruption, but his laughter still echoed through the pocket dimension.

"Infernal Blast!" Mia followed up immediately, dark fiery energy colliding with his corrupted armor.

"Lightning Strike Staff!" I channeled a concentrated bolt through my weapon, timing it to hit while he was still reeling from Mia's attack.

The Death Ranger absorbed both hits, his armor crackling with unstable energy. "Impressive... but futile. Every attack you launch just feeds more power into this realm. And the more power here..."

"The more he can draw from the children," Hunter realized, the Gem of Souls pulsing brighter in response to the surge of death energy.

"Jason!" I called out. "We need to-"

"Chain Lightning!" The Death Ranger's attack - my attack, twisted by his corruption - cut through the air toward us. I barely had time to raise my Amethyst Shield, the purple energy barrier crackling as it deflected his strike.

"That's not possible," I breathed, watching him channel corrupted versions of my own lightning powers. "How are you-"

"I have access to every power you possess, beloved," his voice carried cruel amusement. "After all, in another life, they were mine too."

"The only way that could happen is..." The realization hit me like physical blow, pieces suddenly clicking into place - the way he could manipulate cosmic energy, his connection to me.

"...is if I was Saturnian too? If I had a Saturn Starseed? Indeed." The satisfaction in his voice made my blood run cold.

I turned to Hunter - my Hunter - seeing the same shock I felt reflected in his stance. All this time, we'd never questioned why our bond was so impossibly strong, why we'd always been drawn to each other.

"Oh, is this news to you?" The Death Ranger's mockery echoed through the pocket dimension.

"Why do you think you found your soulmate in each other? You both carry Saturn Starseeds. My god, you must be the stupidest versions of us. In every dimension, in every timeline, Saturn calls to Saturn. It's cosmic law."

"Enough!" Kim's voice cut through the revelation, her Power Bow materializing in a flash of pink energy. "Power Bow!" The arrow of light streaked toward the Death Ranger, carrying all her veteran Ranger power behind it.

The Death Ranger caught Kim's arrow in mid-flight, crushing it in his corrupted grip. "How rude. I was just explaining to my beloved-"

"She's not your beloved!" Hunter's voice carried a rage I'd never heard before, the Gem of Souls flaring brighter in response to his emotion. "And neither was your Michelle!"

"You know nothing of my Michelle," the Death Ranger snarled, his composed mockery finally cracking. "What we had, what we were meant to be-"

"Obsidian Mirror!" Mia's attack suddenly manifested between us, reflecting the Death Ranger's own corrupted form back at him. "Less talking, more ass-kicking!"

"Amethyst Burst!" I channeled my raw destructive energy through my staff, purple lightning combining with Mia's mirror to amplify the effect. The Death Ranger staggered back, his armor crackling unstably.

"You want to talk about Saturn Starseeds?" I advanced, power surging through me. "Then let me show you what a true Saturn warrior can do when she's protecting the people she loves."

"You want to talk about Saturn Starseeds?" I advanced, power surging through me. "Then let me show you what a true Saturn warrior can do when she's protecting the people she loves."

"Crystal Shard Storm!" Purple crystalline fragments materialized around me, each one crackling with destructive energy as they rained down on him.

The Death Ranger deflected most of them, but some found their mark, cracking his corrupted armor. "You think you understand power? Let me show you what happens when Saturn energy embraces death instead of fighting it!"

Dark lightning erupted from his armor, forcing us all to dodge. Jason's team moved in from the left, while RJ's Wolf Spirit manifested on the right.

"Billy," I called into my communicator while maintaining my attack. "Status?"

"We've located the children," his voice crackled through. "But the energy binding them... it's complex. We need more time."

"Time you don't have," the Death Ranger taunted. "Their life force is almost ready for the final conversion. Soon they'll be like me - caught between life and death, feeding my power for eternity."

"Spectral Strike!" Mia's attack caught him from behind while he was monologuing. "God, do you ever shut up?"

"Power Sword!" Jason charged in immediately, his blade crackling with red energy as he engaged the Death Ranger in close combat.

"Zeo Flying Kick!" Rocky's attack followed, forcing our enemy to dodge right into Kim's line of fire.

"Power Bow, full charge!" Another volley of pink energy arrows filled the air.

The Death Ranger deflected Jason's sword strike and batted away Kim's arrows, but RJ's Wolf Spirit caught him with a powerful slash. "Your parlor tricks can't-"

"Thunder Staff!" Hunter cut him off, his Crimson Thunder power meeting the Death Ranger's corrupted energy head-on. The collision sent sparks of purple-tinged lightning throughout the pocket dimension.

"Shadow Shard Barrage!" Mia launched another assault while the Celtic Rangers moved to flank him.

"Lightning Cage!" I channeled my power through my staff, trying to contain his increasingly unstable energy. We needed to keep him distracted, give Billy's team time to free the children.

But something in the Death Ranger's posture changed - a subtle shift that made my stomach drop. He wasn't worried about our attacks. If anything, he seemed pleased by them.

"You still don't understand, do you?" The Death Ranger's voice carried that terrible amusement again. "Every attack, every surge of power... you're just feeding more energy into my pocket dimension."

"Celtic Thunder Strike!" Saoirse and Tiernan's combined attack hit him squarely, but instead of damaging him, the ancient power seemed to be absorbed into the very fabric of the dimension around us.

"The children's life force resonates with every surge of power," he continued. "Making our connection stronger. Soon, they'll be beyond even your reach."

"Billy?" I called into my communicator, trying to keep the worry from my voice.

"We've almost got it," he responded. "Aisha and the girls are-"

A sudden scream cut through our comms - young, terrified, in pain.

"NO!" RJ's anguish was palpable as he recognized his daughters' voices. His Wolf Spirit grew larger, more feral. "What are you doing to them?!"

"Testing the bonds," the Death Ranger said simply. "Shall we see what happens if I pull a little harder on their life force?"

Another scream echoed through the dimension, this time Jason's son.

"You son of a bitch!" Jason charged in, Power Sword blazing with fury.

"ENOUGH!" My voice carried raw power as I summoned my Amethyst, its destructive energy pulsing with deadly intent. The purple crystal's glow cast eerie shadows across the pocket dimension.

"Michelle, NO!" Hunter's voice cracked with fear. "You promised you wouldn't use your Amethyst!" The desperation in his tone reflected the terrible truth - using my Amethyst in its pure form could tear my life force apart.

"We don't have a choice," I ground out, feeling the crystal's power burning through me. "We have to end this."

"You're right. We do." Mia's voice carried deadly determination as her Obsidian materialized. "But not like this. On my terms." The black crystal pulsed with death energy, darker than even the Death Ranger's corruption. "Never tried this before... let's see how it works. Netherworld Gaze!"

The air itself seemed to tear apart as Mia pushed her power beyond its limits. This wasn't just peering into the Netherworld - she was ripping open a gateway to death's domain itself.

"Celtics! Get him through!"

"Gaiscígh na Gaoithe!" Saoirse's whip cracked with ancient power, catching the Death Ranger off guard.

"Crann na Ceatha!" Tiernan's staff strike followed immediately, their combined Celtic magic hurling our enemy toward the yawning portal.

Before any of us could react, Mia dove through after him, the gateway sealing shut behind them with a sound like reality itself screaming.

"What just happened?" Jason's voice seemed distant through my horror.

"Mia just sent the Death Ranger into the realm of death," I whispered, shocked that my irritating rival had actually done something so selflessly stupid. "And followed him there. Reckless as always, but..." I couldn't finish the thought. Despite our mutual antagonism, the idea of Mia sacrificing herself like this sat uncomfortably in my chest.

"We have the kids, on our way back," Billy's voice crackled through our comms.

"Their life force signatures?" Saoirse asked immediately.

"Weak, but stable," Billy confirmed. "Breaking the Death Ranger's connection was... complicated. But Arissa figured out how to-"

A bone-chilling howl cut through the pocket dimension, making the very air vibrate. The Death Ranger's power signature was gone, but something else was happening - the dimension itself was becoming unstable without his energy to maintain it.

"Everyone to Billy's position, NOW!" Jason ordered. "This whole place is going to collapse!"

"What about Mia?" Kim asked as we started moving.

"She made her choice," I said, trying to sound dismissive despite the knot in my stomach. That insufferable woman had better not die saving us all - I'd never hear the end of it from Kaya.

Mia

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I know what you're thinking. 'Wow, Mia, you're actually a heroine. And here I thought you were an anti-heroine.' And to that I say, 'fuck you'. I'm still an anti-heroine. This had nothing to do with saving those kids and everything to do with this Death Ranger pissing me off. Death is my thing and I'm not sharing.

When I arrived in the Netherworld, I took in my surroundings. The familiar dark mists swirled around me, but something felt different. The Death Ranger's corrupted energy had tainted even this realm, making the shadows writhe unnaturally. I couldn't pinpoint his exact location, but I could feel his presence - like an oil slick on the surface of my domain.

My Obsidian pulsed, resonating with the pure death energy of the Netherworld. Here, in death's realm, my power would be at its peak. No more holding back, no more playing nice for the Rangers' sake.

"You want to play with death?" I called out, my voice echoing through the void. "Let's see how you handle the real thing."

The shadows shifted, and I felt him before I saw him - that twisted, corrupted version of death energy that had been giving me migraines for weeks.

"The Netherworld," his hollow voice echoed around me. "You think bringing me to death's domain makes you stronger? I AM death."

"No," I summoned my Scythe of Shadows, feeling its power amplified by this realm. "You're a cheap imitation. A science experiment playing with forces you don't understand."

"And you do?" He materialized fully now, his corrupted armor looking even more wrong in this pure realm of death. "You're just a soldier playing at being death's champion."

I couldn't help but laugh. "That's where you're wrong, asshole. I don't play at anything. I AM Nemesis, and you're trespassing in my jurisdiction."

The Netherworld responded to my declaration, shadows gathering around me like old friends. Here, I didn't have to hold back, didn't have to worry about collateral damage or frightening the other Rangers with the full extent of my power.

"Let me show you what real death magic looks like."

"Truth Severance!" I swung my scythe in a wide arc, cutting through his illusions, his pretense. Here in the Netherworld, I could see him for what he really was - a soul trapped between life and death, twisted by Drakkon's technology.

He staggered back, his corrupted armor flickering. "Impossible-"

"Infernal Blast!" Pure death energy, not his corrupted version, slammed into him. "What's wrong? Not so confident when you're not feeding off children's life force?"

"You understand nothing!" His voice carried genuine rage now. "I transcended death-"

"No, you're running from it," I cut him off, channeling more power through my Obsidian. "You're so afraid of true death that you've become this... aberration."



The shadows of the Netherworld writhed around us, responding to our clash. I could feel the pure death energy trying to claim him, to correct this violation of natural law. But his corrupted power fought back, creating a maelstrom of conflicting energies.

"I chose this power!" he snarled, gathering his corrupted energy.

"No," I readied my scythe. "You let Drakkon's technology twist you into a mockery of death itself. And I'm about to show you just how much that pisses me off."

"No," I readied my scythe. "You let Drakkon's technology twist you into a mockery of death itself. And I'm about to show you just how much that pisses me off."

His response was immediate and brutal. Corrupted death energy slammed into me from all sides, the force of it driving me to my knees. Even in the Netherworld, his power was considerable.

"You think you know death?" he snarled, his attack intensifying. "Let me show you true power!"

The pain was excruciating - like every cell in my body was being torn apart and corrupted simultaneously. Even my Obsidian Armor was cracking under the assault.

Then I felt it - a familiar presence, one I hadn't sensed since that terrible day on Nemesis.

"Mia!" Diamond's voice called to me, exactly as I remembered it, cutting through the pain.

I looked up to see him standing beside me, just as handsome as the day I lost him, his spirit glowing with pure death energy. Here in the Netherworld, the barrier between the living and the dead meant nothing.

"Took you long enough," I managed through gritted teeth, but I couldn't hide my smile. Even the Death Ranger seemed to pause, thrown by this unexpected development.

"Well," Diamond's energy merged with mine, amplifying my power. "Shall we show this pretender how real death magic works?"

The Death Ranger recovered from his surprise quickly. "Another spirit to corrupt? How generous."

"You can't corrupt what's already embraced true death," Diamond's voice carried that aristocratic confidence I remembered so well. His energy, pure and untainted, strengthened my connection to the Netherworld itself.

I stood, my Scythe of Shadows glowing with our combined power. "You're so focused on cheating death," I said, feeling Diamond's presence steady behind me, "that you never learned its true nature."

"And what's that?" the Death Ranger sneered.

"Death isn't about corruption," I raised my scythe. "It's about balance."

"Soul Severance!" Diamond and I called out in unison, our combined power making the attack stronger than I'd ever managed alone. The strike cut through the Death Ranger's corrupted armor like it was paper, revealing the twisted soul beneath.

"Impossible!" he staggered back. "I am beyond death's reach-"

"No one is beyond death's reach," Diamond's voice carried centuries of noble authority. "Especially not in this realm."

The Death Ranger lashed out with his corrupted energy, but here, with Diamond's power amplifying mine, his attacks felt weaker. The Netherworld itself seemed to be responding to our pure death energy, the shadows moving to aid us rather than him.

"You're an anomaly," I advanced, my Obsidian pulsing with power. "A glitch in the natural order. And I'm the debug program."

"Charming as ever, my love," Diamond chuckled behind me. "Though your metaphors need work."

"Shut up and help me kill him. Again."

"With pleasure." Diamond's energy surged through me as the Death Ranger launched another assault. This time, his corrupted lightning bounced harmlessly off my enhanced Obsidian Armor.

"You can't destroy me," the Death Ranger's voice carried a hint of desperation now. "I'm caught between life and death - I exist in both realms!"

"That's your problem right there," I twirled my scythe, feeling Diamond's power guide my movements. "You're trying to exist in both realms when you belong in neither. Let me fix that for you."

"Netherworld Gaze!" Our combined attack tore through the fabric of death's realm itself, revealing the true nature of his corrupted existence. The sight would have driven most beings mad, but I was used to seeing the uglier side of death.

"Your corruption ends here," Diamond's voice resonated with authority. "You've disrupted the balance long enough."

The Death Ranger's armor crackled with unstable energy. "You think you can judge me? I chose this power! I-"

"Deathly Whisper," I cut him off, the attack amplified by Diamond's presence. For the first time, I saw real fear in the Death Ranger's stance.

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Our combined attack hit him full force, pure death energy tearing through his corrupted power. His armor began to crack, dark energy bleeding out like smoke. But something wasn't right - even as we damaged him, his core energy signature remained stubbornly intact.

"You can't... destroy me completely," he gasped, his form flickering between solid and spectral. "Not while I'm... anchored to both realms."

"He's right," Diamond's voice carried frustration. "His connection to the living realm is protecting him from true death."

The Death Ranger laughed, though it sounded more like a death rattle. "Always... a way out..." His form began to fade, using what remained of his power to escape.

"Oh no you don't-" I started forward, but Diamond held me back.

"Let him go, my love. He's weakened, and you've proven your point. Death isn't his to command."

I watched his corrupted energy dissipate, knowing this wasn't over. But we'd accomplished something important - we'd shown him he wasn't invincible, even in death's domain.

"This isn't finished," I called after his retreating presence. "Next time, I'm ending this properly."

Then I turned to Diamond, and everything else fell away. Standing there, looking at the face I'd thought I'd never see again, I felt my carefully constructed walls crumbling. "I've missed you," my voice broke as I fell into his arms. "Gods, I've missed you so much."

He held me close, his familiar embrace exactly as I remembered. "And I you, my fierce warrior. But I see everything, Mia. I watch you push everyone away, build walls higher than the ones you had when we met. You're not living anymore - you're just existing."

"Losing you destroyed me," I buried my face in his chest, breathing in his essence. "I can't... I can't go through that again. I won't survive it."

"My love," his voice was gentle but firm. "You're stronger than you know. Your heart didn't stop beating when mine did."

I looked up at him through tears I couldn't hold back. "Then let me stay. Let me stay here with you. We can be together, protect the Netherworld together."

He held me tighter, and I felt his own pain mirror mine. "As much as my soul aches to keep you here, you know that's not your destiny. You're the guardian of death's realm from the world of the living. That's where you're needed."

"I can't leave you," I clutched at him desperately. "Not again. Please, Diamond. Don't make me lose you twice."

"My stubborn love," he lifted my chin gently, making me meet his eyes. "You never lost me. I'm always with you, in every shadow, in every moment you channel death's power."

"It's not the same," I whispered, hating how vulnerable I sounded. The Queen of Death, reduced to begging by love.

"No, it's not," he agreed. "But it's what we have. And you have so much left to do in the realm of the living. Rachel and Ariss need their godmother. Kaya needs her guardian. Even Michelle needs-"

"Don't push it," I managed a weak laugh through my tears.

His smile, that aristocratic smirk I'd fallen in love with, made my heart ache. "There's my Mia. The woman who tells death itself to fuck off."

"Language, your highness," I teased back automatically, falling into our old pattern even as I felt our time growing short.

"Mia, I will always be with you, but you need to go back and fulfill your destiny. And open yourself up to people. To friends... family... to love..."

"There is no other love for me," I cut him off fiercely. "You were it. You ARE it. No one else could ever understand me like you did. No one else would accept the Queen of Death."

Diamond's eyes softened with that mix of exasperation and affection I remembered so well. "My love, you're not just the Queen of Death. You're also Mia Black - godmother, friend, protector. Don't let my death be the reason you stop living."

"I protect people fine from behind my walls," I argued, though my voice lacked conviction.

"Do you? Is that why Rachel and Arissa are the only people you've let yourself truly care about since I died?" His hands cupped my face. "You're so afraid of loss that you're missing out on all the reasons I fell in love with you in the first place - your passion, your fire, your capacity to care so deeply it terrifies you."

"Do you? Is that why Rachel and Arissa are the only people you've let yourself truly care about since I died?" His hands cupped my face. "You're so afraid of loss that you're missing out on all the reasons I fell in love with you in the first place - your passion, your fire, your capacity to care so deeply it terrifies you."

"That's not fair," I whispered, even as I leaned into his touch. "Arissa... she reminds me of you sometimes. That same quiet strength. And Rachel... she's innocent. Pure. Everything I'm supposed to protect."

"And the others? The ones you keep at arm's length while pretending it's because you can't stand them?" His knowing smile made me want to look away, but I couldn't. "Even Michelle-"

"Don't you dare finish that sentence," I warned. "That woman is insufferable."

"And yet you just risked everything to help save her family. To protect her world."

"I did it because death is my jurisdiction," I protested weakly.

"Keep telling yourself that, my love." His form started to fade slightly, making my heart clench. "Our time grows short."

"Diamond, please-"

"You have to go, Mia. You know this," Diamond's voice was soft but firm as he pulled me into a kiss that felt like coming home and goodbye all at once. The familiar taste of him, the way his energy merged with mine - it was everything I'd been missing for so long.

I kissed him back desperately, trying to memorize every sensation. "Diamond, no. I love you."

"And I love you. I always will." His form started becoming more translucent, but his eyes held mine with fierce intensity. "Now go home, be happy, find love... Mia... live."

"There is no happiness without you," I argued, even as I felt him slipping away.

"There can be. Trust me." His signature smirk, the one that had always made my heart skip, appeared one last time. "I'm with you. Now go and kick that Death Ranger's ass."

"Diamond-" But he was already fading, his final words echoing through the Netherworld.

"I love you Mia, I always will."

"DIAMOND! NO!" My scream of anguish echoed through death's realm, raw power surging through me unlike anything I'd felt before. Love, loss, rage, and determination merged into pure energy, making my Obsidian pulse with deadly intent. The Death Ranger thought he knew pain? He thought

he understood loss? I was going to show him exactly what happened when you truly pissed off death's champion.

I raised my scythe, its blade crackling with amplified power - Diamond's final gift to me. With one savage strike, I tore open a portal back to the living realm. As I stepped through, I carried with me not just grief, but a purpose that burned hotter than ever.

That corrupted bastard was going to learn why they called me the Queen of Death.

Michelle

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The command center was filled with the kind of chaos that only reunited families could create. Billy and Aisha moved efficiently between the children, checking vitals while parents hovered anxiously.

RJ pulled his twins into his arms, his usual zen master composure completely abandoned. "I am so sorry. Are you ok?"

Summer nodded bravely. "We're ok. Autumn was scared, but I knew you would save us."

"I was so worried," Rocky's voice cracked as he hugged Tam.

"I'm ok Dad, really," Tam assured him.

A sharp intake of breath made me turn. Harley stood rigid, her eyes blazing with fury at the scene between Rocky and his stepdaughter. Before she could say anything, Arissa intervened.

"Aunt Mia will be ok, right?" my oldest daughter asked, deliberately drawing attention away from the tension.

"I honestly don't know, Riss," I admitted, the weight of Mia's sacrifice sitting uncomfortably in my chest. "I've never seen her actually go into the realm of death. Jase, is Ollie ok?"

Ollie managed a tired smile. "I'm ok, Aunt Michelle."

"Kaya, can you get Aunt Mia back?" Arissa's voice carried a worry I rarely heard from my analytical daughter. Her bond with Mia had always been special, different from the antagonistic relationship Mia maintained with almost everyone else.

For the first time since I'd known her, Kaya's usual sass was completely absent. The guardian cat's ears were flat against her head, her posture tense with genuine fear. "I wish I could. I don't know what is going to happen either. Mia is supposed to fight with death energy and peer into the realm of death, not actually enter it."

The sight of Kaya actually showing concern for her human rather than her usual sarcastic commentary made my stomach twist. If Kaya was worried...

Suddenly, the temperature in the command center dropped dramatically.

Suddenly, the temperature in the command center dropped dramatically.

"Everyone back!" Jason ordered, moving protectively in front of Ollie. The other parents quickly gathered their children close as dark energy began swirling in the center of the room.

A portal ripped open - not like our usual dimensional gateways, but something darker, more primal. Death energy poured out of it in waves that made even the Celtic Rangers step back.

Mia emerged, but something about her was different. Her Nemesis form crackled with more power than I'd ever seen, and her eyes... there was something in them that made even me pause.

"Aunt Mia!" Arissa started forward, but Hunter held her back.

"Mia?" Kaya approached cautiously, studying her human with unusual concern. "What happened in there?"

For a moment, Mia just stood there, power radiating off her in waves. When she finally spoke, her voice carried an edge I'd never heard before.

"The Death Ranger isn't dead. But he knows now what real death power feels like." She looked at the rescued children, then at Arissa, her expression softening slightly. "And I got a reminder about what we're fighting for."

Arissa broke free from Hunter's grip and ran to her godmother. "I was scared you wouldn't come back."

Something in Mia's face changed - a crack in her usual harsh exterior that I'd rarely seen. She wrapped her arms around my daughter, holding her close. "Honestly? I almost didn't. But someone really special reminded me that I'm still needed here. That I need to be here for you, Riss. I'm not leaving you."

The raw emotion in Mia's voice made me look away. Whatever had happened in the realm of death had clearly shaken her. Kaya moved closer to her human, pressing against Mia's legs in an unusually affectionate gesture.

"Did you..." Arissa's voice dropped to a whisper. "Did you see him?"

The look that crossed Mia's face was almost too private to witness - grief and love and something else, something stronger.

"Yeah, kiddo. I did." Mia's voice was soft in a way I'd never heard before. "He helped me fight. And he... he reminded me of some important things."

"Like what?" Arissa asked, still holding onto her godmother.

"Like the fact that closing yourself off from everyone isn't actually protecting yourself." Mia's eyes met mine briefly, and for once there wasn't any antagonism there. Just a shared understanding of loss and healing.

"Does this mean you're going to be nicer to people now?" Kaya asked, some of her usual snark returning.

"Don't push it, cat," Mia warned, but there was no real bite in her tone. She looked around at the rescued children, at our gathered teams. "We got the kids back and now we need to prepare. The Death Ranger isn't finished."

"But neither are we," I added firmly.

For once, Mia didn't argue with me.

"Long Overdue"

The Death Ranger was off somewhere licking his wounds, and for the first time since this mess started, we could actually breathe. Perfect timing to set up Amber's little scheme.

As everyone filtered up from the command center into Michelle's living room, I watched the reunited families fussing over their kids. My encounter with Diamond in the Netherworld was still raw, making all this emotional display more affecting than I'd like to admit.

I made my way over to RJ and his twins, trying to look casual. "Hey Wolf Master, you good?"

RJ looked up, wariness warring with gratitude in his expression. After helping save his daughters, I'd apparently earned at least a sliver of trust. "Yes, thank god we're all okay."

Now for the tricky part - getting him to the Cantina without revealing this was all about making Michelle squirm. "So, my best friend's husband owns this restaurant in Cork. Not far from here. I know you have your pizza places back home, but Trevor's place is something special. We're having a sort of impromptu family dinner thing tonight. He's got what locals swear is the most famous lobster in Cork. Your girls might enjoy it."

RJ studied me, probably trying to figure out my angle.

Kaya, bless her manipulative little heart, hopped onto my shoulder. "Your girls gotta eat, right? Good food and decent company. And one of Mia's friends has a daughter around the twins' age."

RJ's laugh held genuine warmth. "I suppose we do need to eat. Sure, we'll join you."

I smiled, carefully keeping my satisfaction in check as I pulled out my phone to text Amber: "RJ is in. Operation Family Dinner is go." I knew my best friend would handle this perfectly - she'd invite everyone except Michelle, letting Jeremy handle that invitation so it wouldn't raise any red flags.

Amber's response was immediate: "I love you so much right now. Niamh and I will pick you both up in 30 minutes."

"Make that four of us. RJ has twin daughters, Tiffy's age," I texted back. Then, crafting a careful lie to explain their disheveled state: "There was an incident at the airport, they lost their luggage. Any chance we could get them some clothes and cleaned up before dinner?"

"This just gets better and better. Of course we'll help. See you in 30."

I turned back to RJ. "My friend Amber will pick us up in half an hour. She's offered to take the girls shopping for some clothes and get everyone cleaned up at her place before dinner."

"Mia, thank you," RJ's gratitude was genuine, making me feel the tiniest bit guilty about my ulterior motives. But only the tiniest bit. "This is incredibly kind of you."

If he only knew what was coming.

When Amber texted her arrival thirty minutes later, I quickly ushered RJ and the twins out before Michelle could notice. Kaya trotted alongside us, probably enjoying being part of the scheme. Amber had brought Niamh's SUV instead of her usual sports car - practical as always.

I claimed the passenger seat while RJ helped the girls into the back. Amber's perfectly styled hair and designer outfit were a stark contrast to our somewhat disheveled appearance.

"Hey Amber, thanks for this. Where's Niamh?" I asked.

"Left her and Rachel home to get ready for tonight while we take care of the shopping," Amber explained, her eyes sparkling with mischief as she studied RJ in the rearview mirror. I could practically see her planning Michelle's discomfort already.

"Well, official introductions - Amber, this is RJ James and his daughters Summer and Autumn. RJ, my best friend and partner in crime, Amber O'Sullivan."

"It's wonderful to finally meet you," Amber's smile was genuine but definitely carried an edge of plotting. "I've heard... interesting things."

"All terrible, I'm sure," RJ managed a self-deprecating smile.

"Lost luggage is the worst," Amber sympathized, completely buying our cover story. "Don't worry, Dunne's has everything we'll need to get the girls taken care of."

I caught RJ's momentary confusion before he smoothly played along with our cover story.

"Right? They act like it's completely out of their hands."

"Exactly!" Amber agreed, pulling away from Michelle's estate toward Castle West.

Kaya shot me a knowing look. Phase one of Operation Make Michelle Squirm was officially underway.

Just then Ellie's fluffy white head popped out of Amber's purse. Kaya's expression turned to pure disdain as she silently pleaded with me to save her from the tiny dog's existence. I obligingly slipped her into her backpack, positioning it so she could still see out the window while maintaining her dignified distance from the "white puff ball," as she called it.

"Oh! A puppy!" Summer's excitement filled the car.

Amber laughed warmly. "Just a small dog. That's Ellie. She's my companion - goes everywhere with me."

"Can I pet her?" Summer asked eagerly.

"When we get to the store you sure can." Amber smoothly shifted her attention. "So, RJ, Mia says you're joining us at the Cantina tonight?"

"Yeah, she mentioned something about a family dinner and a famous lobster?" RJ replied.

"Oh yes," Amber's laugh carried just the right amount of casual warmth. "Just our little Cork chosen family. Me, Mia, my mother-in-law, my brother-in-law, sister-in-law, and a couple other close friends that are like family. And Patrick O'Claw - my husband Trevor's pet lobster. He's becoming quite the celebrity throughout Ireland."

"Sounds really interesting," RJ said, and I could hear him trying to place all these relationships.

At Castle West, Amber expertly navigated us through Dunne's, helping the girls pick out a couple of outfits each. I covered the bill before RJ could protest - after what they'd been through, it was the least I could do.

"Thank you so much, Mia," RJ's gratitude was genuine.

I shrugged it off. "Least I could do. Let's get everyone cleaned up at Amber's before dinner."

"That sounds amazing," RJ admitted, and I could hear the exhaustion in his voice.

At Amber's house, she went into full hostess mode. "We have two showers upstairs and one downstairs," she explained, efficiently distributing towels and toiletries to everyone.

Once the James family was settled, Amber joined me in the living room, her eyes sharp with curiosity. "So, what happened? You look like you've been through the ringer."

I had my cover story ready. "I invited RJ to watch Arissa practice at the track behind Michelle and Hunter's place. That's why he was there."

"Ah, that makes sense. I was wondering," Amber nodded.

"Yeah, well, Hunter and RJ got into it. Dust flew... it got messy," I kept it vague but plausible.

"That explains the bruise on his jaw," Amber mused. "Hopefully dinner won't get that rough."

"Hunter will behave," I assured her. "Michelle being uncomfortable is the whole point, right?"

Amber's smile turned slightly wicked. "Exactly. Let her feel how Trevor felt when she showed up with Ramsey."

"Then everything is going according to plan," I smiled, satisfied with how smoothly this was all working out.

"Is it?" Amber's tone shifted to that probing one I knew too well. "What about you and RJ?"

"What about me and RJ?" I kept my voice neutral, though I could already tell where this was going.

"There seems to be some chemistry happening." Amber's smirk was insufferable.

I stared at her, genuinely thrown. "Between me and RJ? Are you actually insane? No fucking way. Even if I were looking for someone, which I'm absolutely not, RJ isn't even in the same universe as my type."

"They say opposites attract," Amber sing-songed, clearly enjoying my reaction.

"Yeah, well, not in this case," I shut that down firmly. "RJ is a means to an end. That's it." Diamond's face flashed through my mind, making my chest ache.

"If you say so," Amber's tone made it clear she wasn't convinced, but she had no idea how wrong she was. After seeing Diamond in the Netherworld, the idea of any other relationship was laughable.

RJ came downstairs looking considerably refreshed, the bruise on his jaw already fading. Even Zen masters apparently appreciated a hot shower after interdimensional battles.

"My turn to clean up," I announced, grabbing clean clothes from the guest room before retreating to the bathroom.

The moment the warm water hit my skin, I felt my carefully maintained composure start to crack. Here, alone with the shower masking any sound, I could finally process what had happened. Diamond. His touch, his voice, his presence - everything I'd been missing for so long, right there within reach. The way he'd held me, the impossible choice of leaving him again...

I pressed my forehead against the cool tile, letting the water mix with tears I refused to acknowledge. How was I supposed to just go back to normal after that? How could Amber or anyone else even think about setting me up when my heart was still thoroughly, completely Diamond's?

Amber

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"Would anyone like some tea?" I asked, Niamh's Irish influence showing.

"That actually sounds great," RJ accepted, settling into the armchair.

I moved to the kitchen, starting the kettle before returning to sit across from him. "Mia mentioned you're from California too. What part?"

"Ocean Bluff," he said.

"Oh! San Diego here," I smiled at the connection.

"Cali Coast. Is there anything better?" His smile was genuine.

"It's pretty amazing," I admitted, "but Ireland's stolen my heart."

"Pretty far from home," he observed.

"In my case, that's a good thing. My family and I... we're not exactly close." The understatement of the century.

RJ's expression shifted slightly. "Wait... Amber O'Sullivan... what was your maiden name?"

I sighed, knowing exactly where this was heading. "Trevino."

"Are you the Amber Trevino from the Brody Dalton scandal?"

"Yeah, that's me," I confirmed wearily. "Though we were never actually engaged." Brody's name made headlines in California business circles, and my "betrayal" had been quite the society scandal.

"I remember the story. He was about to propose when his girlfriend disappeared, and he ended up marrying her sister instead."

"That's the tabloid version," I said, unable to keep the bitterness from my voice.

"What's the real version?" His tone held genuine interest rather than judgment.

"I dated Brody, but I never loved him. When I realized he was planning to propose..." I paused, remembering that suffocating pressure. "My father was pushing so hard for that marriage. I knew he'd never let me walk away, so I ran. Disappeared to LA, started over. Then I met Trevor, and... well, I finally understood what real love feels like."

"No judgment here," RJ's voice was thoughtful. "I know what it's like being in a marriage without love."

"Michelle?" I ventured.

"Yeah... I never should have married her."

"Wasn't it a Vegas wedding?"

"It was," he admitted. "But I never should have tried to make it work afterward."

The kettle whistled, giving me a moment to process. I prepared two cups of tea, bringing them back to the living room. "Why did you? Try to make it work, I mean?"

RJ accepted the tea with a grateful nod. "I thought... I thought love would grow with time. MJ was amazing - talented, passionate, beautiful. I convinced myself that was enough, that real love would follow." He laughed softly, but there was pain behind it. "Sometimes caring about someone isn't the same as being in love with them."

"That must have been hard," I said carefully, watching his expression. "Realizing it wasn't enough."

"It was. For both of us." He stared into his tea. "We wanted different things, different lives. I had my pizza place, she had her music... we were going in different directions."

"You call her MJ?" I asked, noticing the familiar nickname.

"Yeah... old habits." He turned the tea cup in his hands. "Michelle James. It fit back then. I know I hurt her - that was never my intention. Actually, I tried so hard not to hurt her that I think I ended up hurting her more in the end."

"Sometimes that's how it goes," I offered gently. "The harder we try to protect someone from pain, the worse it becomes. But she found her way back to Hunter. She seems happy."

"Always knew that would happen," RJ's voice carried a hint of old bitterness. "Even when we were married, Hunter was this... presence. He was just always there."

"Did she cheat?" The question slipped out before I could stop it.

"I don't think so. Not sure I want to know if she did," he admitted. "But part of me always knew I was a placeholder because she couldn't have Hunter. I may not understand what she sees in him, but clearly they're happy."

"Do you regret leaving?"

"Not at all. Should have done it sooner." His expression softened. "After MJ, I found the love of my life - Grace. Lost her in an accident two years ago, but we had an amazing life. She gave me two beautiful daughters I wouldn't trade for anything."

"But you still care about Mich?"

"I'll always love MJ," he said thoughtfully, "but I was never in love with her. Don't think I ever could be."

The sound of footsteps on the stairs interrupted whatever I was about to say. Mia appeared, looking refreshed but somehow... different. There was something in her eyes I hadn't seen before, a kind of raw vulnerability she was trying to hide.

"Tea party without me?" she asked, trying to sound casual.

"Kettle's still hot," I offered, studying my best friend carefully. Something had happened today - something more than just airport luggage drama.

"The girls almost ready?" RJ asked.

"They're upstairs getting dressed," Mia said. "Summer was asking about Ellie again."

My little dog perked up at her name, and I caught Mia discreetly checking that her backpack was still zipped, keeping Kaya safely away from the 'white puff ball.'

"Speaking of being ready," Mia's voice carried a warning edge as she looked at me, "remember our conversation earlier?"

I held up my hands in surrender, but I couldn't help noticing how quickly she'd jumped to defend against any potential matchmaking. Usually, Mia just rolled her eyes at my attempts. This felt different.

"Trevor just texted," I said instead. "Everything's set for tonight."

The back door opened, and Niamh came in from her cottage with Rachel. My mother-in-law's timing was perfect as always.

"Mam, come meet our new friend. This is RJ James. RJ, this is my mother-in-law Niamh O'Sullivan."

"Lovely to meet you, RJ," Niamh's warm Irish lilt filled the room as she handed Rachel to me.

I cradled my daughter close, silently grateful for how far I'd come since those early days of postpartum anxiety. Therapy and medication had worked wonders, even if I still hadn't worked up the courage to tackle diaper duty. "Hola Mija," I smiled down at my baby girl, her perfect little face still a miracle to me.

"Your daughter is beautiful," RJ said softly, and I caught the flash of pain in his eyes - probably thinking of his own girls when they were this small, before he lost their mother.

The sound of footsteps on the stairs announced the twins' return, both looking much better in their new clothes. Summer's eyes lit up at the sight of Rachel.

"Oh! A baby!" she exclaimed, moving closer to peek at Rachel. "She's so tiny!"

"She's four months old," I said proudly. "Would you like to sit and hold her?"

Summer looked at RJ hopefully. "Can I, Daddy?"

"Of course, just be careful," RJ nodded, watching attentively as I helped Summer settle into the armchair with Rachel securely in her arms.

"I used to help with the babies at our d-" Autumn started, but RJ cleared his throat slightly and she quickly amended, "at our daycare center back home."

"Well then, you'll have to come visit Rachel more often," Niamh said warmly. "She loves meeting new friends."

"Speaking of friends," Mia checked her phone. "We should probably head to the Cantina soon. Trevor will be wondering where we all are."

I started gathering Rachel's things - diaper bag, extra clothes, her favorite toys. Between the twins' fascination with the baby and Niamh's natural warmth, dinner was already promising to be interesting. Add Michelle's inevitable reaction to finding RJ there...

"Everyone ready?" I asked, unable to keep the slight anticipation from my voice.

We piled into Niamh's SUV and headed into Cork. After parking, we made our way to the Cantina, where I led everyone straight to the VIP Room - technically our banquet room, but it had become the unofficial gathering spot for our chosen family.

"Welcome to the Celtic Cantina," I said as everyone settled in.

Trevor spotted us and came over immediately, greeting me with a kiss before scooping Rachel from her carrier. "Hey love." His eyes sparkled with mischief - he would finally have satisfaction for Michelle's Ramsey stunt.

"Babe, this is RJ James and his daughters Summer and Autumn," I made the introductions, catching his subtle wink.

"Welcome to the Cantina, mate!" Trevor's hospitality was genuine, even if his motives were delightfully devious. "Everything's on the house tonight."

"Thank you. This is a really nice restaurant," RJ looked around appreciatively.

"RJ owns a restaurant too," Mia chimed in with a smile that could only be described as devious. I knew exactly what she was doing - we all knew Trev was a culinary snob.

"Oh, it's just a pizza parlour," RJ said modestly.

Trevor's expression flickered slightly. "A pizza parlour? How... quaint. Do you work with pineapple?"

"Of course."

I could practically hear Trevor's internal cringe. My husband, the culinary purist, trying to hide his horror at the mention of pineapple on pizza.

"Let's start with some drinks and appetizers while we wait for everyone else," I intervened quickly, though I had to admit, watching Trevor's culinary elitism clash with RJ's casual approach to pizza was pretty entertaining.

"I'll send Fionn over with some menus," Trevor said, still bouncing Rachel gently. "And of course, you'll want to meet Patrick."

"Patrick?" Summer asked eagerly.

"Patrick O'Claw," Trevor grinned. "Our resident celebrity. Most famous lobster in Cork."

Fionn appeared with menus and his usual efficient manner. "Will you be wanting to meet Patrick then?"

"The girls would love to meet him," Mia said, settling into her chair.

"I'll show you to his tank after I get your drink orders," Fionn promised. "Though he's been a bit dramatic since that food critic only called him 'charismatic' instead of 'captivating.'"

As everyone placed their orders, I checked my phone. Kara had texted that she and her family were on their way. I knew Michelle and Hunter would be arriving soon too - the best part was, Michelle had no idea what was waiting for her.

I caught Trevor's eye and he nodded slightly. After that stunt Michelle pulled bringing Ramsey here, tonight's surprise felt like perfect karma.

The Jordan family's arrival coincided perfectly with our drinks being served. "RJ, let me introduce you to some more of our Cork family," I said warmly. "This is Hal and Kara Jordan and their daughters Kira, Kora, and Tiffy. Everyone, this is RJ James and his daughters Summer and Autumn."

"I'm six!" Tiffy announced proudly, displaying her fingers as evidence.

"Me too!" Summer and Autumn's synchronized response brought smiles all around. The instant connection between the girls was obvious.

"Kira, Kora," Mia jumped in with perfect timing, "why don't you take the little ones to meet Patrick?"

The older girls led their new friends off to meet Patrick, and I couldn't help but feel satisfied with how smoothly everything was progressing. Now we just needed our other guests to arrive.

Jeremy and Livvie arrived moments later with their twins in tow. "Hey Liv!" I called out, just as Kira and Kora returned with our trio of six-year-olds.

"KIRA!" Rose launched herself at her friend with typical enthusiasm.

"Inside voice, Ro Ro. You scare Tiffy," Killian admonished his sister with his usual protective nature.

Rose immediately dropped her voice to a whisper. "Sorry."

"Jeremy, Livvie, meet RJ James and his twin daughters Summer and Autumn," I made the introductions. "RJ, this is Jeremy and Livvie O'Brien and their twins, Rose and Killy."

"Twins?" Summer looked between Rose and Killian, confused. "But they're a boy and girl."

"They're fraternal twins, Summer. We're identical," Autumn explained with surprising clarity for a six-year-old.

Jeremy's expression shifted as recognition hit. "RJ... James? As in Mich's ex?"

I couldn't help my satisfied smirk. "One and the same."

"Amber... no..." Jeremy's sigh carried equal parts exasperation and concern. He knew exactly what I was up to, and more importantly, he knew exactly how Michelle would react.

"Amber... no..." Jeremy's sigh carried equal parts exasperation and concern. "This is payback for the Ramsey thing, isn't it?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I said innocently, though my smile probably gave me away. "RJ's just visiting Ireland and Mia thought he and the girls might enjoy seeing Patrick."

"Right," Jeremy's tone made it clear he wasn't buying it. "And the fact that Mich and Hunter always join us for family dinner had nothing to do with this invitation?"

"Oh, is Michelle coming?" I widened my eyes in mock surprise. "I had no idea."

Livvie tried to hide her smile behind her hand while Jeremy just shook his head. "You're terrible."

"No, what's terrible was Mich bringing Ramsey here without warning just to entertain herself," Trevor chimed in, bouncing Rachel. "This is just... karma."

"The kids seem to be having fun at least," Livvie observed diplomatically, watching as all the children clustered around Patrick's tank.

I checked my phone again. Any minute now...

"Patrick! Look! He's waving at me!" Summer's delighted voice carried across the room.

"He likes you," Tiffany declared with authority. "Sometimes he hides from people, but he's showing off for you!"

"That's because Patrick has excellent taste," Trevor called out proudly. "He knows a proper audience when he sees one."

The sound of familiar voices in the main dining room made me straighten slightly. Trevor caught my eye, and I saw Mia trying to suppress a smirk.

"I think our last guests are here," I said sweetly, watching Jeremy's expression shift from exasperation to resignation.

This was going to be interesting.

"I think our last guests are here," I said sweetly, watching Jeremy's expression shift from exasperation to resignation.

Michelle's laugh carried from the main dining room - that genuine one she rarely let people hear. I could picture her and Hunter with their girls, completely unaware of what awaited them in the VIP room.

RJ tensed slightly at the sound of her voice, and I noticed Mia watching him carefully. The twins were still clustered around Patrick's tank with the other children, blissfully unaware of any tension.

"Daddy, look!" Autumn called out. "Patrick's doing tricks!"

"He's showing off because he has new friends," Trevor explained, bouncing Rachel gently. "He loves an audience."

The sound of footsteps approaching the VIP room made everyone freeze. I caught Mia's slight smirk, Trevor's anticipatory grin. This was going to be better than any show Patrick could put on.

Show time.

Michelle and Hunter walked in with their daughters, Hunter carrying little Tomi. Michelle's usual dramatic entrance cut off abruptly as she registered RJ's presence.

"OK, I'm here! The party can..." Her voice died mid-sentence, her expression freezing.

"What the hell is he doing here?" Hunter's voice carried a dangerous edge. I hadn't specifically planned to antagonize Hunter - this was about getting back at Michelle - but I supposed some collateral damage was inevitable.

The tension in the room shifted instantly. The children at Patrick's tank fell quiet, sensing the adults' sudden discomfort. Even our famous lobster seemed to pause his performance.

"Michelle," RJ acknowledged quietly, while his twins looked between the adults with growing confusion.

"Mia," Michelle's voice was deadly calm as her eyes found her frenemy. "Did you do this?"

"Actually," I stepped forward, unable to keep the satisfaction from my voice, "this was my idea. Thought it might be nice to have everyone together. You know how much you enjoy... surprise guests at dinner."

Hunter's grip on Tomi tightened slightly while Harley and Arissa exchanged worried looks. The parallel to Michelle's Ramsey stunt wasn't lost on anyone.

"Amber," Jeremy's warning tone suggested I might have gone too far, but Trevor's subtle squeeze of my hand told me he had my back on this one.

Michelle

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Well played, Amber. Well played. The shock of seeing RJ at our family dinner hit hard, but I'd be

damned if I'd give Amber the satisfaction of the dramatic reaction she was clearly hoping for. I forced myself to regain my composure, clearing my throat.

"RJ, so glad to see you," I managed with practiced ease, years of public appearances coming in handy. "I'm guessing you already met my family?"

RJ nodded, looking almost as uncomfortable as Hunter. "Yeah. I didn't realize you'd be here too."

"It's fine! The more the merrier!" I injected false brightness into my voice. "My mom will be here soon too."

Hunter's arm slipped around my waist, a silent show of support even as I felt the tension in his body. The bruise on RJ's jaw from their earlier confrontation was still visible, making this whole situation even more delicate.

"Daddy," Summer tugged at RJ's sleeve. "Is that the famous singer you said owned the house?"

And there it was - the innocent question that made everything more awkward. I caught Amber trying to hide her satisfied smirk behind her wine glass. She'd orchestrated this perfectly, I had to give her that.

"Yes, sweetheart," RJ answered carefully. "This is Michelle Morris...Bradley."

"Can we sit by the other kids?" Autumn asked, clearly more interested in her new friends than the adult tension.

"Of course," I said smoothly, gesturing to where the other children had gathered. "Harley, Arissa, why don't you help get everyone settled?"

My daughters caught my tone and moved to guide the three six-year-olds to one side of the table where they could sit together.

"Auntie Michelle!" Rose's excited voice preceded her launching herself at me.

I laughed, catching her easily. "Hey Fairy Girl."

"I sit Tiffy?" Her hopeful eyes darted to where her friend sat.

I chuckled, knowing exactly what chaos an unsupervised Rose could create. "Ask your Da. I'm not giving you permission for that."

"No, you sit by Da," Jeremy replied firmly.

"But Tiffy!" Rose's protest was immediate.

"Inside voice, Ro Ro," Killian reminded his sister.

"Ki Ki SHHH!" Rose commanded her twin.

"Róisín Dónailín O'Brien..." Jeremy's warning tone carried years of practiced patience.

Rose's response was a piercing scream.

Jeremy raised his eyebrow, stood up, and collected his daughter from my arms. "We'll be right back." The look on his face suggested Rose was about to learn some lessons about indoor voices.

"Oof, wouldn't want to be her right now," I commented as Killian quietly climbed into Livvie's lap, the perfect contrast to his sister's dramatics.

"Why don't you teens sit with the kids and keep an eye on them?" Hunter suggested diplomatically.

Harley nodded, clearly grateful for the excuse to avoid the adult tension. "OK. Come on, Kora."

As my daughters and the Jordan girls settled in with the James twins and Tiffy, Amber's laugh carried just a hint of satisfaction. "So, welcome to the chaos, RJ."

I met her eyes across the table. Oh, she'd played this well, but she had no idea what she'd just started. This would not stand.

Hunter guided me to a seat, positioning himself between RJ and me while still keeping Tomi secure. My baby girl was contentedly playing with her teething ring, blissfully unaware of the tension around her.

"Fionn!" Trevor called out. "Let's get some drinks sorted. Michelle, your usual?"

"Please," I nodded, keeping my voice carefully neutral. Years of public appearances and handling awkward social situations had taught me how to maintain composure, even when Amber was clearly reveling in her little scheme.

I could hear the younger kids chattering happily at their end of the table, while the teens kept them entertained. At least they were all getting along, completely unaware of the complicated dynamics playing out among the adults.

Jeremy returned with a much calmer Rose, who immediately went to sit with her father, apparently having learned her lesson about indoor voices. The normalcy of the moment - a parent dealing with a typical childhood outburst - somehow made this surreal situation feel even more bizarre.

Amber got an evil gleam in her eye. "So, Michelle, you and RJ were married... you two seem so different. RJ, I have to ask, what drew you to Michelle?"

The air seemed to freeze. Hunter's hand found mine under the table as I fought to keep my expression neutral. Of course Amber would go there - she was determined to make this as uncomfortable as possible.

"Well," RJ shifted slightly, clearly caught off guard by the direct question. "I guess opposites attract sometimes. And Michelle is a presence that is pretty hard to ignore. She can be very captivating. As far as our wedding, we went on a trip to Vegas and it just happened and we decided to try to make it work."

"Vegas?" Amber's feigned surprise wasn't fooling anyone. "That doesn't sound very... zen."

I could feel Mia tensing across the table, probably regretting her part in this scheme now that it was actually playing out.

"Some decisions," I cut in smoothly, "are better left in Vegas. Along with certain restaurants' attempts at authentic Italian cuisine."

"Speaking of restaurants," Trevor intervened, clearly trying to steer the conversation away from dangerous territory. But Amber wasn't done.

"So what happened?" she pressed, ignoring Trevor's attempt at redirection. "I mean, obviously it didn't work out..."

Hunter's grip on my hand tightened slightly. The loss of Aubrey wasn't something I discussed casually, especially not as dinner entertainment for Amber's revenge plot.

"Sometimes," RJ said carefully, his eyes meeting mine briefly, "things just aren't meant to be."

"Different paths," I added lightly, bouncing Tomi on my knee. My baby girl's presence was grounding, helping me maintain my composure. Amber had no idea about the real reasons "Different paths indeed," Amber mused, glancing between Hunter and me. "Though some paths seem to circle back around..."

"Amber," my voice carried a warning edge, "did you ever think maybe there's things about my life that aren't public knowledge for a reason? That as much of an open book as I am with the press, maybe there are things that are private?"

"We all have private moments," Amber shot back, "like Trev's culinary school encounter with Ramsey that he trusted you with and you used against him."

I glared. "I was trying to help Trev make peace with it."

"By bringing him here without Trev's permission?" Amber countered. "Look, I'm just making small talk. What came between you and RJ? Oh wait, did you cheat on him with Hunter like you always do? Fidelity isn't your strong point."

"Amber, stop..." Mia's warning carried real concern now.

"No, I want to know, what awful thing did Michelle do to RJ to make him want to annul their marriage?" Amber pressed.

Something in me snapped. "You want to know so bad?" I hissed, keeping my voice low enough that only the adults could hear. "I was pregnant and miscarried. It destroyed what was left of our marriage. Happy?!"

Amber froze, the satisfaction draining from her face as the weight of what I'd revealed hit her.

The silence at our end of the table was deafening. Hunter's arm tightened around me while RJ stared intently at his water glass. I hadn't spoken about Aubrey in years, and now I'd just blurted it out in the middle of a revenge dinner plot.

"Michelle, I..." Amber's voice had lost all its previous venom. "I had no idea..."

"No, you didn't," I said quietly, hugging Tomi closer. "Because contrary to what you might think, there are some things I keep private. Some pains that aren't for public consumption or entertainment."

Trevor reached for Amber's hand, probably seeing the horror dawning on his wife's face as she realized how far she'd pushed.

"Daddy!" Summer's voice carried from the kids' table. "After dinner I want to see Patrick again."

The innocent interruption was a blessing. The children, at least, were untouched by the heavy revelation that had just silenced the adults.

"I need some air," I managed, passing Tomi to Hunter before standing. "Excuse me."

I made it to the small garden behind the Cantina before the tears started. The evening air was cool, but I barely noticed. Years of carefully contained grief threatened to spill over.

"Mich." Jeremy's voice was soft as he approached, immediately pulling me into his arms. I buried my face in his chest, letting myself break just a little. Jeremy was one of the few people I trusted enough to fall apart with.

"I never wanted anyone to know," I managed against his shirt. "Especially not like this."

"I know you don't talk about it," he said softly, holding me tighter. I had told Jeremy about Aubrey, but he knew I rarely talked about her. "Amber had no right to push."

"I shouldn't have said anything. I should have just..."

"Let her keep pushing? That's not you, Mich." He paused as footsteps approached. "Some things can't stay buried forever."

I looked up to see RJ standing uncertainly at the garden entrance. Jeremy pressed a kiss to my forehead before stepping back.

"I'll make sure no one else comes out," he said quietly before heading inside.

The silence between RJ and me felt heavy with fifteen years of unspoken grief.

"MJ..." he started, then caught himself. "Michelle. I'm sorry. I never wanted you to have to talk about Aubrey like that."

"Neither did I," I wiped at my eyes, grateful for the darkness that hid most of my tears. "But Amber just kept pushing and..."

"And you snapped. I remember that temper." His voice carried no judgment, just memory. "Though usually you were throwing pizza dough at me, not revealing our deepest trauma."

The attempt at lightness fell flat, but I appreciated the effort. "I never threw dough at you. I had more respect for the pizza than that."

Another heavy silence fell. Fifteen years of distance, yet here we were, finally facing the loss that had torn us apart.

"I should have been there," he said quietly. "At the hospital. I never should have..."

"Left?" My voice cracked slightly. "Yeah. That... that broke me, RJ. More than losing Aubrey. Losing you both at once..."

"I went to see my father," RJ admitted, his voice heavy with old regret. "When you were in the hospital. I told myself it was because I needed guidance, but the truth is... I'd already been planning to ask for an annulment before we found out about Aubrey."

The confession hit hard, even after all these years. "So when I lost her..."

"I felt trapped," he said quietly. "How could I leave then? But trying to stay, pretending I could make it work when my heart wasn't in it... I just made everything worse."

"You should have told me the truth," I said, surprised by how steady my voice was. "Instead of letting me think we were grieving together, that we could heal together..."

"I know. But I didn't know how to tell you that I wasn't in love with you while you were dealing with losing our baby. So I waited, and that wait just made everything harder."

"Aubrey," I whispered our daughter's name. "She would have been fifteen now."

"I think about that sometimes," RJ said softly. "When I watch Summer and Autumn. Wonder what she would have been like."

"I used to imagine her all the time," I admitted. "Less now, but sometimes... when Harley hit certain ages, or now watching Arissa as a teen..."

"I'm sorry I made you go through that alone," he said. "Not just losing her, but the aftermath. The annulment papers..."

"You know what's strange?" I turned to look at him. "I'm not angry anymore. Not really. We weren't right for each other, RJ. We both know that now. I just wish... I wish we'd handled it better. For Aubrey's sake, if nothing else."

"Grace used to say that sometimes the kindest thing you can do is be honest about your feelings, even when the timing seems cruel." He paused. "I should have been honest with you."

"I loved you so much," I reflected, the words carrying no bitterness now, just acknowledgment of what had been.

RJ nodded. "I know. And that made it harder. I knew how much you loved me and I wanted to return that but I just didn't."

The simple truth of it hung in the air between us. All these years later, it was almost a relief to hear it stated so plainly. No more pretense, no more unspoken truths.

"You found real love though," I said quietly. "With Grace."

"And you found yours with Hunter," he replied. "The way you two look at each other... that's what I wanted for us. What I couldn't give you."

The garden door creaked slightly, and I turned to see Hunter standing there, his concern evident even in the dim light.

"Are you ok?" he asked softly.

I walked into his waiting arms, letting myself settle against his chest as he held me. "I am now. I'm sorry about that."

Hunter shook his head, tightening his embrace. "Never apologize for your feelings, especially where Aubrey is concerned."

I nodded against his chest, memories of that terrible night washing over me. Hunter had been the one to get me to the hospital, despite our argument just moments before. For a long time, I'd blamed him - we both had. The stress of our fight, the timing of everything... but I'd eventually realized the truth. I would have lost Aubrey anyway. It wasn't Hunter's fault, though I knew he still carried that guilt.

"We should probably head back inside," RJ said quietly, reading the moment. "The twins will be wondering..."

"Yeah," I stayed in Hunter's arms but turned slightly to face RJ. "Thank you. For finally having this conversation."

"Fifteen years too late, but..." RJ managed a small smile. "Maybe we needed the distance to have it properly."

Hunter's arms tightened slightly around me, protective but not possessive. He understood this moment wasn't about old feelings for RJ, but about finally laying Aubrey's ghost to rest.

"Amber's probably feeling pretty awful right now," I said, trying to lighten the mood.

"Good," Hunter muttered, making me smile despite everything.

"She had no idea," RJ pointed out. "Though maybe next time she'll think twice about using people's past relationships as entertainment."

"Yeah... that's part of our dynamic," I said, thinking about how Amber and I had always played these games, pushing each other's buttons. But this time she'd accidentally pushed too far, uncovered something real.

As we headed back inside, I couldn't help but think how different this evening had turned out from what Amber had planned. Her revenge dinner had somehow turned into something else entirely - a chance for long-needed closure.

The conversation at the table had shifted to safer topics when we returned. Amber wouldn't meet my eyes, her usual confidence replaced with genuine remorse. Trevor had Rachel in his arms, while the kids were still chattering happily at their end of the table, untouched by the adults' drama.

"Everything okay?" Jeremy asked quietly as I took my seat, Hunter settling beside me with Tomi.

"Yeah, everything's okay." I nodded.

"Mich, I'm sorry," Amber's voice carried genuine regret.

I smirked, letting that dangerous glint she knew so well enter my eyes. "Just remember Amber, payback's a bitch."

The color drained slightly from her face. She knew me well enough to know this wasn't over - that somewhere, sometime, when she least expected it, I would even the score. I wouldn't take this lying down and she knew it.

"Maybe we should order?" Trevor suggested, bouncing Rachel. He'd seen enough of our revenge plots over the years to recognize the warning signs.

"Excellent idea," Hunter agreed, though I caught his slight smile. He understood this was just part of my friendship with Amber - the constant push and pull that somehow worked for us.

The rest of dinner passed surprisingly smoothly. Summer and Autumn seemed to have found fast friends in Tiffany and the other kids, while the teens kept everything running smoothly at their end of the table. Our strange extended family had somehow absorbed RJ's girls without missing a beat, despite the earlier drama.

Later, after we'd made it home and the girls had disappeared to their rooms, Hunter and I settled into our bedroom routine. Tomi was already half asleep as we got her ready for bed.

"Are you really okay?" Hunter asked softly, watching me as I changed into my pajamas. The question carried all the weight of the evening - Aubrey, RJ, everything.

I nodded, surprising myself with how much I meant it. "I really am." Then reality crashed back in. "Other than the Death Ranger being out there regrouping."

Hunter's expression darkened as he laid Tomi in our bed. "Mia did some serious damage to him in the Netherworld. He'll need time to recover."

"But he will recover," I said quietly, watching our baby girl sleep peacefully. "And next time..."

"Next time we'll be ready," Hunter's arms slipped around my waist from behind. "The girls proved themselves today. The Celtic Rangers are with us. We have the Gem."

I leaned back against his chest, drawing strength from his presence. "He was using the sacred grounds, Hunter. The ancient Thunder traditions..."

"I know," his voice carried that edge it got whenever the Death Ranger corrupted something else that mattered to us. "But we stopped him this time. We'll stop him again."

"I just want our children safe," I whispered, watching Tomi's tiny chest rise and fall. "All of them. The twins, Jason's boy, Rocky and Aisha's daughter..."

"We'll protect them," Hunter promised, though we both knew it wasn't that simple. "Whatever it takes."

"Truth and Consequence"

Four monitors, three energy drinks, and absolutely no progress. I glared at the security protocols scrolling across my main display, more intrigued than frustrated by their complexity. After four hours of careful probing, I still couldn't make sense of the encryption protecting this section of Billy's systems.

"Come on," I muttered, fingers flying across my keyboard. "What are you hiding?"

Rose and Killian's giggles echoed from downstairs where Jeremy was attempting to keep our two-year-old terrors entertained. I should have been working on the cybersecurity upgrade for the Irish Department of Defence - a contract that paid significantly better than Billy's consulting work. Instead, I'd stumbled across this anomaly in Cranston Tech's systems two days ago and couldn't let it go.

This wasn't standard encryption. It wasn't even close to the government-grade security I dealt with daily. This was... something else. The code seemed to shift and adapt every time I probed it, like it was learning from my attempts. In fifteen years of hacking everything from Pentagon subsystems to MI6 databases, I'd never seen anything like it.

"Impossible," I whispered, leaning closer to study the patterns. "Unless..."

My third attempt at bypassing the first layer of security triggered something new - symbols I'd never seen before, definitely not any programming language I knew.

A particularly loud shriek from the living room made me jump. "Everything okay out there?" I called out.

"Just fine!" Jeremy's voice carried that slight strain that meant the twins were probably climbing something they shouldn't. "Though maybe a lunch break..."

"In a minute," I promised, eyes locked on the strange symbols.

I pulled up my secure connection to the Irish government's systems on the second monitor, comparing encryption patterns. Nothing even close. The third monitor displayed my collection of known security protocols - everything from basic corporate systems to the most sophisticated military networks I'd ever encountered. Still nothing that matched what I was seeing.

The fourth monitor showed my actual contracted work for Billy - the security interface I should have been focusing on. But something about this hidden section of his system kept nagging at me. A tech company, even one as innovative as Cranston Tech, shouldn't have security this advanced.

"What are you up to, Billy?" I murmured, starting another decryption sequence. "And why do I get the feeling I'm poking at something I really shouldn't?"

A small notification popped up in the corner of my main screen - Jeremy had sent a photo of the twins, Rose somehow covered head to toe in chocolate. From the empty Tim Tams packet visible in the shot, she'd found my hidden stash. Again.

But just as I was about to step away, something in the code shifted. The symbols rearranged themselves into new patterns I'd never seen before. The encryption wasn't just complex - it was actively evolving, changing its own parameters faster than any system should be capable of.

"Got you," I whispered, fingers flying across the keyboard. Whatever this was, it was definitely more than standard corporate security. But why would a tech company need this level of protection? And why was it hidden behind protocols that made government systems look primitive?

Come to think of it, Billy had been acting strange lately. Well, stranger than usual. The urgent projects, the increased security measures...

"Rose!" Jeremy's voice carried clear panic now. "Not the curtains!"

I quickly saved my progress and encrypted my own findings. The mysteries of Billy Cranston's system would have to wait. Right now, I had a chocolate-covered tornado to clean up.

But later... later I was going to figure out what exactly I'd stumbled into.

I stepped into the living room and found Rose running in joyous circles, laughing uncontrollably and covered in chocolate, while Daisy and Peach chased her, trying to lick her clean. Killy had climbed onto the back of the sofa to avoid the chaos, and Jeremy was making a valiant effort to catch Rose before the dogs could.

"Oy!" I called, raising my voice to cut through the laughter. "Alright, bathtime!"

"Yes! Ro Ro needs a bath!" Killy chimed in from his perch, eyes sparkling.

Rose, however, continued her giggles, ignoring me completely as she darted past.

"Róisín!" Jeremy called, his tone a mix of exasperation and affection.

I positioned myself strategically, anticipating her next dash. Just as she sped by, I scooped her up, her laughter ringing in my ears as she squirmed in my arms. With a knowing smile, I plopped her into Jeremy's waiting embrace.

"Róisín Dónailín O' Brien, a chailín dána, tá sé in am folcadh a thógáil anois. Ná rith ó Da. An dtuigeann tú mé?" he scolded gently as he headed toward the stairs with her.

Rose's giggling came to an abrupt halt as she pouted. "Da, bhí mé díreach ag baint taitnimh as."

"Caithfidh tú éisteacht nuair a bhíonn Da agus Mummy ag caint leat," Jeremy replied, his tone firm but loving.

"I take bath too?" Killy asked, his eyes wide with excitement.

I smiled, "You don't need a bath, but sure. Come on."

Killy reached up for me to pick him up, and I gladly obliged, lifting him into my arms. As we followed Jeremy and Rose up the stairs, the chaos of the day faded into the background, replaced by the warmth of these precious moments with my family.

Once in the bathroom, Jeremy and I expertly maneuvered the twins into the bath. Killy was all business, focused on getting clean, while Rose transformed the tub into her own splash zone. Water flew everywhere, soaking both Jeremy and me as she laughed, reveling in the chaos she created.

After the bath, I retrieved fluffy towels from the warmed rack, the comforting heat embracing me. Killy raised his arms, eyes wide with anticipation. I wrapped him in a warm towel, his favorite ritual, and pulled him close for cuddles. There was something so special about those moments, feeling his small body relax against me.

Just then, Rose slipped through Jeremy's grasp, giggling as she dashed down the hall, leaving a trail of water behind her. Our twins couldn't have been more different—Killy, the careful little man who loved his mummy cuddles, and Rose, the spirited whirlwind who thrived on mischief.

"Come back here, you little imp!" Jeremy called after Rose, shaking his head with an affectionate smile. I couldn't help but laugh at the delightful pandemonium of our lives.

Jeremy chased Rose down the hall, cornering her in our room as he scooped her up in her towel. He dried her off while she wiggled and giggled, her laughter infectious. I settled on the edge of our bed with Killy wrapped in my arms, giving him the Mummy cuddles he loved before we headed to his room to get dressed.

After some negotiation and a fair amount of wriggling, we finally managed to get both twins dressed and ready for lunch. Jeremy whipped up a couple of sangas, and then it was time for their naps. As I was settling Killy into his bed, I could hear Rose down the hall arguing with Jeremy.

"No nap!"

"Róisín, yes nap," he replied firmly, his tone leaving no room for debate.

"Not tired!" Rose protested, her voice rising in that unmistakable whine.

I chuckled silently from Killy's room, knowing all too well how stubborn she could be. "Good luck convincing her, J," I whispered to Killy, who was already yawning.

Jeremy's patience was remarkable as he tried to reason with her. "You need your rest to play with your friends later. Remember? We're going to the Cantina tonight, and you'll need energy to see Patrick."

"Patrick!" Rose's excitement momentarily distracted her from her resistance, but it wasn't enough to convince her to settle down.

"Exactly! But first, nap time," Jeremy said, his voice gentle but insistent.

I finished tucking Killy in, placing a soft kiss on his forehead. "Sweet dreams, my little man."

As I headed back to Rose's room, I found Jeremy still trying to coax her into bed. "Róisín, you can be a pirate or a fairy in your dreams. But you need to close your eyes first."

"Fairy!" Rose insisted, her little face lighting up at the mention of her favorite character.

"Exactly! But even fairies need to rest," Jeremy said, his voice gentle but insistent.

"I'll be the best fairy ever!" Rose declared, finally relenting as Jeremy pointed to her bed.

"Absolutely," he agreed, tucking her in. "But first, you need to take a nap so you can spread your fairy wings later."

As I left the room, I couldn't help but smile. The chaotic but loving atmosphere of our home made everything worthwhile, even on days that felt overwhelming.

Jeremy and I made our way back downstairs, collapsing into the living room for a brief moment of peace before reality called us back to work. He had a client due in fifteen minutes, and I had both my contracted work and my... extracurricular investigation waiting. But for now, I just wanted to breathe.

I settled onto the sofa, laying my head in his lap as he sat down. "Never a dull moment," I laughed softly.

"With our Róisín? Never," he replied, his fingers running gently through my hair. His touch was soothing, grounding - a quiet moment of connection in our wonderfully chaotic life.

"Billy's systems are driving me mad," I admitted, closing my eyes. "There's something... different about them. Like nothing I've ever seen before."

"Different how?" Jeremy asked, his tone casual but I could hear the slight edge of concern. He knew my capabilities better than anyone - if something was stumping me, it had to be unusual.

"The encryption, the security protocols - they're not just advanced, they're..." I paused, trying to find the right words. "It's like they're alive somehow. Adapting. Learning."

"Maybe that's why he hired you," Jeremy suggested. "To figure out what's going on."

I opened my eyes to look up at him. "Or to make sure no one else does."

The doorbell rang before he could respond. His client was early.

"Back to reality," I sighed, sitting up. "Have fun with your rich people problems."

"Have fun with your impossible code," he kissed my forehead before standing. "Try not to start an international incident before dinner."

"Have fun with your impossible code," he kissed my forehead before standing. "Try not to start an international incident before dinner."

"No promises," I called after him as he went to answer the door. I could hear him greeting his client, discussing hair color possibilities and style options with that natural enthusiasm he brought to his work.

Four monitors glowed welcomingly as I settled back into my chair. I pulled up the Irish government contract on the main screen - might as well get some actual paid work done while my programs ran diagnostics on Billy's mysterious security protocols.

But my eyes kept drifting to the strange symbols that had appeared earlier. They were like nothing I had ever seen before.

My phone buzzed with a text from Amber. She was asking if I'd heard anything about Michelle's revenge. We all knew it was coming after Amber's RJ stunt and knowing Michelle it would be something even more brutal than the Ramsey incident.

I smiled, typing a quick response before turning back to my screens. My friends' drama was entertaining, but right now, Billy Cranston's secrets were far more intriguing.

I pulled up my decryption program, watching as it tried - and failed - to make sense of the security protocols. This section of Billy's system wasn't part of my contracted work - I'd stumbled across it accidentally while implementing the new security interface he'd hired me to design. But something about these encrypted files called to the hacker in me, the part that couldn't resist a locked door.

Whatever this was, it wasn't just advanced technology. The way it responded to my probes, the way it seemed to anticipate my next move... it was almost like it had its own intelligence. I had a feeling Billy hadn't meant for me to find this.

Come to think of it, a lot of unexplainable things had been happening lately. The weird attack downtown that the Gardaí were trying to pretend didn't happen. Rumours of spirits walking among the living. Something was going on. I didn't know how or if any of the weirdness connected, but I was going to find out. Starting with this insane encryption.

I initiated another decryption sequence, this time trying a different approach. If traditional methods weren't working, maybe it was time to think outside the box. Way outside the box. I'd built my reputation on being able to crack any system, and I wasn't about to let Billy Cranston's mysterious security protocols be the first to defeat me.

The strange symbols flickered across my screen again, almost seeming to mock my efforts. But this time, I noticed something different. A pattern, maybe? Or was I just seeing what I wanted to see?

Amber

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The launch of Amber Nichole was consuming every minute of my day. London Fashion Week loomed just weeks away, and even though manufacturing and shipping were on track, launching a full cosmetics line was no small feat. The industry buzz exceeded my expectations, and they didn't even know about the ghost launch planned for two weeks after. I couldn't wait to see Bre's face when Amber Nichole demolished Doll 10 in the market.

Lydia had just confirmed our timeline when Gina appeared in my doorway.

"There's my favorite PR genius," I smiled, gesturing for her to come in.

"Got a minute?" Gina settled into the chair across from my desk.

Ellie emerged from her spot under my desk, immediately claiming Gina's lap. My usually well-behaved pup had a special weakness for Gina.

"Someone's happy to see you," I laughed as Gina scratched behind Ellie's ears.

"Listen," Gina leaned forward, her expression turning serious. "I've been looking at our marketing metrics. The print campaign is solid, but our digital presence needs something more."

"Let me guess," I interrupted, already knowing where this was headed. "We need a digital marketing specialist? Someone like, oh, I don't know... Áine?"

Gina's eyes widened. "How did you-"

"Please," I cut her off with a knowing smile. "With how close you two have gotten lately, I've been waiting for this conversation. Let me talk to Trev and Pete about the budget. If the numbers work..."

"Really?" Gina's eyes lit up with hope.

"Really. But Finance has to sign off first, so don't get too excited."

"Thanks Amber," Gina beamed, giving Ellie a final cuddle before setting her down and practically bouncing out of my office.

I chuckled and patted my lap, watching Ellie scramble up eagerly. "Oh baby girl, if they only knew how Mommy sees these things coming." I nuzzled her soft fur, breathing in her familiar comfort. "Guess we should call Daddy about Áine, hm?"

With Ellie settled contentedly in my lap, I dialed Trev's number. Two rings, then-

"Trevor O'Sullivan."

"Hey handsome."

"Amber," his voice softened immediately. "Perfect timing for a break. What's on your mind, love?"

"Well, Gina finally did it - asked about bringing Áine on for digital marketing."

A warm chuckle. "Took her long enough. Been waiting for that one."

"Sí, mi corazón. Thoughts?"

"Have to run it past Pete, but..." he paused thoughtfully. "She'd need to handle digital for all of O'Sullivan Inc, not just Amber Nichole. Can't justify the position otherwise."

"Exactly what I was thinking," I agreed, scratching behind Ellie's ears.

"We could do a trial period," Trev suggested. "See how she handles the whole corporate portfolio before making anything permanent."

"Smart," I nodded, though he couldn't see me. "Plus it gives us time to see if she and Gina can actually work together professionally, not just as friends."

"Speaking of friends," his tone shifted slightly. "Have you heard from Michelle since... you know."

I winced, remembering that disastrous dinner. "Nothing. Complete radio silence." I shifted Ellie as my leg started to go numb. "I really messed up, Trev. I pushed too far."

"You couldn't have known, love."

"Still." I sighed, remembering Michelle's face that night. "Whatever revenge she's planning, I probably deserve it."

"Let's focus on one crisis at a time, yeah?" His voice carried a gentle smile. "Want me to talk to Pete about Áine's numbers first?"

"Please. The sooner we can get this sorted, the better chance we have of having everything in place before London."

"Right then, I'll corner Pete after his meeting. Anything else on your mind, love?"

"No, that's all. I should get back to my endless inbox. I love you."

"I love you too, mo grá. See you tonight."

"See you tonight, mi corazón," I ended the call, giving Ellie one last squeeze before setting her down.

My email inbox glared at me accusingly - the price of success, I supposed. The industry buzz around Amber Nichole had exploded beyond my expectations, and every media outlet seemed desperate for an exclusive. Between press requests and interviews, the next few months would be absolute chaos. At least I had the photoshoot this afternoon to look forward to. Despite everything I'd accomplished as a businesswoman, there was still something special about being in front of the camera. I might have moved on from my modeling days, but that didn't mean I didn't miss it sometimes.

Livvie

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The strange symbols on my screen had completely consumed my attention, splitting my focus between cracking Billy's impossible system and my actual paid contracts, when a thunderous crash from upstairs shattered my concentration.

"I'm ok!" Rose's voice carried that particular tone that always meant trouble. In Rose-speak, "I'm ok" translated directly to "I'm not injured, but please don't come see what I've done."

I sighed, quickly locking my computer before bolting toward the stairs. Jeremy burst out of his salon at the same moment, and we shared that look of parental dread as we rushed upstairs together.

The scene in Rose's room was exactly the disaster we'd expected - her bookshelf had been completely dismantled, shelves and contents scattered across the floor like a tornado had hit. Killy stood at a safe distance, hands on his hips in perfect imitation of my scolding pose.

"Ro Ro you make mess! Clean now!"

Meanwhile, Rose sat in the middle of the chaos, giggling with pure delight at the destruction she'd caused. Jeremy and I exchanged exhausted looks from the doorway.

"Are you ok, love?" Jeremy finally asked, scooping up our little demolition expert.

"I ok," Rose nodded cheerfully, clearly proud of her accomplishment.

"I ok," Rose nodded cheerfully, clearly proud of her accomplishment.

"What were you trying to do, a stór?" Jeremy asked, though we both knew the answer. Rose never needed a reason for chaos beyond the joy of creating it.

"Want fairy book," she pointed to her favorite story, now buried under the wreckage of her climbing adventure.

"Róisín," I tried to keep my voice stern despite her infectious grin, "what do we say when we want something up high?"

"Ask Mummy or Da," she recited, not looking remotely sorry.

Killy was still surveying the damage with his hands on his hips. "Bad Ro Ro. Big mess."

"You help clean?" Rose asked her brother sweetly.

"No! Your mess!" Killy shook his head firmly.

I caught Jeremy fighting back a smile. Our twins couldn't be more different - Killy with his perfect mini-adult behavior, and Rose, our beloved agent of chaos.

"Right then," Jeremy set Rose down. "Let's get this sorted before my next client arrives."

My phone buzzed in my pocket - probably another text from Amber about Michelle's inevitable revenge. But family drama would have to wait. Right now, we had a bookshelf to resurrect.

I looked at Killy, noting the exasperation on his little face as he watched his sister's latest disaster. He was clearly tired of being the responsible twin.

"How about I take Killy for a snack while Da and Rose clean this up?"

"I want snack!" Rose protested immediately.

"After we clean this up," Jeremy's tone left no room for argument.

I scooped up Killy and headed downstairs to the kitchen. "Would you like some Jammies, love?"

Killy shook his head solemnly. "No bikkies. Veg."

I couldn't help but smile. While Rose would have been bouncing off the walls at the mention of biscuits, here was Killy, asking for his carrot sticks and celery. I pulled out one of his pre-packed veggie snacks and settled him at the table, pouring myself a glass of mango punch while he munched contentedly.

The sound of Jeremy and Rose cleaning drifted down from upstairs, punctuated by Rose's occasional giggles and Jeremy's patient instructions. I could picture her "helping" - probably making an even bigger mess in the process of trying to fix the first one.

"Ro Ro silly," Killy observed between bites of carrot.

"She is, isn't she?" I agreed, watching him methodically work his way through his vegetables. "But that's why we love her."

"Love Ro Ro," he nodded seriously. "But she messy."

My phone buzzed again, and this time I did check it. Not Amber, but Billy - asking about my progress on the security interface. The legitimate one, not the encrypted mystery I'd stumbled across. I typed a quick response, assuring him everything was on schedule.

The guilt of poking around in systems I shouldn't be accessing nagged at me slightly. But those symbols... they were unlike anything I'd ever seen in my years of hacking. And something was definitely going on in this town lately. The attacks downtown, the strange energy surges...

"Mummy?" Killy's voice pulled me back to the present. "More veg please?"

I smiled, "Just a little. Don't want to ruin your dinner."

As I got him another small portion of vegetables, thundering footsteps on the stairs announced Rose and Jeremy's approach. Rose burst into the kitchen first, face flushed with pride.

"All clean!" she declared, climbing onto the chair next to her brother. "Snack now?"

"Did Da check that it's properly clean?" I asked, knowing our daughter's definition of 'clean' often involved shoving things under furniture.

Jeremy appeared in the doorway, looking slightly disheveled but amused. "Actually, she did quite well. Even sorted her books by color."

"Pretty colors!" Rose nodded enthusiastically. "Like rainbow!"

I pulled out some carrot sticks for Rose too, though I knew she'd wrinkle her nose at them. Sure enough-

"No veg! Want Jammies!"

"No ma'am. You got into Mummy's Tim Tams this morning. You've had quite enough sugar for today. Veg or no snack," I said firmly.

Rose's bottom lip jutted out in that practiced pout. "Cheese puffs?"

I sighed, recognizing my own processed food addiction in my daughter. "Fine." I retrieved a small bag of Wotsits from the cupboard and handed them to her. They weren't exactly Cheetos, but they were the closest thing I'd found since moving to Ireland. Some American habits died hard.

"Orange fingers!" Rose declared happily, already tearing into the bag.

Jeremy shot me a knowing look. He'd long since given up trying to convert our daughter to his healthy snacking habits. Like mother, like daughter - though thankfully Killy had inherited his father's more sensible tastes.

My phone buzzed yet again, and this time the notification made my heart skip. One of my decryption programs had found something in Billy's system. Something about... power signatures?

Amber

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I stood up from the makeup chair, enjoying the familiar buzz of being back on set. Ellie watched attentively from her designated chair as the photographer started giving directions.

"Hold on - where's our animal model?" he asked suddenly.

"Animal model?" My stomach dropped slightly.

Right on cue, Michelle appeared, Thara preening in her arms. "Here she is, ready for her close-up."

"What?" I stared as she handed me her notoriously temperamental cat.

"Oh, I had a change of heart about using Thara in your autumn launch campaign," Michelle's smile was pure sugar-coated vengeance.

"What?" I repeated weakly. "We already determined Thara wasn't part of this."

"Oh, Lydia didn't tell you?" Michelle's innocent tone wasn't fooling anyone.

"Tell me what?" I asked cautiously.

"You really should check your email."

I practically ran for my phone. Sure enough, there it was - an email from Lydia sent during my hair and makeup session.

Subject: Amber Nichole Autumn Launch

Darling,

I called your office and they told me you were already at the photoshoot. I didn't want to disrupt by calling your mobile. I just spoke to Michelle Morris and she changed her mind about us using Thara in the Autumn campaign. Now, I know you had hesitations when we discussed it before, but I assure you, this is going to be a marvelous addition to the launch. Michelle will bring her to the photoshoot and of course she will be with you throughout London Fashion Week. I would also like to discuss a special edition palette, perhaps a quad, named Thara. We can emboss her face on the case. Our tag line will be "The Purrfect Autumn Palette". Thank you so much for making this happen. Michelle said you talked her into letting us use Thara. I owe you.

Best,

Lydia James

I nearly dropped my phone, sliding it back into my purse before returning to set. "This is your revenge, isn't it?"

Michelle's smile was angelic. "Would I use my sweet baby girl as a revenge tactic?"

"Yes."

"Oh, then I suppose it is. Don't fuck with me again," she said sweetly, depositing Thara in my arms.

"I can't wait to see what a natural my baby is in front of the camera."

I stared at Thara, who was already giving me that superior look I'd come to associate with Michelle's cat. This was brilliant revenge, I had to admit. Not only would I have to work with the most difficult cat in Ireland, but she'd be with me through all of Fashion Week. And a palette named after her? The 'Purrfect' Autumn Palette? I could already picture Michelle's satisfied smirk every time she saw it.

"Right then," the photographer clapped his hands. "Let's start with some simple poses. Amber, if you could just-"

Thara immediately twisted in my arms, clearly unimpressed with his direction.

"Oh, she doesn't like taking direction," Michelle called out helpfully. "Or quick movements. Or being held too tightly. Or too loosely. Actually, she's quite particular about everything."

I shot Michelle a look. "Anything else I should know?"

"Oh, so much," Michelle settled into a nearby chair, making herself comfortable. "But watching you figure it out will be much more entertaining. Don't worry though - I'll be here for the entire shoot. All three hours of it."

Thara's tail swished dangerously close to my perfectly applied makeup.

This was going to be a very long day.

"Maybe we should start with some standing shots?" the photographer suggested uncertainly, clearly sensing the tension between cat and model.

"Oh no," Michelle chimed in. "Thara prefers to be photographed sitting. Don't you, baby girl?"

Thara's only response was to dig her claws ever so slightly into my arm.

"Michelle," I managed through gritted teeth, "could we maybe discuss this..."

"Discuss what?" Her innocent tone was back. "How you're going to handle Thara during the entire London Fashion Week press tour? Or the palette launch party where she'll be the guest of honor?"

The photographer looked increasingly concerned as Thara began methodically shredding the sleeve of my designer outfit.

"You win," I whispered. "Message received. Never push about personal matters again."

Michelle's smile widened. "Oh grasshopper, we're just getting started. Now, Thara absolutely loves having her photo taken... when she's in the mood."

"And is she in the mood?" I asked, already knowing the answer as Thara continued her systematic destruction of my sleeve.

"Hard to say," Michelle mused, examining her nails. "She's quite particular about lighting. And temperature. And energy. She's very sensitive to negative energy, you know."

The photographer cleared his throat nervously. "Perhaps we could try-"

"Oh!" Michelle sat up straighter. "I almost forgot to mention - Lydia loved the idea of Thara doing press interviews with you. She thinks it'll add an authentic touch to the launch."

I froze. "Press interviews?"

"Mhmm. Morning shows, magazine features... Oh, and Graham Norton specifically requested both of you for his show. Isn't that exciting?"

Thara chose that moment to express her opinion by attempting to climb onto my head.

"Michelle," I said carefully, trying to protect both my hair and makeup from feline assault, "we need to talk about this."

"We absolutely do," she agreed cheerfully. "Over dinner on Friday. Trevor's coming too, of course. Thara will want to discuss her rider requirements for Fashion Week."

I sighed in defeat. There was no way around this - Michelle had orchestrated her revenge perfectly. For the next three hours, I maintained my professional smile while wrestling with a cat whose diva behavior made even the most difficult supermodels I'd worked with seem easy in comparison. The photographer kept insisting we were getting "unique" and "compelling" shots, but I knew better. Every time Thara deigned to look at the camera, Michelle's satisfied smirk grew wider. When the shoot finally ended, I handed Thara back to Michelle with barely concealed relief.

"Oh, by the way," Michelle said casually as she settled Thara into her backpack, "I'll be in Nashville filming during London Fashion Week. So you'll have Thara for the whole week."

"What?" I stared at her. "I'm cat sitting?"

"If you want to think of it like that, sure." Her smile was pure evil. "Anyway, gotta run. See you Friday. Ta!"

I watched her breeze away, my fury building with each click of her heels. By the time I made it home, I was ready to explode. Trevor was in the kitchen cooking while Niamh sat with Rachel, both looking up as I stormed in.

"Michelle Morris is going to regret messing with my brand," I announced, practically vibrating with anger.

"What happened, mo grá?" Trevor crossed to me, his hands settling on my arms in that way that usually calmed me down. Usually.

I explained the Thara situation, watching his expression shift from concern to barely hidden amusement.

"You could let it go," he suggested carefully. "Let this feud die out."

"And let her win? Hell no. I'll play along with her stuck-up cat for now, but this isn't over."

"What's not over?" Mia appeared in the doorway, Kaya at her heels.

After hearing my tale of woe, she didn't even try to hide her amusement.

"Some best friend you are," I accused.

"I am your best friend," she managed between poorly suppressed laughs, "but you have to admit, you sort of deserve it."

"She started this with the Ramsey thing!" I protested.

"And you can finish it by letting it go," Trevor tried again.

"Not a chance."

"I'll help you plot when I get back," Mia offered, already heading for the door.

"Where are you off to?"

"Um, just grabbing coffee with RJ," she said too casually.

I forgot my Thara troubles immediately, zeroing in on Mia's slightly uncomfortable posture. "Coffee? With RJ?"

"It's not what you think," Mia said quickly. "We just...have some business to discuss."

"Uh huh." I wasn't buying it. "And this requires coffee because...?"

"Don't start," Mia warned, "It's just coffee."

"You never have coffee with anyone. Not usually even me..."

"I'm leaving now," Mia cut me off. "Try not to plot any revenge that will result in actual bloodshed."

As she disappeared through the door, I turned to Trevor. "Did you know about this?"

"About what? Mia having coffee with someone? Or about you having to parade around London with Thara for a week?"

"Don't deflect," I pointed at him. "Something's going on there."

Niamh chuckled, bouncing Rachel gently. "Perhaps we should focus on one drama at a time, love?"

Livvie

~~~~~

I practically sprinted back to my office, leaving Jeremy to handle the twins' snack time aftermath. My fingers flew across the keyboard as I logged back in, heart racing with anticipation. Sure enough, I'd broken through the first layer of Billy's encryption - only to find more layers waiting beneath.

The exposed files were frustratingly cryptic, filled with strings of code that didn't match any programming language I knew. Just as I started working on the second layer of security, my concentration was broken by tiny footsteps.

"Help Mummy?" Killy appeared in the doorway, looking hopeful.

I smiled, patting my lap. "Sure, love."

He scrambled up, settling against me as I returned to work. It wouldn't be the first time my little pattern-finder had spotted something I'd missed. Killy might not understand coding, but he had an uncanny ability to see connections that others missed. Still, this level of encryption seemed beyond even his remarkable-

"Mummy, pattern break," Killy said suddenly, one small finger pointing at my screen.

I followed his gesture, studying the section he'd indicated. At first glance, it looked like random symbols, but... there. A subtle disruption in the sequence, almost invisible unless you knew exactly what to look for. Or unless you were a two-year-old with an extraordinary gift for patterns.

"Good eye, love," I murmured, already typing in new parameters based on his observation. The encryption started to shift, and suddenly I was staring at what looked like... personnel files? Detailed profiles on people I knew - Jason, Kim, Billy himself. And Michelle... pages and pages of data about Michelle.

"Pretty colors," Killy commented, pointing at what appeared to be some kind of power classification system, marked in different colored indicators.

I scrolled, my eyes widening. The files went on and on - dozens of people, many I recognized, some I didn't. Tommy Oliver, Rocky DeSantos, RJ James, Hunter Bradley... What was this? Some kind of monitoring system?

"Ro Ro coming," Killy warned, just before Rose's telltale giggle echoed down the hall.

I quickly saved my progress and switched screens. Whatever I'd just stumbled onto, it was bigger than I'd imagined. Billy wasn't just running a tech company - he was keeping tabs on something much more complex.

"Mummy work?" Rose appeared in the doorway, face still dusted with orange Wotsits powder.

"Yes, love. Mummy's working." I lifted Killy down as Rose climbed up to investigate my screens. Thankfully, I'd switched back to my legitimate contract work.

But those files... they connected people I'd never thought were connected. Michelle, Jason, and Kim I understood - they'd known each other since school. But RJ? Rocky? And why did Billy have what looked like detailed battle statistics on all of them?

"Da says dinner soon," Rose announced, trying to press random keys on my keyboard.

"Hands off, missy," I caught her fingers. "Why don't you and Killy go help Da? Mummy needs to finish something important."

As soon as they left, I started to look over the files. I opened the first one:

Subject Profile: Jason Lee Scott

- **Primary Ranger Identity:** Red Ranger
- **Secondary Ranger Identity:** Gold Zeo Ranger
- **Designation Status:** Retired (Able to resume Active status if required)
- **Clearance Level:** Omega
- **Date Created:** 10/11/1993
- **Last Updated:** 08/17/2023

Mighty Morphin' Red Ranger

- **Zord:** Tyrannosaurus Dinozord
- **Primary Weapon:** Power Sword
- **Secondary Weapon:** Blade Blaster
- **Combat Specialization:** Close-quarters combat, martial arts-based attacks, leadership.
- **Metrics:**
 - **Morphing Sequence Time:** 1.25 seconds.
 - **Armor Integrity:** 98.7% (Baseline average).
 - **Power Output (Power Sword):** Average 12,000 joules per strike.
 - **Zord Synchronization:** 99.8% (Near-perfect connection).
 - **Strategic Profile:** Excels at on-the-fly tactical adjustments and team coordination.

Zeo Gold Ranger

- **Zord:** Pyramidas, the Gold Zeo Zord.
- **Primary Weapon:** Golden Power Staff.
- **Combat Specialization:** High-impact energy attacks and defense.
- **Metrics:**
 - **Morphing Sequence Time:** 1.8 seconds.
 - **Armor Integrity:** 100% (Zeo Crystal-based armor is nearly invulnerable).
 - **Power Output (Golden Power Staff):** Average 25,000 joules per energy blast.
 - **Zord Synchronization:** 100% (The Zeo Crystal provides a seamless link).
 - **Strategic Profile:** Utilizes overwhelming force and a strategic, defensive posture.

Medical & Physical Data

- **Blood Type:** O-Positive.
- **Martial Arts Disciplines:** Shotokan Karate, Taekwondo.
- **Physical Strength:** Peak human; 9/10 rating.
- **Endurance:** High; can maintain peak performance for extended periods.

Notes & Observations

- **Leadership Transition:** Jason's transfer of the Red Ranger powers to Rocky and later the Gold Ranger powers to Trey was a critical moment in Ranger history.
- **Mental Fortitude:** Subject consistently demonstrates high levels of courage and a deep sense of responsibility, often pushing his physical limits to protect others.
- **Long-Term Goal:** To understand the human limitations and resilience of a Ranger. This data is essential for developing future Ranger suits and combat strategies.
- Master Morpher pending

Subject Profile: Hunter Bradley

- **Primary Ranger Identity:** Crimson Thunder Ranger
- **Designation Status:** Retired (Master Morpher Ready)
- **Clearance Level:** Beta
- **Date Created:** 05/23/2003 (After he joined the team)
- **Last Updated:** 07/12/2025

Crimson Thunder Ranger

- **Zord:** Crimson Insectizord
- **Primary Weapon:** Thunder Staff
- **Secondary Weapon:** Crimson Blaster
- **Combat Specialization:** Close-quarters combat, thunder-based attacks, and high-impact strikes.
- **Key Metrics:**
 - **Morphing Sequence Time:** 1.9 seconds.
 - **Armor Integrity:** 99.2% (The Thunder Ranger armor is highly durable).
 - **Power Output (Thunder Staff):** Average 18,500 joules per strike.
 - **Zord Synchronization:** 98.9% (A strong connection, especially with his brother Blake as they co-pilot the Thunder Megazord).
 - **Strategic Profile:** Initially prefers a solo-strike approach but has adapted to team tactics over time.

Psychological & Tactical Profile

- **Role:** Senior Field Commander (after joining the team), Co-leader alongside Shane.
- **Leadership Style:** Direct and independent. Often clashed with Shane due to a shared desire to lead, but they ultimately respected each other's abilities.
- **Threat Analysis:** Excellent at tracking and isolating targets. Specializes in head-on assaults.
- **Team Synergy:** Requires a higher degree of communication to integrate with the Wind Rangers due to their different ninja philosophies.

Medical & Physical Data

- **Martial Arts Disciplines:** Thunder Ninja Arts.
- **Physical Strength:** High; excels in upper body strength and powerful strikes.
- **Endurance:** High; can sustain prolonged fights.

Notes & Observations

- **Power Source:** The Thunder Ranger powers are a unique and powerful offshoot of traditional Ninja arts, harnessing the power of thunder and lightning. This power set, while potent, has a higher risk of being drained by mystical or magical enemies.
- **Relationship with Blake:** The bond between Hunter and his brother Blake is a significant factor in his combat effectiveness and personal stability. The brothers often fight as a unit, and their combined Zords form the Thunder Megazord.

- **Post-Ranger Life:** Hunter is currently married to fellow Ranger Michelle Morris. Their combined power is under observation as are their daughters Harlyn and Tatum. Their combined power is notable.

Subject Profile: Michelle Morris

- **Primary Ranger Identity:** Purple Ranger
- **Secondary Ranger Identity:** Sailor Saturn (Civilian designation: Princess of Saturn, Soldier of Destruction)
- **Designation Status:** Retired (Master Morpher Ready)
- **Clearance Level:** Omega
- **Date of Activation:** 10/11/1993
- **Last Updated:** 07/12/25

Ranger Abilities & Power Set

- **Power Source:** Her life force is tied to her Power Amethyst
- **MMPR Zord:** Brontosaurus Dinozord.
- **Primary Weapon:** Power Staff, a weapon that can manipulate and create energy, capable of producing concussive blasts and solid energy constructs. It can also channel concentrated lightning bolts and shockwaves.
- **Combat Specialization:** Unconventional and creative warfare. Her fighting style is not based on traditional martial arts but on creating unexpected situations and overwhelming her opponents with a chaotic, unpredictable power set.
- **Sailor Soldier Identity:** She is the true Sailor Saturn and the Princess of Saturn, with her Purple Power tied to her Saturnian energy.

Psychological & Tactical Profile

- **Role:** Co-leader of the Mighty Morphin and Zeo teams, trainer for all teams there after. She is an asset of last resort due to the sheer destructive potential of her powers. Her unpredictable nature makes her a dangerous ally and a nightmare for any opponent to anticipate.
- **Leadership Style:** Unconventional. She doesn't command; she manipulates and orchestrates, often placing people where she needs them to be without their full knowledge.
- **Threat Analysis:** She is a high-risk, high-reward asset. Her power can be overwhelming, but her lack of adherence to traditional protocols and her casual disregard for the consequences of her actions make her dangerous.

- **Personality:** Michelle is characterized by her chaotic confidence, unapologetic nature, and self-awareness. She has a documented history of impulsive decisions, and while she struggles with fidelity and commitment, she has a deep capacity for love and loyalty to her family and closest friends.

Notes & Observations

- **The Blood Lock:** The release of the lock is a major development. The Purple Powers are no longer tied to Michelle's bloodline.
- **The "Charm":** Her ability to "charm" people and AIs is a part of her power set. It's a subconscious or conscious manipulation of reality that makes others ignore her chaos and see her actions as "iconic" or "authentic." This makes her a difficult subject to analyze objectively.
- **Family:** She is devoted to her children, Harley, Arissa, and Tomi, and her husband Hunter. Her friendships, particularly with Jeremy, Mina, and her brother Zack, are a central part of her support system. She is also a mentor and a teacher to many new Ranger teams and artists.

As I read over the files I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Michelle and her friends were Power Rangers...

My fingers hovered over the keyboard as pieces started falling into place. The mysterious attacks downtown, the weird energy readings... And Michelle... a Purple Ranger AND some kind of magical princess?

I scrolled further, finding more familiar names. The files were meticulously detailed, tracking everything from battle statistics to personal relationships. Even the recent tension between Rocky and Hunter was documented, along with notes about how it might affect team dynamics.

"Mummy! Dinner!" Rose's voice carried up the stairs.

"Coming!" I called back, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from the screen. There was so much more to process. Billy wasn't just monitoring them - he was collecting data on their children too. Notes about Harley and Arissa's "potential," references to something called "Saturn Starseeds"...

I quickly created a secure backup of everything I'd found. Whatever was happening in Cork, whatever my friends were involved in, it was bigger than anything I could have imagined. And now I had to decide what to do with this information.

"Death's End"

It had been two days since we'd seen the Death Ranger. We knew he'd survived his encounter with Mia in the Netherworld, but it had weakened him significantly. Now he was regrouping somewhere, gathering strength - and so were we.

I absently bounced Tomi on my knee, settled comfortably against Hunter on our living room sofa. Jason and Kim sat across from us, both positioned to keep an eye on Ollie playing in the backyard with Harley, Arissa, and the James twins. The relative peace felt strange - Rocky and Aisha were at their hotel with Tam, and RJ was off somewhere with Mia, a development I was trying very hard not to have opinions about.

"So let me get this straight," Kim's voice carried equal parts admiration and confusion. "You're using Thara to get revenge on Amber?"

I nodded, unable to suppress my satisfied smile. "You should have seen her face when I dropped that Fashion Week bombshell."

"But isn't Amber supposed to be your friend?"

"I mean, I guess she kind of is..." I hedged, watching understanding dawn on Kim's face.

"Don't try to decode the Michelle-ness," Hunter advised, his arm warm around my shoulders. "Just accept it."

"So you've just accepted that your wife is using her cat as a weapon of mass destruction?" Jason asked dryly.

"Thara is a willing participant," I defended. "She enjoys making Amber's life difficult almost as much as I do."

The sound of children's laughter filtered in from the backyard, making us all instinctively check their position. The girls had adapted remarkably well to their new powers, but the memory of the Death Ranger's last attack was still too fresh.

"Have the Celtic Rangers had any luck tracking his energy signature?" Kim asked, her voice dropping slightly.

"Nothing concrete," Hunter's arm tightened around me imperceptibly. "But Saoirse says the ancient grounds are... different. Like his corruption left some kind of residue."

"And Mia?" Jason's question carried weight. "Has she sensed anything since..."

"Since she chased him into the realm of death?" I finished. "She's been... distracted."

"By RJ," Kim couldn't help adding, earning a collective groan from the rest of us.

"I knew Mia was insane, but this is next level," I shook my head in disbelief. "She cannot seriously be interested in RJ. I mean, of all people..."

"Someone should warn her about his disappearing act when things get tough," Hunter's voice carried that edge it always did when RJ came up. The memory of being left alone in that hospital still haunted us both.

"Ohhh," Kim's eyes lit up with mischief. "If they get together, RJ could be Arissa's godfather!"

"Absolutely not," Hunter made an exaggerated gagging sound that set Tomi giggling. "I draw the line at RJ being anything to any of my children."

"Absolutely not," Hunter made an exaggerated gagging sound that set Tomi giggling. "I draw the line at RJ being anything to any of my children."

A sudden chill ran through me, making Tomi whimper slightly. Hunter felt it too - I could tell by the way he tensed. Outside, the Celtic Rangers' ancient magic flared visibly around the children, responding to... something.

"Get the kids inside," I said, already passing Tomi to Kim. "Now."

Jason was already moving toward the back door when the sky started to darken unnaturally. The temperature dropped further as shadows began gathering, more intensely than we'd ever seen before.

"He's not just attacking," Hunter said grimly, both of us moving into defensive positions. "This is different."

"Harley! Arissa! Inside!" I called out, watching my daughters immediately herd the younger children toward the house. Their Thunder powers were crackling in response to the threat, ready to morph at a moment's notice.

"Should I call Mia?" Kim asked, holding Tomi close.

"Get down here!" Billy's voice crackled urgently through our comms.

We rushed down to the Command Center, the familiar hum of monitoring equipment filling the air.

"What is it, Billy?" I asked, though his expression already told me it wasn't good.

"The Death Ranger's in the city center," Billy's fingers flew across his console. "He's siphoning energy from civilians to restore his power."

"Where exactly?" Jason demanded.

"Downtown Cork," Billy pulled up a map showing energy signatures. "But the civilian presence-"

"We can't engage him there," Hunter cut in. "Too many potential casualties. We need to draw him out."

"To a quarry?" I suggested, catching Hunter's eye.

"Well, yeah." His slight smile acknowledged the classic Ranger battle location.

"Contacting everyone now," Billy activated the emergency protocols. "All hands on deck for this one."

"Harley, Arissa," Hunter turned to our daughters. "You two stay here and protect the little ones."

Arissa's voice carried steel. "With our lives."

"The Gem?" Jason asked Hunter, who patted his pocket in confirmation.

We morphed and teleported to the city, the scene of chaos hitting us immediately.

"How do we get him away from civilians?" Kim asked.

"Leave that to me," I said, already moving before Hunter could stop me.

"Mich, wait!" he called after me, but I was committed.

"Help! Death Ranger, please!" I cried out, letting desperation fill my voice. "Help me!"

"Purple Ranger?" His confusion was evident even through the corrupted armor. "What-"

"It's Sailor Nemesis," I pleaded, playing up my fear. "She turned on me! She's going to kill me. The Crimson Ranger can't protect me anymore. You're the only one who can... I'll do anything."

"It's Sailor Nemesis," I pleaded, playing up my fear. "She turned on me! She's going to kill me. The Crimson Ranger can't protect me anymore. You're the only one who can... I'll do anything."

The Death Ranger's helmet tilted slightly, studying me. I could feel his corrupted energy probing, testing my sincerity. "The Soldier of Death turned against you?"

"She's gone mad with power," I continued, taking a careful step closer. "After what happened in the Netherworld... please, you have to help me. You're the only one strong enough."

"And your precious Hunter?" His voice carried dangerous amusement. "He can't protect you?"

"He's weak," I spat, hating the words even as I said them. "You were right all along. About everything. Please... take me away from here."

I held my breath, watching his armor pulse with dark energy as he considered my words. Behind him, I could see the others moving into position, ready to follow once I got him clear of civilians.

"You expect me to believe," he said slowly, "that you've suddenly seen the light? That you're choosing power over love?"

"I'm choosing to survive," I replied, letting real emotion color my voice. "If Nemesis kills me she will go after my kids next. I need to protect myself...my children. To do that I need you."

His energy signature shifted slightly - I'd hit the right nerve mentioning the children. Even corrupted, some part of him still responded to the idea of protecting family.

"The quarry," he said suddenly. "If what you say is true, we'll go somewhere more... private to discuss this arrangement."

Perfect. He was suspicious enough to want to get me away from potential allies, but intrigued enough to follow my lead.

"Yes, anywhere," I agreed quickly. "Just get me out of here before she finds me."

He extended his hand, corrupted energy crackling around it. "Shall we?"

I placed my hand in his, fighting back a shudder at the cold touch of his armor. As we teleported away from the city center, I caught Hunter's slight nod. Everything was going according to plan.

I just hoped the others would be ready when we materialized at the quarry. Because the moment we landed, all hell was going to break loose.

The quarry materialized around us, stark and empty - or so it appeared. I knew the others were already in position, waiting for my signal.

"Now then," the Death Ranger's voice carried dangerous amusement as he released my hand. "Let's discuss this... arrangement."

"Of course," I took a careful step back, positioning myself exactly where I needed to be. "I just have one question first."

"And what's that?"

"Did you really think I'd betray my family?" I dropped the pretense of fear from my voice. "That I'd choose you over them?"

His corrupted energy flared with rage. "You dare-"

"NOW!" I shouted, dropping and rolling as Hunter's Crimson Thunder blast hit the Death Ranger from behind, followed immediately by Jason's Power Sword strike.

"You manipulative little-" the Death Ranger's curse was cut off by Kim's arrows raining down from her position on the quarry ridge.

"What can I say?" I called out, summoning my staff. "I learned from the best. The Empress says hello, by the way."

His roar of rage shook the entire quarry as dark energy exploded outward. The real battle was about to begin.

"You weren't going to start this party without us, were you?" Mia's voice carried that dangerous edge it got when she was ready for a fight. Nemesis power crackled around her as she materialized with the others - RJ in his Jungle Fury Violet, Rocky morphed as Zeo Blue, and Aisha in her Yellow Ranger form.

"Back for another round in the Netherworld?" the Death Ranger taunted. "Or did your little reunion with Diamond make you nostalgic for death?"

"Funny," Mia's scythe materialized in her hands. "I was about to offer you a one-way ticket there myself."

The Death Ranger's corrupted energy pulsed stronger. "You really think you can defeat me? All of you together couldn't stop me before. And now..." Dark lightning crackled around his armor.

"Now I'm so much stronger."

"Maybe," I shifted into a fighting stance, feeling the others move into formation around me. "But so are we."

"Maybe," I shifted into a fighting stance, feeling the others move into formation around me. "But so are we."

A crack of thunder split the air as Saoirse and Tiernan appeared, their ancient Celtic power blazing bright against the Death Ranger's darkness. They took position on either side of our group, their Thunder Staffs crackling with energy that felt older, more primal than our own Thunder powers.

"The ancient ways reject your corruption," Saoirse's voice carried centuries of Thunder tradition.

"Your perversion of sacred power ends here," Tiernan added, Celtic symbols glowing on their armor.

The Death Ranger's laugh echoed through the quarry. "The ancient ways? You think those outdated traditions can stop me? I've evolved beyond such limitations."

"No," Hunter's voice was steel as he raised the Gem of Souls. "You've just forgotten what real power feels like."

We moved as one - Rangers, Soldier, and Celtic warriors united. Jason and Rocky attacked from the left while Kim and Aisha struck from the right. RJ and the Celtic Rangers channeled their combined energy into a focused blast, while Mia's death magic surged forward, looking for weaknesses in his corrupted armor.

This was it. Our last chance to end this, once and for all.

"Have a lightning orb!" I channeled my power through my staff, purple energy crackling as it slammed into him. The others followed immediately - a relentless barrage of attacks from all sides. Kim's arrows found gaps in his armor while Jason and Rocky's coordinated strikes kept him off balance. The Celtic Rangers' ancient Thunder magic seemed to resonate with something deep within him, making his corrupted energy fluctuate wildly.

He fought back with desperate fury, dark lightning tearing through the quarry. A blast caught Aisha in the shoulder, another nearly took RJ off his feet. But he was already weakened from the Netherworld, and our combined assault was too much to dodge. For every strike he landed, we hit back with three more.

"You can't-" his voice carried rage and something else... fear? "I am beyond your power!"

"No," Mia's death magic wrapped around him like chains. "You're just running from it."

This was it, our best chance. Kim and I synchronized our attacks, my lightning combining with her energy arrows in a devastating blast that sent him staggering backward.

"Hunter, now!" I called out, knowing we wouldn't get another opening this perfect.

Hunter raised the Gem of Souls, its pure energy pulsing in stark contrast to the Death Ranger's corruption. The Celtic Rangers immediately channeled their ancient power into it, while Mia's death magic held our enemy in place.

"You think that trinket can hold me?" the Death Ranger snarled, but there was real fear in his voice now. "I've transcended-"

"You haven't transcended anything," Hunter's voice carried absolute conviction as the Gem began to glow brighter. "You're just lost. And it's time to find peace."

The Gem's power surged forward, and the Death Ranger's scream echoed through the quarry.

The Death Ranger's scream echoed through the quarry as the Gem's power enveloped him. His corrupted armor began to crack, dark energy leaking out like smoke.

"No!" he thrashed against Mia's bonds. "I won't go back to nothing! I won't!"

"It's not nothing," Hunter's voice remained steady even as the Gem pulsed brighter in his hands. "It's rest. Peace. What you should have had before Drakkon's technology twisted you."

The Celtic Rangers' ancient magic wove through the Gem's power, their Thunder energy calling to whatever remained of his original power signature. Mia's death magic shifted, no longer restraining but guiding, showing his corrupted spirit the way to true death's embrace.

"Michelle," he called out, his voice suddenly sounding more like the Hunter I knew. "Please..."

"Let go," I said softly, adding my own power to the mix. "Just let go."

A final surge of energy lit up the quarry like daylight. When it faded, the Death Ranger's armor lay empty on the ground, and the Gem of Souls pulsed with a new, contained darkness.

For a moment, no one moved. The empty armor lay there like a dark reminder of what corruption could do to even the purest power.

"Is he..." Kim started.

"He's contained," Mia confirmed, her death magic sensing the transfer. "Properly this time. The Gem is holding his essence."

Hunter carefully wrapped the Gem in protective cloth, his hands steady but his energy signature betraying his emotion. Seeing another version of himself finally find peace - or at least containment - had to be affecting him more than he showed.

"The Celtic grounds," Saoirse spoke up. "They're already feeling cleaner. His corruption is fading."

"And the civilians he was draining?" Rocky asked.

"Their energy signatures are stabilizing," Billy said as he looked at his scanner. "They'll be fine."

I moved to Hunter's side, placing my hand over his where he held the wrapped Gem. "What do you want to do with it?"

"We can't give it to the Empress," he said quietly. "No matter what we promised."

"No," I agreed. "It's too dangerous. He's too dangerous, even contained."

"I know a place," Mia stepped forward. "In the Netherworld. Somewhere not even I can access easily. He'll be at peace there, and no one will be able to use his power."

"You trust her with that?" RJ asked Hunter, surprising me by speaking up.

"More than anyone," Hunter replied without hesitation. "Mia understands death magic better than any of us. And she's proven where her loyalties lie."

Mia's expression was unreadable behind her transformation, but I caught Kaya's slight nod of approval.

"We should get back," Jason said, ever practical. "Make sure the kids are okay."

"And someone needs to tell the Empress," I added quietly. Her Hunter, lost to her forever. Even if it was the right choice, it felt heavy.

"We can contact her," Hunter said as he handed the Gem carefully to Mia.

As we prepared to teleport back, I caught sight of something glinting in the remains of the Death Ranger's armor - a small crystal, pulsing with familiar purple energy.

"Is that..." I started.

"A Saturn starseed," Hunter confirmed, picking it up.

The proof of what the Death Ranger had told us about Saturn Starseeds lay in his palm, another reminder of how connected we truly were - across dimensions, across life and death. We watched as the Starseed slowly faded away, its energy dispersing like stardust.

Later, back at our house, the aftermath of battle settled heavily around us. The living room was crowded with Rangers in various states of exhaustion, the tension of recent weeks finally giving way to relief. Harley sat between Hunter and me, her body language screaming discomfort at Rocky, Aisha, and Tam's presence, but she was making an effort to be civil. Hunter, meanwhile, was doing his best to ignore RJ's existence entirely, though his jaw clenched every time RJ spoke.

The strange dynamics of our extended Ranger family had never felt more complicated - or more necessary. We'd needed everyone today, personal feelings aside.

"So that's it?" Arissa asked from her spot on the floor, where she was entertaining Tomi. "He's really gone?"

"He's contained," Mia corrected, absently scratching Kaya's ears. "There's a difference."

"But he can't hurt anyone anymore?" Summer's voice carried a slight tremor. The James twins had been remarkably brave through all of this.

"No, love," RJ assured his daughter. "He can't hurt anyone now."

Hunter's arm tightened around me slightly at RJ's voice. I squeezed his hand, grounding him.

"The Celtic grounds will need time to heal," Saoirse added. "His corruption ran deep."

"But the ancient magic is already starting to recover," Tiernan noted. "It's stronger than his darkness."

"Just like our family," Kim said softly, watching Ollie doze against Jason's shoulder.

"Speaking of family," Aisha ventured carefully, "maybe now that this is over..."

"Don't," Harley cut her off, though her voice lacked its usual edge. She was too tired for real anger. "Just... not tonight."

Rocky opened his mouth to argue but caught my warning look. Some conversations needed to wait.

"The little ones are fading fast," RJ observed, noting how his twins had curled up together on the floor while Tam fought to keep her eyes open.

"Maybe we should call it a night," Rocky suggested, helping Aisha up as she put her arm around a sleepy Tam.

"Good idea," Kim agreed, watching Ollie doze against Jason's shoulder. "It's been a long day for everyone."

"The longest," RJ stood, carefully gathering his daughters. "We should get back to the hotel."

As they started gathering their things, Mia pulled the wrapped Gem from her bag. "I should probably take care of this sooner rather than later. The longer we wait..."

"The more chance something could go wrong," Hunter finished. "Do you need backup?"

"No," she shook her head. "This is something I need to do alone. Well, not alone exactly." Her hand drifted to where Kaya sat. "Some things are meant for death's domain only."

I caught the look that passed between her and RJ - something unspoken but heavy with meaning. That was definitely a development we'd need to discuss later.

"Just... be careful," I found myself saying, surprising both of us. Since when did I worry about Mia?

Her smile was knowing. "Aren't I always?"

After the others left, our house felt almost too quiet. Harley and Arissa had taken Tomi upstairs to get her ready for bed, while Kim helped Jason settle Ollie in the guest room.

Once we were alone, Hunter pulled me closer on the sofa. "You okay?"

"Just processing," I admitted, thinking about the Saturn Starseed we'd seen fade away. "What he told us, about us both having Saturn Starseeds... it explains so much."

"Why we were drawn to each other from the start," Hunter agreed quietly. "Why our powers resonate the way they do."

"Why our daughters are so strong." I leaned into him, feeling the familiar hum of his energy signature matching mine. "Do you think you were part of my past life? In the Silver Millenium?"

"Maybe. But right now, I just want to focus on now. On our family being safe."

Hunter's laugh broke the heavy moment. "Speaking of family, what do we think about Mia and RJ?"

"Nothing good," I muttered.

"Be nice," he squeezed my hand. "She did help save the world today."

"Doesn't mean she has good taste in men."

"Says the woman who married RJ in Vegas," Hunter teased, earning himself an elbow to the ribs.

"That's different," I protested. "I was young and stupid. Mia should know better."

"Maybe she does," he said thoughtfully. "She's different since the Netherworld. Since seeing Diamond again."

I considered this. Mia had been... softer somehow, since her encounter with Diamond. Less guarded, even if she'd deny it. "You think Diamond told her something? About moving on?"

"I think," Hunter pressed a kiss to my temple, "that sometimes people surprise us. Look at us - the Thunder ninja and the Saturn princess. Who would have predicted that?"

"The Starseeds did, apparently," I smiled, settling more comfortably against him. The house was quiet now, our children safe in their beds, our friends nearby. After weeks of tension and fear, we could finally breathe.

"Think the Celtic Rangers will consider rebuilding the Academy now?" I asked, fighting back a yawn.

"I mentioned it to them. Told them I would help... they haven't committed to anything," Hunter said.

"They're still processing everything that happened," I mused. "Finding out about their ancient traditions being corrupted, losing their sacred grounds temporarily... it's a lot."

"Speaking of processing," Hunter's voice grew serious. "How are you doing with all of this? Really?"

I knew what he meant. The Death Ranger, the Saturn revelations, our daughters becoming Rangers far sooner than we'd planned... "I'm okay. Tired, but okay. The girls proved themselves today."

"They did," pride colored his voice. "Though I still wish..."

"That they could have stayed children a bit longer?" I finished. "Me too. But they're our daughters - it was probably inevitable."

"True," he chuckled. "Though I could have done without RJ's kids being involved in any of this."

"Hunter," I warned, though I couldn't help smiling.

Hunter stood up and picked me up, "Come on my Queen. Let's go to bed."

I laughed as he hoisted me over his shoulder and carried me to our room. For the first time in weeks I actually felt like I was living again.

Mia

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The Netherworld felt different this time. Colder, more purposeful. Kaya padded silently beside me as we made our way to the deepest part of death's realm, the Gem of Souls pulsing steadily in my hands.

"You're sure about this place?" Kaya asked, her tail twitching nervously.

"Diamond showed it to me in a dream," I replied, remembering his words. "A place where even death's queen can't easily reach. Where corrupted souls can find peace."

"Speaking of peace," Kaya's voice carried that knowing tone I hated, "are we going to talk about RJ?"

I shot her a look. "No."

"Mia-"

"What's there to talk about? He's... pleasant to be around. Someone who understands loss."

"Right," Kaya's sarcasm could cut glass. "That's why you've had coffee with him three times this week. Because he's 'pleasant.'"

I adjusted my grip on the Gem, its weight a convenient distraction. "Diamond said I needed to live, not that I needed to jump into anything."

"And having coffee is jumping into something?"

"Can we focus on the task at hand?" I gestured to our surroundings. "Securing an incredibly dangerous corrupted soul in the depths of the Netherworld seems slightly more important than my coffee habits."

"Fine," Kaya conceded, though her tone suggested this conversation wasn't over. "But you know Michelle's going to have opinions about this."

"Michelle always has opinions," I muttered, feeling the Gem pulse stronger as we approached our destination. "Usually loud ones."

The cavern Diamond had shown me loomed ahead, its entrance barely visible through the perpetual mists of death's realm. A fitting resting place for a soul caught between life and death.

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"Here," I said softly, feeling the ancient power of the place resonating with my own death magic. "This is where he belongs."

"Are you sure this will hold him?" Kaya asked, her fur standing slightly on end. "Even with the Gem?"

"Diamond wouldn't have shown me this place if it wasn't secure." I unwrapped the Gem carefully, its glow casting eerie shadows through the mist. "Besides, he's not fighting anymore. I can feel it - he's ready to rest."

As if in response, the Gem pulsed with a quieter energy. The corrupted soul within it had settled, accepting its fate. Maybe seeing Hunter with his family, seeing what real power looked like when it wasn't twisted by darkness... maybe that had finally shown him what he'd lost.

"You're thinking about RJ again," Kaya observed.

"I'm thinking about peace," I corrected her, though we both knew it wasn't entirely true. "About what Diamond said about living."

The truth was more complicated. RJ had once been firmly in my enemy category, guilty by association with Michelle back when we'd been at each other's throats. I'd dismissed him as another zen-spouting idiot, someone who couldn't see past his own spiritual platitudes to reality.

But time had a way of shifting perspectives. The man I'd been having coffee with these past few days wasn't the one-dimensional character I'd painted in my mind years ago. There was a depth to him that surprised me - a man who'd faced loss and battle but somehow maintained his inner light. Not through ignorance or naivety, but through conscious choice.

The more we talked, the more layers I discovered. His seemingly simple philosophy masked a brilliant mind that saw connections others missed. His calm wasn't forced or fake - it was hard-won through experience and pain.

Yes, there was his history with Michelle. The way he'd abandoned her after losing Aubrey was something Hunter and Michelle would probably never forgive. But who was I to judge someone's past mistakes? I carried my own weight of regret - Mindy's death, my misguided attack on the Sailor Soldiers, all those choices made in anger and confusion. We all had darkness in our pasts.

Not that I'd ever admit any of this out loud, especially not to Michelle. I'd never hear the end of it.

"You're brooding," Kaya observed, interrupting my thoughts. "And we still have a job to do."

She was right. I raised the Gem, its power pulsing in sync with the cavern's ancient energy. This place existed outside normal death magic - even I would have trouble accessing it once we sealed it properly. That was the point.

"Ready?" I asked, though I wasn't sure if I was asking Kaya or myself.

"Just do it before you start thinking about RJ's smile again."

I shot her a glare. "I wasn't-"

"Please," she cut me off. "I'm your guardian. I know exactly what you were thinking about."

Pushing aside thoughts of a certain Wolf Master (and his admittedly nice smile), I channeled my death magic into the Gem. The cavern responded immediately, dark energy swirling around us as the corrupted soul within the Gem began its transfer to its final resting place.

"Goodbye, Death Ranger," I murmured as the transfer completed. "Find the peace you couldn't find in life."

The cavern sealed itself, ancient symbols glowing briefly before fading into the stone. Not even I would be able to open it again without significant effort - and that's exactly how it should be.

"Now," Kaya said as we turned to leave, "about that coffee date tomorrow..."

I rolled my eyes, "It's not a date. And we're having lunch."

"Ohhh, moving on to a real meal. It's getting serious," Kaya's voice dripped with smug satisfaction.

"Shut up, Kaya," I snapped, though we both knew my irritation was mostly for show.

The familiar pull of the living realm started to surround us as we made our way back. The Netherworld always felt different after completing a task like this - heavier somehow, like it recognized what we'd done.

"You know," Kaya continued, clearly not done tormenting me, "Diamond did say you needed to open yourself up to-"

"If you finish that sentence, I will leave you in this realm."

"No, you won't. Who else would keep you from making terrible life choices?"

"My terrible life choices are none of your business," I muttered, though memories of my conversation with Diamond in this very realm flickered through my mind.

"Everything about you is my business," Kaya reminded me. "I'm your guardian. It's literally my job to-"

"To what? Push me toward RJ?" We emerged back into the living realm, the cool Irish night air replacing the Netherworld's heavy atmosphere. "Because Michelle will love that."

"Since when do you care what Michelle thinks?"

"I don't," I said too quickly. "I just..."

"Just what? Are afraid to admit that maybe, just maybe, you're ready to let someone in again?"

I stopped walking, staring down at my insufferable guardian. "You know it's not that simple."

"It could be," Kaya's voice softened. "Diamond told you to live, Mia. Not just exist. When was the last time you actually considered letting yourself feel something for someone?"

"I feel plenty," I protested. "Annoyance, mostly. Especially right now."

"I feel plenty," I protested. "Annoyance, mostly. Especially right now."

"Right," Kaya's tail twitched knowingly. "That's why you've been checking your phone every five minutes to see if he's texted about tomorrow's lunch plans."

I reflexively glanced at my phone, then cursed under my breath when I realized I'd just proved her point. "I hate you."

"No, you don't. You hate that I'm right." She jumped up onto a nearby wall to be closer to eye level with me. "Look, I'm not saying marry the guy. I'm just saying... maybe it's okay to enjoy someone's company. To let yourself have lunch with someone who makes you smile."

"I don't smile," I muttered, but my phone chose that moment to buzz with a text from RJ, and I couldn't quite hide my reaction fast enough.

"Of course you don't," Kaya's voice carried pure satisfaction. "Just like you're not smiling right now."

"We should head back to Amber's," I said, pointedly ignoring her. "It's late."

"Mmhmm. And you need your beauty sleep for tomorrow's not-date."

"Keep talking and I'll feed you to Ellie," I threatened.

Kaya laughed, "The insufferable mutt is smaller than me."

I powered down, my Nemesis form fading as we approached Amber's house. "Oh look at that. We're back. You can't talk now. Secret identities and all."

"Convenient," Kaya muttered as I scooped her up, but she settled into her 'normal cat' act as we entered through the back door.

Amber was still up, curled on the sofa with her laptop and a sleeping Ellie. She looked up as we came in, and I immediately recognized her expression - she was plotting something.

"So," she started, that dangerous gleam in her eye. "RJ, huh?"

Great. This was exactly the conversation I didn't need right now.

"What about him?" I dropped into the chair next to her, already dreading where this was going.

Amber's smirk grew wider as she sipped her tea. "My best friend dating Michelle's ex-husband? That would be the ultimate revenge. Way better than her Fashion Week play with Thara."

I fell back against the chair with an exasperated sigh. "Seriously, Amber? This revenge thing is making you crazy. You cannot seriously be trying to use my love life - or complete lack thereof - as some twisted plot against Michelle."

Kaya made a sound suspiciously like a snicker, which she quickly covered with a meow when I glared at her. Even my guardian cat was against me tonight.

"Besides," I added, watching Amber's scheming expression, "there's nothing to use. We're just having lunch."

"Lunch?" Amber's eyebrows shot up. "You've upgraded from coffee to lunch? Oh, this is perfect."

"No, it's not perfect because it's not anything." I reached over to steal her tea, needing something stronger but settling for caffeine. "And even if it was something - which it's not - it wouldn't have anything to do with Michelle."

"Everything in this town has something to do with Michelle," Amber countered. "But fine, tell me about these completely platonic lunch plans that definitely aren't dates."

"I'd rather hear about how you plan to handle Thara at Fashion Week," I deflected. "Has she shredded any more designer outfits?"

"Don't change the subject. RJ's quite attractive, you know. In that yoga master kind of way. By the way, that is Chamomile tea. No caffeine."

Kaya's tail twitched with amusement as I groaned. This was going to be a long night.

"I need real tea," I muttered, pushing myself up from the chair. "Or better yet, something stronger."

"There's wine in the kitchen," Amber called after me. "And you're still not changing the subject. What is it about him? The whole spiritual vibe? The way he handles those twins of his?"

I busied myself looking for wine glasses, trying to ignore both Amber's questioning and Kaya's knowing stare. "What happened to plotting your revenge against Michelle? I liked that topic better."

"Oh please, this is way more interesting. When was the last time you actually showed interest in someone? And don't tell me you're not interested - I saw how quickly you checked that text earlier."

"I've had a long day," I deflected, returning with two glasses of wine. "Can we just... not? I'm not really in the mood for relationship analysis."

Amber accepted her wine but wasn't letting this go. "Look, I know it's hard for you to admit you're actually human and have feelings... but in all the time I've known you, I've never seen you show interest in anyone. I know there was someone once, but you never talk about him. You don't even have groupies on tour. And RJ is actually really hot. You can't tell me you don't want to fuck him." She took a sip, then suddenly froze. "Oh my god, are you asexual? Was I just being totally insensitive?"

Kaya made a choking sound that I knew was suppressed laughter, though Amber probably thought she was just coughing up a hairball.

I rolled my eyes so hard it hurt. "Oh for fuck's sake! No, I'm not asexual. I just haven't met anyone worth being sexual with since I lost the love of my life."

Amber's smirk returned immediately. "Until now?"

"Fucking hell!" I threw my hands up in exasperation, nearly spilling my wine in the process.

"Fucking hell!" I threw my hands up in exasperation, nearly spilling my wine in the process.

"That's not a no," Amber pointed out, looking far too pleased with herself.



"That's not a anything," I took a long drink of wine. "And even if it was - which it's not - you really think getting involved with Michelle's ex is a good idea?"

"Since when do you care what Michelle thinks?"

"I don't," I said automatically, though Kaya's skeptical look suggested otherwise. "But I do care about... complications."

"Right, because your life is so uncomplicated now," Amber's voice softened slightly. "Look, I'm not saying marry the guy. I'm just saying... maybe it's okay to enjoy lunch with someone who makes you smile. When was the last time you let yourself do that?"

I stared into my wine glass, trying not to think about Diamond's similar words in the Netherworld. "You sound like Kaya."

"Your cat gives dating advice?"

Shit. "I mean... she judges me. With her eyes. You know how cats are."

"She is expressive," Amber agreed, then her eyes lit up with that dangerous scheming gleam. "Look, this could be a win-win. Two birds, one stone. You get laid and actually enjoy being with someone you seem to like, and I get to rub it in Michelle's face and watch her lose her mind."

I set my wine glass down harder than necessary. "Okay, first of all, my potential love life - or lack thereof - is not a weapon in your revenge arsenal. Second, you need to let this thing with Michelle go before someone gets hurt. And third..." I paused, realizing I didn't actually have a third point.

"And third, you're afraid to admit you actually like him," Amber finished for me, looking annoyingly smug.

Kaya chose that moment to stretch dramatically and give me a look that clearly said 'she's not wrong.'

"I hate both of you," I muttered, reaching for the wine bottle. This conversation definitely required a refill.

"No you don't," Amber's smile was pure sugar. "You love me."

I rolled my eyes. "I do, for reasons that continue to escape rational explanation. Look, even if I did like RJ - which I'm not saying I do - he lives in Ocean Bluff, California. I live in New York City and spend half my life on tour."

"Simple solution," Amber's eyes sparkled. "You both move to Cork."

"Ah, so we're back to you trying to convince me to move to Ireland?"

She shrugged, taking another sip of wine. "I'm excellent at multitasking my arguments."

"Why exactly are you my best friend again?"

"If I remember correctly, we bonded over our mutual hatred of Michelle," she smirked. "Though lately you seem to be slacking in that department."

I thought about Michelle's face earlier today, when she'd actually expressed concern for my safety. About how we'd worked together to stop the Death Ranger. Things had shifted between us, though neither of us would ever admit it out loud.

"Maybe I'm just tired of carrying grudges," I said carefully. "It takes a lot of energy to hate someone."

"Who are you and what have you done with my best friend?" Amber stared at me like I'd grown a second head.

"Look, I'm not saying we're braiding each other's hair and having slumber parties," I defended quickly. "She's still insufferable. I just... I don't know. Maybe some things aren't worth the energy anymore."

"First you're interested in RJ, now you're making peace with Michelle?" Amber pressed her hand to my forehead. "Are you feeling okay?"

Kaya made another suspiciously laugh-like sound, which she covered with a yawn this time.

"Be serious for a moment," I set my wine glass down. "You don't actually hate Michelle. Neither of us do. We just find her insufferable."

Amber rolled her eyes. "Even if that were true - which I'm not admitting - she cannot get away with messing with my launch."

"I admit, that was pretty asinine of her," I sighed. "Fine. How can I help? And no, I'm not fucking RJ just to fuel your revenge plot."

Amber's face scrunched in thought before lighting up. "How about dinner? The four of us? I'd love to get to know RJ better."

I threw my head back against the chair. "Fine. I'll ask if he wants to have dinner with you, Trev, and me. But we are not calling it a double date. And we're not eating at the Cantina."

"Deal," Amber's smile was triumphant. "I know plenty of other great restaurants." She paused for effect. "My husband's is just the best one."

I sighed but pulled out my phone, trying to keep my message casual: "Hey, Amber wants to try this new place in Cork tomorrow night. Thought you might want to check it out before heading back to California. Want to join us?"

His response came almost immediately: "Sounds great, but need to find a sitter."

"He needs someone to watch the twins," I relayed to Amber.

"On it," she was already typing furiously on her phone. Minutes later, her face lit up. "Kara says they can go to her place for a playdate with Tiffy. She's happy to watch them."

I typed back: "Kara Jordan invited the girls for a playdate with Tiffy."

"Well then, looks like I'm free. Just send me the details," RJ responded.

"He's in," I told Amber, already regretting this decision.

Her eyes sparkled dangerously. "Perfect! A double date with my bestie. Oh, you have to let me do your makeup!"

I held up my hand. "Don't push it."

"Don't push it."

"Fine," Amber conceded, but her expression remained entirely too pleased with herself. "But at least wear that black dress I got you for your birthday."

"I'm not dressing up," I protested. "This isn't a date. It's just dinner."

"Right. Just dinner. Which is why you're already thinking about what to wear."

I wasn't, actually, until she mentioned it. Now I couldn't help wondering if RJ would notice... "I hate you."

"You love me," she countered, reaching for the wine bottle. "And you're wearing the dress."

Kaya stretched lazily on her perch, giving me that look that clearly said 'you know you're going to end up wearing the dress.'

"I need new friends," I muttered. "And a new cat."

"Too late," Amber's smile was knowing. "You're stuck with us. Now, about your hair..."

I stood up abruptly. "I'm going to bed. And Kaya, you can sleep with Ellie."

Kaya's expression of absolute horror at the suggestion of spending the night with the 'insufferable mutt' was almost worth the hours of teasing I'd just endured. Almost.

"Fine," Amber called after me as I headed for the stairs. "But I'm doing your makeup tomorrow whether you like it or not!"

I pretended not to hear her as I climbed the stairs, Kaya following behind me - clearly not taking my threat seriously. As I got ready for bed, I steadfastly ignored both my phone's notification light and my guardian's judgmental stare.

Tomorrow was just dinner. Nothing more. No matter what Amber or Kaya or anyone else thought.



"Land of the Living"

I woke in Hunter's arms, feeling truly at peace for the first time in weeks. The Death Ranger was contained, our children were safe, and I had less than a week before I needed to report to set in Nashville. All I planned to do was to savor every moment with my family until duty called me away.

You know what they say about plans.

My phone's vibration broke through the morning quiet. I reached for it, surprised to see Livvie's name on the screen. She never texted me directly - our friendship existed purely through Jeremy, maintained by mutual love for my best friend rather than any real connection between us.

"Mich, I really need to talk to you alone. ASAP. Can you meet me at Starbucks in a half hour?"

I stared at the message, something in her tone setting off warning bells. Livvie tolerated me at best, understanding my importance in Jeremy's life but never quite warming to my... particular brand of chaos. For her to reach out like this, something had to be seriously wrong.

"Meet you there," I texted back, already dreading what could be important enough to make Livvie seek me out alone.

I gently nudged Hunter. "Babe, I gotta go run an errand. Be back soon."

"Mmkay," he mumbled, rolling over and pulling my pillow closer.

I smiled at his half-asleep form before heading to get ready. It was definitely a loungewear kind of morning - purple sweats with a matching hoodie, hair pulled back in a messy ponytail. A quick brush of teeth, spritz of body spray, and I was out the door, keys and purse in hand.

Livvie was already at Starbucks when I arrived, nursing her usual iced caramel macchiato. She'd chosen a table tucked away in the corner, far from other customers - definitely not a casual coffee chat kind of setup. I grabbed my coconut mocha latte and headed over, noting how she kept checking to make sure no one was within earshot.

"Hey Livvie," I settled into the chair across from her. "I was surprised to hear from you. What's up?"

Livvie sighed, fidgeting with her straw. "Okay, so you know how I've been working with Billy?"

"Yeah..." I studied her nervous expression. "He's impressed with you. That's not easy to accomplish. Oh god, did you cheat on Jeremy with Billy? I knew this would happen. Intellectual attraction is a thing..."

"What? Cheat on J?" Livvie's voice rose sharply before she caught herself. "Christ, Michelle, I wouldn't do that!"

"Oh... then what is it?"

She leaned forward, voice dropping. "I found a hidden system in Billy's network, encrypted like nothing I've ever seen before. I know I should have left it alone, but the challenge..." She took a breath. "I cracked it. I found things."

I felt my blood run cold. I'd warned Billy about this, told him letting someone with Livvie's skills anywhere near his systems was asking for trouble. "What exactly did you find?"

"I know who you really are..." her voice was barely a whisper. "Purple Ranger."

"Oh fuck," I slumped back in my chair, already dreading this conversation.

"I'm sorry," Livvie twisted her hands nervously. "I know I shouldn't have gone digging. J always warns me about staying out of things that aren't my business..."

"Jeremy?" I cut her off sharply. "Does he know? Did you tell him?"

"No!" Her response was immediate. "I haven't told anyone. Truth be told, I'm not even sure what to do with this information."

"Nothing!" I hissed, leaning forward. "You do nothing! You pretend you never found it and never mention it again!"

"That's a little bloody hard to do now, don't you think?" Her Irish accent grew stronger with her frustration.

I ran a hand over my face. "Okay, fine... but you cannot tell Jeremy. Or anyone else. Fuck, Livvie!" I took a steadying breath. "We need to tell Billy. He'll know how to handle this."

"I was afraid you'd say that," she sighed, looking like she'd rather face anything else than Billy's reaction to her hacking.

"Look," I lowered my voice further, "how much exactly did you see in those files?"

"Enough," Livvie wouldn't quite meet my eyes. "The Rangers, the different teams, the... other things. Like that fact that you're some kind of magical princess?"

I choked on my latte. Of course she'd found that part. "Livvie, you have to understand - this isn't just about me. There are children involved now. My children. And others."

"I know," she glanced around before continuing. "I saw the files about Harley and Arissa. About their powers. And about what happened downtown recently... that wasn't really a terrorist attack, was it?"

"No," I admitted. "It wasn't. Which is exactly why this has to stay quiet. The Death Ranger might be gone, but there are always other threats. The fewer people who know about us, the safer everyone is."

"J tells me everything," Livvie said.

"This isn't your secret to tell."

She stirred her drink absently, processing my words. "So what happens now? I just... pretend I don't know that my friends are superheroes? That my goddaughter has some kind of cosmic power? That there are actual monsters attacking Cork?"

"Yes," I said firmly. "That's exactly what you do. And we talk to Billy, so he can make sure his systems are properly secured."

"He's going to fire me, isn't he?"

"Honestly? He might offer you a different kind of job." At her questioning look, I continued, "Billy values talent. And clearly, his security needs work if you got through it."

"I don't want to be involved in... all this," she gestured vaguely. "I have twins to think about."

"And that's exactly why you need to keep this quiet," I leaned forward. "The more people who know, the more danger everyone is in. Including Rose and Killy."

I pulled out my phone to text Billy and told him to get his ass to Starbuck's, ASAP.

"He's going to be so mad," Livvie muttered, shredding her napkin nervously.

"Not at you," I assured her, though I wasn't entirely sure that was true. "Look, Billy's... intense about security. But he's also practical. If you got through his encryption..."

"Which wasn't easy," she interjected. "I mean, some of those protocols were unlike anything I've ever seen. Almost like they weren't... human."

I carefully kept my expression neutral. "The point is, you did get through. And that means his systems need updating."

"Is that Billy's car?" Livvie's voice rose slightly as she looked out the window.

I followed her gaze to see Billy's distinctive vehicle pulling into the lot. "Time to face the music."

Billy walked in, spotted us, and his expression shifted from confusion to understanding to resignation in the span of seconds. He ordered his usual green tea before joining us at our secluded table.

"So," he said quietly, settling into the chair. "I assume from Michelle's urgent text and your presence, Livvie, that you found something in my systems you weren't supposed to."

Livvie straightened her spine slightly. "Your encryption was impressive. Almost... alien."

"It was alien," Billy confirmed, watching her reaction carefully. "Which makes me very interested in how exactly you managed to bypass it."

"I had help," Livvie admitted. "Though he doesn't know it."

"Killy," I realized. "Your pattern-finding prodigy of a son."

"He saw something in the code," she nodded. "Something I would have missed."

Billy's eyebrows shot up. "A two-year-old helped you crack Eltarian security protocols?"

"He just... sees patterns," Livvie explained, though she looked thrown by the word 'Eltarian.' "He doesn't understand what he's seeing, he just points them out."

Billy leaned back, a familiar look crossing his face - the one he got when confronting an interesting scientific puzzle. "That's... remarkable. And concerning."

"Billy," I warned, recognizing his expression. "She just said she doesn't want to be involved."

"And yet here we are," he replied mildly. "With a civilian who not only breached our security but has a toddler who can identify alien patterns. This isn't something we can just ignore, Michelle."

"I just want to forget I ever found anything," Livvie interjected. "Go back to my normal contracts, my normal life."

"Normal stopped being an option the moment you accessed those files," Billy said gently. "But we can figure out how to handle this. Starting with better security protocols."

"And keeping this between us," I added firmly. "No one else needs to know about this. Not even Jeremy."

"About that..." Billy adjusted his glasses. "Michelle, you know as well as I do that secrets like this, especially between spouses-"

"No," I cut him off. "The fewer people who know, the safer everyone is. Including Jeremy and the twins."

"But J tells me everything," Livvie protested again. "We don't have secrets."

"This isn't your secret to keep or tell," I repeated. "This is bigger than just us. Think about Rose and Killy. The less Jeremy knows, the less danger he's in. The less danger they're in."

"She has a point," Billy conceded. "Though I'm more concerned about Killy's ability to recognize alien patterns. That's not... normal."

Livvie's face paled slightly. "What do you mean? Is something wrong with my son?"

"Not wrong," Billy assured her quickly. "Just... unique. And potentially significant."

"No," Livvie's voice was firm. "Whatever you're thinking, no. My son is not going to be part of... any of this. He's two years old."

"Of course not," I jumped in before Billy could start theorizing. "No one's suggesting anything about Killy. Right, Billy?"

He caught my warning tone. "Right. Though we should probably monitor-"

"We're not monitoring my child," Livvie cut him off. "And we're not telling Jeremy, and we're not doing anything except pretending I never found those files. Because if anything happens to my babies because of this..."

"Nothing will happen to them," I assured her, though I knew better than to make such promises. "But Livvie, you need to understand - now that you know, there are certain... protocols we need to discuss."



"Protocols?" She looked between us suspiciously.

"Security measures," Billy explained. "Ways to protect yourself and your family. Just in case."

"Just in case what?" Livvie's voice rose slightly before she caught herself. "No, never mind. I don't want to know. I just... I need to process all this." She looked at me. "All those times you disappeared during emergencies, all those weird incidents around town..."

"Yeah," I nodded. "Though to be fair, some of those times I really was just being a diva."

"That's not as comforting as you think it is," she muttered.

"Look," Billy leaned forward. "We need to discuss your access to Cranston Tech's systems moving forward. Obviously, some changes need to be made."

"You're firing me," Livvie said flatly.

"Actually," Billy's expression shifted to what I recognized as his 'I have an idea' face, "I was thinking of promoting you."

"No," Livvie and I said simultaneously.

"Hear me out," Billy held up his hands. "Clearly, our current security protocols need work. Who better to improve them than someone who managed to breach them?"

"Billy," I warned, "she just said she doesn't want to be involved."

"I'm not talking about Ranger activities," he clarified. "Just security consulting. Making sure no one else can do what you did."

Livvie stirred her nearly empty drink. "And what happens when Jeremy asks what my new project is about?"

"You tell him exactly what it is - security consulting for Cranston Tech. It's not even a lie."

"Just an omission of certain alien-related details," I added dryly.

"I need to think about this," Livvie said finally. "This is... a lot."

"Of course it is," I agreed. "Finding out your friends are Power Rangers tends to be a bit overwhelming."

"And that one of them is some kind of magical space princess," she added with a pointed look at me.

"Technical term is Sailor Soldier," I corrected automatically, then caught myself. "But we're not getting into that right now."

"No, we're not," Billy interjected. "Right now, we need to focus on immediate concerns. Livvie, I need you to document exactly how you breached the security protocols. Every step."

"So you can patch the vulnerabilities?"

"So we can make sure no one else can exploit them," he confirmed. "And... perhaps to better understand Killy's unique abilities."

"Billy," I warned again, seeing Livvie tense.

"Just observation," he assured her. "Nothing more. But a child who can recognize alien patterns... that's not something we can completely ignore."

"Billy," my voice carried a desperate edge I rarely let show. "They are civilians. And Killy is a baby. No. If Livvie wants to help you secure your systems then that's her call, but aside from that leave them out of this."

I leaned forward, letting him see how serious I was. "Jeremy is my best friend. If Livvie is involved that puts him and their kids in danger. Please Billy, leave them out of this."

The thought of Jeremy or the twins being hurt because of my world, my battles... it made my chest tight. Aside from Hunter and my girls, Jeremy was the most important person in my life. The one constant, the friend who'd stood by me through everything. The idea of my Ranger life touching his family terrified me in a way few things could.

Livvie must have heard something in my voice because her expression softened slightly. "You really do care about him, don't you?"

"More than most people realize," I admitted quietly. "I love him so much. Which is exactly why I want to keep this part of my life far away from his."

Billy's expression softened - he knew how rare it was for me to be this openly emotional about anyone outside my immediate family. "Okay, Michelle. You're right. No involvement beyond system security, if that's what Livvie decides."

"Thank you," I breathed, then turned to Livvie. "And thank you, for coming to me first with this."

"I almost went to Jeremy," she admitted. "But something told me this wasn't my secret to share with him."

"It's not," I confirmed. "And I hate asking you to keep things from him. I know how much you two share everything. But this..."

"This is different," she finished. "I get it. I don't like it, but I get it." She glanced at her phone. "I should get back. The twins will be waking up soon."

"Livvie," I caught her arm as she started to rise. "I need to know I can trust you with this."

She met my eyes steadily. "You can. Not for you - though I'm starting to understand you better than I ever have - but for J. For my children." She paused. "But Michelle? If anything comes after my family because of this..."

"It won't," I promised, though we both knew such promises were dangerous. "And if it ever did, you have an entire team of Rangers who would protect them. Jeremy means too much to me to let anything happen to his family."

"Speaking of protection," Billy interjected carefully, "we should at least set up some basic security measures. Nothing invasive, just... precautionary."

"Like what?" Livvie asked warily.

"Enhanced monitoring systems for your home, emergency protocols..." he trailed off at my warning look. "Simple stuff. Just in case."

Livvie gathered her things, looking overwhelmed. "I'll think about it. All of it. But right now I need to get home to my babies."

As we watched her leave, Billy turned to me. "You know we can't just ignore-"

"Yes, we can," I cut him off firmly. "We have to."

"Michelle..."

"Don't 'Michelle' me," my voice carried years of frustration. "Jeremy is my best friend and the anchor of my non-Ranger life. Do not pull his family into this. I've been cursed with this life. Do not put that on them."

"You see it as a curse?" Billy's voice was soft, surprised.

"Yes!" The word exploded out of me. "How many times have I tried to retire? But there is no retiring from this. Not really. A new big bad always shows up and we always have to step up eventually. There is no end. There is no normal." I took a steadying breath. "Well, I found a slice of normal with Jeremy and his family, and I'm not giving it up."

Billy studied me for a long moment. "Is that how you really feel? That being a Ranger is a curse?"

"You don't understand," I said quietly. "You love this life - the science, the tech, the endless possibilities. But I just wanted to sing, to perform. Instead, I've spent thirty years fighting monsters, watching my children inherit powers they never asked for, lying to people I love..."

"And saving countless lives," Billy countered gently. "Including Jeremy's, more than once, though he doesn't know it."

"That's different," I protested, though we both knew it wasn't. "Look, I accept my responsibilities. I do what needs to be done. But Jeremy... his life is pure. Untouched by all this chaos. His biggest concerns are his clients' hair disasters and keeping Rose from climbing the curtains."

"And now his wife knows about us."

"Which is exactly why we need to contain this," I insisted. "The less involvement, the better. Let Livvie help with your security if she wants, but that's it. No monitoring Killy, no special protection details, nothing that might make Jeremy suspicious."

"And if something comes after them because Livvie accessed those files?"

"Then I'll handle it," I said firmly. "Like I always do. I didn't ask to be a Ranger. I didn't ask to be the reincarnation of some Saturn Princess. I finally found my normal life... at least as close as it gets for me. I will not let you or anyone else take it from me now."

Billy leaned back, studying me with that analytical gaze I'd known for decades. "You know, in all these years, I don't think I've ever heard you talk about it like this."

"Because I don't," I gathered my empty cup, needing something to do with my hands. "What's the point? It is what it is. But Jeremy... his friendship is the one thing in my life that has nothing to do with powers or destiny or saving the world. He just... loves me. For me. Not Purple Ranger, not Princess Saturn, just Michelle."

"Even though he doesn't know all of you?"

"He knows the parts that matter," I said quietly. "The parts that are truly me, not the roles I was forced into."

"Michelle..." Billy's voice carried concern now. "How long have you been feeling this way?"

"Since 2006 when training the Mystic Force team cost me Hunter. But I kept going. I kept doing what I needed to do," I said, the old pain surfacing. "I lost him because of this life, got him back despite it, and now our daughters are part of it too. The cycle just keeps going."

"You're an incredible trainer, Michelle. Those teams needed you."

"I know that," I sighed, running a hand through my hair. "And I'll keep doing it. I'll keep fighting whatever big bad shows up next. I'll keep training new teams if it's needed. I'll keep watching my children follow in our footsteps. But Jeremy..." I met Billy's eyes. "His family stays out of it. That's my line."

"Okay," he said finally. "But at least let me give Livvie some basic security protocols. Nothing obvious, nothing that would make Jeremy suspicious. Just... protection. In case."

"Fine," I conceded. "But that's it. And Billy? If anything happens to them because of this..."

"It won't," he assured me. "I promise."

We both knew such promises were dangerous in our line of work, but I needed to hear it anyway.

Mia

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I woke up feeling like I'd been to hell and back... oh right, I had.

Blinking against the morning light, I found Kaya perched in the window, staring out at the Irish countryside.

"You okay?" I asked, my voice still rough with sleep.

"You mean aside from having to pretend to be a normal house cat and mingle with the likes of Ellie and Thara? I'm spectacular." Her tail twitched with annoyance. "When are we going back on tour?"

"Soon. Really soon." I stretched, considering. "Though I have to admit, it's been nice spending time with Amber and being able to see Arissa and Rachel."

"Oh god," Kaya turned to face me, horror dawning in her eyes. "You're not seriously considering moving to Cork, are you? I like New York."

I shrugged, surprising myself with my answer. "I love NYC, but maybe we don't have to be alone all the time."

"So you are considering it?" Her stare was penetrating.

"Maybe?" I pulled my pillow over my face. "Who knows?"

Kaya sighed in exasperation. "This wouldn't have anything to do with having actual friends for once, would it?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked, though I knew exactly what she meant.

"You've spent years keeping everyone at arm's length. Now suddenly you have Amber, and you're spending time with Arissa, and even Michelle isn't completely insufferable anymore."

"I have friends," I protested.

"You have fans," she corrected. "And industry contacts. When was the last time you had people you could just... be with?"

My phone buzzed before I could answer, and I definitely did not lunge for it, despite Kaya's knowing look.

"Speaking of being with people," she said innocently, "isn't that lunch with RJ today?"

"I hate you," I muttered, though we both knew it wasn't true.

"What? You're having lunch with him and the twins then dinner with him, Amber, and Trevor," Kaya's tail swished knowingly. "You're spending a lot of time with him."

"He's in Ireland, the twins like playing with Tiffy, it makes sense to get together while they're here," I defended, though it sounded weak even to me.

"Mhmm," Kaya stretched lazily. "And the fact that you actually smile when he texts has nothing to do with it?"

"I do not-" my phone buzzed again, and I caught myself smiling before I could stop it. "Shut up."

"I didn't say anything," she said innocently. "Though I notice you're not denying it anymore."

I buried my face in my remaining pillow. "Don't you have some mice to chase or something?"

"Don't you have an outfit to pick out for your not-date?"

"It's just lunch," I muttered into my pillow. "With his kids there. It's not..."

"Not what? Not meaningful? Not something that makes you feel more alive than you have since Diamond?"

I sat up abruptly. "Don't. Don't bring him into this."

"Why not?" Kaya's voice softened. "He told you to live, Mia. To actually live, not just exist. Maybe this is part of that."

"It's temporary," I said firmly. "RJ lives in Ocean Bluff. I live in New York. We're both just... here for now."

"And yet you agreed to dinner with Amber and Trevor."

"Because Amber is impossible to say no to," I swung my legs out of bed, needing to move. "And she's my best friend, even if she is plotting something."

"Why are you pushing this so hard? You hate people," I said, rifling through my closet for something appropriate for lunch with kids present.

"I hate most people," Kaya corrected, watching me reject outfit after outfit. "But I love you. And I've watched you build walls around yourself for years. Even with Amber, even with Arissa - you keep part of yourself locked away."

"Because that works for me," I pulled out a black dress, then immediately put it back. Too formal for lunch.

"Does it? Because ever since you talked to Diamond in the Netherworld, something's different. You're different."

I paused in my wardrobe search. "Different how?"

"You're actually considering possibilities instead of automatically shutting them down. You're letting people see past your Queen of Death persona. You're even being civil to Michelle sometimes."

"Now I know you're exaggerating," I muttered, finally settling on black jeans and a deep red top. "And since when do you admit you love me? I mean, of course you do, you just usually don't admit it."

Kaya's tail twitched with mild irritation. "Perhaps seeing you literally walk into the realm of death made me... reconsider my usual stoicism."

"Aww, you were worried about me," I teased, though we both knew how serious that mission had been.

"I was concerned about who would feed me if you didn't return," she sniffed, but her eyes gave her away. "And speaking of feeding, shouldn't you be getting ready? Unless you plan to go to lunch in your pajamas."

"You know," I started changing, "for someone who claims to hate everyone, you seem awfully invested in my social life lately."

"Someone has to be," she watched me apply minimal makeup. "Since you seem determined to sabotage it at every turn."

"I do not-" my phone buzzed again. RJ confirming the restaurant choice. "Sabotage anything."

"Then prove it," Kaya challenged. "Stop overthinking and just... enjoy lunch."

I finished getting ready and grabbed Kaya's carrier - a specialized cat backpack with its clear dome window that let her watch the world while staying safely contained. "Okay, in you go. If you're good maybe I'll get you a burger at lunch."

Kaya twitched her nose but hopped into the carrier, settling herself so she could see through the dome. "I'd rather have some fish and chips."

"In Ireland? Shocking." I secured the carrier carefully. "Just remember to act like a normal cat around the twins."

"Please," she positioned herself for optimal viewing. "I'm an excellent actor. Unlike some people who can't hide a smile when certain Wolf Masters text."

"One more word and you're getting dry kibble," I threatened, though we both knew I'd never follow through.

"You wouldn't dare," she said confidently, her voice slightly muffled by the dome. "Now hurry up. We're going to be late for your not-date."

"It's not a-" I caught myself. "You know what? Never mind. Let's just go."

Trev and Amber were already at work, but Niamh had kindly offered me use of her car. I found the restaurant easily enough, spotting RJ and the twins through the window. He was studying the menu while Summer and Autumn concentrated on their kids' menu coloring pages with impressive focus.

"Hi," I said, sliding into the seat across from him and setting Kaya's carrier carefully by my feet.

He looked up with a smile that definitely didn't make my stomach flutter. "Hey. How are you doing after... everything?"

"You mean after securing a corrupted soul in the depths of the Netherworld using an ancient mystical gem? Oh, I'm fantastic," I smirked, keeping my voice low enough that only he could hear.

"Hi Kaya!" Summer whispered excitedly at the carrier.

Autumn glanced around carefully before adding her own quiet greeting. The twins had adapted remarkably well to the whole 'talking cat must remain secret' thing - better than most adults probably would have.

"Hello girls," Kaya responded softly, knowing the restaurant was empty enough for her to risk it.

RJ's smile carried understanding - his daughters had been through so much lately, but they were handling it all with surprising grace. "The girls are excited about their playdate with Tiffy later."

I nodded, watching the twins continue their coloring. "Kara says Tiffy struggles to make friends her age, so I'm glad she and the twins hit it off."

"I'm glad we get to have dinner," RJ said, then seemed to catch himself. "With Amber and Trevor, I mean."

I nodded, ignoring the slight flutter in my stomach at his slip. "Yeah, Amber says she's heard great things about the place we're going. And Trevor is really picky. Dinner with a Michelin Star chef is never dull."

"I imagine he has strong opinions about pizza," RJ's eyes crinkled with amusement.

"Oh god, don't get him started," I laughed. "He nearly had an aneurysm when he found out you put pineapple on pizza."

"Daddy makes the best pizza!" Summer looked up from her coloring to defend her father's honor.

"The very best," I agreed, surprising myself with how much I meant it. The pizza at JKP was a guilty pleasure of mine whenever I went anywhere near Ocean Bluff on tour.

"You should come by more often when you're in California," RJ said casually, though something in his voice made Kaya's ears perk up in her carrier. "The girls love having visitors."

"Yeah!" Autumn looked up eagerly. "And you can bring Kaya!"

"As long as she promises not to chase the restaurant cats," Summer added with a giggle.

I could practically feel Kaya's indignation at the suggestion she would chase anything. "I think Kaya prefers to maintain her dignity."

"Speaking of dignity," RJ glanced at the menu, "how would Trevor feel about us eating at a simple sandwich shop for lunch?"

"Well, suppose we just won't tell him," I smirked. "I think I'm going for the cobb salad. What looks good to you?"

"The turkey club is calling my name," he said, then turned to the twins. "Have you girls decided?"

"Grilled cheese!" they answered in perfect synchronization.

"At least it's not pizza," I teased, earning a mock-wounded look from RJ.

"There's nothing wrong with pizza for lunch," he defended. "Or dinner. Or-"

"If you say breakfast, Trevor might somehow sense it from across town and show up just to lecture you."

The twins giggled at that, clearly enjoying the ongoing pizza debate. I found myself smiling too, surprising myself with how comfortable this felt - lunch with RJ and his daughters, Kaya quietly observing from her carrier, the weight of recent battles temporarily forgotten.

"You know," RJ said carefully, "the girls really do like having you around."

"Just the girls?" Kaya muttered from her carrier, quiet enough that only I could hear.

I ignored her, but RJ was studying me with an expression I couldn't quite read. "What?"

"You're different than I expected," he admitted. "From what I remembered, from what Michelle used to say..."

"You mean I'm not just the cold-hearted Queen of Death?" I raised an eyebrow.

"I mean you care more than you let people see," he said quietly. "About Arissa, about Rachel... even about Michelle, though you'd probably rather face the Death Ranger again than admit it."

"I do not-" I started to protest, but the knowing look from both RJ and Kaya made me stop.

"Fine. Maybe I've... evolved since those days. People can change."

"They can," he agreed, something deeper in his voice. "Sometimes it takes losing everything to figure out who you really are."

The weight of shared understanding - his loss of Grace, my loss of Diamond - hung between us for a moment before Summer asked for more crayons, breaking the tension.

Autumn quietly shared her crayons with her sister, and watching RJ's soft smile at the gesture, I found myself saying something I'd been thinking about.

"I'm glad you got to be a dad," I said softly. "Everyone talks about how losing Aubrey affected Michelle, but no one ever really mentions what it did to you."

RJ nodded, his expression growing thoughtful. "It was... hard. I didn't handle it well. Everything with MJ- Michelle and I happened so fast, I had trouble processing any of it. I still think about Aubrey, and yeah, it's difficult. But these two," he smiled at his daughters, "they're the light of my life. I miss Grace every day, but I'm so grateful she gave me my girls."

"I understand," I said. "Diamond and I never had children, but being a godmother... Arissa and Rachel mean everything to me."

RJ laughed softly. "You being Michelle's daughter's godmother - definitely didn't see that coming."

"Yeah, well," I shrugged. "Michelle and I have come a long way. She's still insufferable, but... I don't actively want to kill her anymore, so... progress?"

"That's quite the evolution," RJ observed. "From mortal enemies to... whatever you two are now."

"Co-existing peacefully-ish?" I suggested. "Though if you tell her I said anything nice about her, I'll deny it completely."

"Your secret's safe with me," he promised, then hesitated before adding, "You know, you're nothing like what I expected either. Back then, when you were Michelle's enemy... I thought you were just..."

"Cold? Heartless? The evil Queen of Death?"

"Lonely," he finished quietly. "I thought you were lonely."

I felt Kaya shift in her carrier, suddenly very attentive. "I wasn't-" I started to protest automatically, then stopped myself. "Maybe I was. Maybe I still am, sometimes."

"Daddy," Summer interrupted, completely oblivious to the weight of our conversation, "can we get ice cream after?"

"Murphy's Ice Cream is just down the street," I found myself offering. "Best in Cork. Probably shouldn't tell Trevor I said that either."

"You're collecting quite a few secrets," RJ noted with amusement.

"What can I say? I'm a woman of mystery." I tried to keep my tone light, but something in his expression made me add, "Though maybe... maybe not everyone needs to be kept at a distance."

"No," he agreed softly. "They don't."

The waitress chose that moment to come take our orders, giving me a chance to collect myself. What was I doing? Opening up like this, letting down walls I'd spent years building...

"You're overthinking again," Kaya muttered from her carrier.

"Shut up," I whispered back, though she wasn't wrong.

After we ordered, the twins went back to their coloring, but the atmosphere had shifted slightly. That moment of vulnerability hung between RJ and me, neither of us quite sure how to proceed.

"So," he finally broke the silence, "how long until you head back on tour?"

"A week," I said, trying to ignore the way my stomach tightened at the thought. "Have some shows in London first, then back to the States."

"That must be hard," he observed carefully. "Always moving, never staying in one place too long."

"It's easier," I admitted. "Keeping moving means not getting too attached. To places, to people..."

"To pizza places?" he suggested with a slight smile, trying to lighten the mood.

"To anything," I said quietly, then caught myself. "Though JKP might be an exception. Don't let that go to your head."

RJ smiled, "Never."

"Amber is trying to convince me to get rid of my apartment in NYC and move to Cork," I said, not sure why I was sharing this.

"And what do you think about that?" His tone was carefully neutral.

"I think..." I paused, considering. "I think for the first time in a long time, I'm actually thinking about it. Having roots somewhere. People who know the real me, not just the stage persona."

"That's a big change for the Queen of Death," he observed softly.

"Yeah, well," I watched the twins sharing their crayons again, "maybe Diamond was right. Maybe it's time to actually live instead of just existing."

"Speaking of existing," Kaya piped up quietly from her carrier, "I exist, and I'm hungry."

"You always pick the worst moments," I muttered, but I was almost grateful for the interruption. I was getting dangerously close to saying things I couldn't take back. "I can't feed my cat at a restaurant. I'll order fish and chips to go and you can eat after," I whispered to my demanding cat.

"Fine," Kaya grumbled. "But I expect proper Irish fish and chips, not that frozen nonsense."

RJ was watching our exchange with barely concealed amusement. "You two remind me of the girls sometimes. The way you bicker but clearly care about each other."

"We do not-" I started to protest.

"Yes, we do," Kaya interrupted. "Though I'm clearly the more mature one."

"I will get you cat food from the grocery store instead," I threatened.

"You wouldn't dare," she replied confidently. "You love me too much."

I caught RJ trying to hide his smile behind his water glass. "What?"

"Nothing," he said. "It's just... nice seeing this side of you. The one that argues with her cat and takes kids for ice cream."

I glared down at Kaya to hide the blush I felt creeping up my neck. "Kaya, shut up. Someone is going to hear you."

"No one's paying attention," she muttered, but settled into a more convincingly cat-like silence as our waitress approached with our food.

The twins immediately dug into their grilled cheese with the kind of enthusiasm only children can muster, while RJ watched them with obvious affection. Something about the simple domesticity of the moment made my chest tight.

"You okay?" RJ asked quietly, noticing my expression.

"Yeah," I said, surprising myself by meaning it. "Just... not used to this."

"Lunch?"

"Normal," I clarified, picking at my salad. "Moments like this. They feel..."

"Scary?" he suggested gently.

"Safe," I corrected, then immediately wanted to take it back. I was definitely sharing too much.

RJ's expression softened in a way that made me want to look anywhere else. "Safe is good," he said quietly. "Safe is... rare in our world."

He wasn't wrong. Between Rangers and monsters, death magic and corrupted souls, dimensional travel and ancient prophecies - moments like this, just eating lunch with no imminent threats, felt almost surreal.

"Daddy," Autumn interrupted my thoughts, "can we get chocolate ice cream?"

"And sprinkles?" Summer added hopefully.

"We'll see," RJ smiled at his daughters before glancing back at me.

My phone buzzed, and I fought back a groan when I saw Michelle's name on the screen. Of fucking course she'd interrupt my one normal lunch. I opened the message: "Bit of an issue. Can you get to my place ASAP?"

"Let me guess," RJ said, noting my expression. "Duty calls?"

"Michelle," I sighed. "Says there's an 'issue' that needs immediate attention."

"After everything that just happened?" He lowered his voice, glancing at the twins who were still focused on their lunch. "You'd think we could get one day of peace."

"Peace isn't really in our job description," I muttered, typing back a quick response.

"Should I go with you?" RJ asked.

"Not sure since I don't know what this is about," I said, but the twins were already looking up with interest.

"Can we come see Harley and Arissa?" Summer asked hopefully.

RJ and I exchanged looks. After everything that had happened, keeping the girls close might not be a bad idea. They'd already been through so much - at least at Michelle's they'd be protected if anything went wrong.

"Actually," I found myself saying, "maybe you should all come. Better to stay together after everything that's happened."

"And we can get ice cream after?" Autumn asked.

"If your dad says it's okay," I smiled despite my concern about Michelle's message.

"We'll need to take both cars," RJ said practically as he helped the girls gather their things. "Since you have Niamh's."

"Race you there?" I suggested, trying to keep things light for the twins' sake.

Kaya made a disapproving sound from her carrier. "No racing with me in here. And I'm still hungry."

I rolled my eyes and flagged down the waitress. "Can I order fish and chips to go?"

While we waited for the food, my phone buzzed again. Another text from Michelle: "Today would be good."

"Someone's impatient," I muttered, typing back that we were on our way.

"Is everything okay?" Autumn asked, picking up on the tension.

"I'm sure it's fine," RJ assured her, helping the girls gather their things. "Michelle probably just needs help with something."

"And Kaya needs her lunch," I added, accepting the takeaway bag from the waitress. "Or she'll never let me hear the end of it."

"I heard that," came the muffled response from the carrier.

"You were meant to," I replied quietly, earning a small smile from RJ. "Ready?"

We headed out to the cars, and I carefully placed Kaya's carrier on the passenger seat, unzipping the side to slide in the open takeaway container.

"About time!" she muttered, immediately diving into her fish and chips while I pulled out behind RJ's rental car.

"You know," I said as we followed him toward Michelle's, "you could try being a little less demanding."

"And you could try being a little less obvious about your feelings," she replied between bites.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I focused intently on the road.

"Of course not," Kaya's voice dripped with sarcasm. "Just like you weren't blushing every time he smiled."

"Keep it up and that's the last takeaway you get," I threatened, though we both knew it was empty.

"Please, you need me to keep you honest with yourself," she paused in her eating. "Speaking of honest, what do you think Michelle wants?"

"With Michelle? Who the hell knows?"

Michelle

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I paced the living room after filling Hunter in about the Livvie situation. He'd insisted we tell Mia, worried that Livvie might confide in Amber if the secret became too much to handle alone. Given how close they'd become, almost like sisters, it wasn't an unreasonable concern.

When Mia finally arrived, she wasn't alone - RJ and the twins were with her. Because of course they were.

"What's he doing here?" Hunter's voice carried that edge it always got around RJ.

"Mich said something was up. I thought we might need backup?" Mia's attempt at casual explanation wasn't fooling anyone.

I rolled my eyes. "I don't even want to know. Hey, girls, why don't you go out back and play with Tomi and Arissa?"

"Can we?" Summer looked to RJ for permission.

He nodded. "Of course."

Once the twins were safely out of earshot, Mia turned to me. "So, what is it?"

I sighed heavily. "I warned Billy not to contract Livvie, but he didn't listen. She managed to hack into his Ranger files - actually got dangerously close to the Morphin Grid itself. She's seen files on all of us - me, Hunter, Billy, RJ... she knows who we are."

"And me?" Mia's voice carried an edge.

I shook my head. "Not yet. Though I'm sure Billy has files on the Sailor Soldiers stored somewhere, so it's probably just a matter of time."

"Fucking hell," Mia muttered.

"Well, that's peachy," Kaya grumbled as Mia released her from the carrier, the guardian cat's tail twitching with irritation.

"Does Jeremy know?" Mia asked, settling into a chair while Kaya prowled the room restlessly.

"No," I shook my head. "And that's part of the problem. Livvie's never kept anything from him before."

"She can't tell him," Hunter's voice was firm. "The fewer people who know-"

"The safer everyone is," Mia finished. "Yeah, we know. But this is Jeremy we're talking about. Your best friend," she looked at me. "Can you really ask his wife to lie to him?"

"I have to," I said quietly. "Because the alternative is putting him and the twins in danger. And I won't do that."

"There's something else," RJ spoke up, studying my expression. "You wouldn't have called us here just for this. What aren't you telling us?"

Sometimes I forgot how perceptive he could be. "Livvie is our Tech Fairy... she brags endlessly about how good she is, and she just hacked alien tech. I'm afraid if she can't tell Jeremy, she'll burst and blurt it out to Amber."

Mia's eyes widened with genuine fear. "She can't. Amber can't know who I am. She's my best friend. If she knows I've been keeping this from her..." She stood up, starting to pace. "Not to mention the danger it would put her and Rachel in..."

"Rachel," Hunter's voice softened at the mention of Mia's goddaughter. "That's exactly why we need to contain this. One slip to Jeremy becomes a slip to Amber becomes Rachel in danger."

"And Trevor," RJ added. "The Cantina is practically Rangers' headquarters at this point. If they knew..."

"It would change everything," I finished. "Our one normal space would become just another part of... all this." I gestured vaguely at our complicated lives.

"So what do we do?" Mia asked, and I could hear the strain in her voice. "How do we keep Livvie quiet without making her resent us? Because if she starts resenting us..."

"We don't. We just have to trust her," I sighed. "I just wanted to warn you in case shit hits the fan." I ran a hand through my hair in frustration. "Look, I'm not happy about this either. I want everything Ranger behind me. My life has been one Ranger disaster after another for the 19 years since Mystic Force."

I noticed RJ tense slightly - he knew I was counting from Mystic Force even though I'd worked with his team two years after that. But that was when I'd lost Hunter—the 2nd time.

"I have been cursed to have this hanging over me, and I was finally happy. I finally had a life that didn't revolve around this shit. Now here I am again, facing that all falling apart."

Hunter moved to my side, his presence steadying. "It's not falling apart. We'll handle this, like we handle everything else."

"That's exactly what I'm tired of," I said quietly. "Always having to 'handle' something. Always waiting for the next crisis, the next threat, the next time our normal life gets interrupted by Ranger business."

"And now our daughters are part of it too," Hunter added softly, understanding exactly where my mind was going.

"At least they had a choice," RJ said, then seemed to regret it when Hunter's expression darkened.

"Did they?" I asked sharply. "Really? When it's in their blood? When they were born into this legacy? When the Death Ranger was threatening their family?" I shook my head. "None of us ever really had a choice. And now Livvie's been dragged into it too."

"She chose to hack those files," Mia pointed out practically.

"Because she's Livvie. She can't resist a locked door any more than you can resist death magic or I can resist a fight. We are who we are." I slumped onto the sofa. "I just... I wanted Jeremy to stay untouched by all this. Him and his family... they're my anchor to normal life."

"Maybe that's why Livvie came to you first," Mia suggested, surprising me with her insight. "She knows what Jeremy means to you. She's trying to protect that too."

"Or maybe she just didn't want to admit to her husband that she'd been hacking secure systems again," Hunter muttered.

"Again?" RJ asked.

"Let's just say there's a reason Jeremy warns her about staying out of things," I explained. "She's... curious by nature."

"Like mother, like son," Kaya observed cryptically.

"What does that mean?" I asked sharply, remembering what Billy had said about Killy's pattern recognition.

"Nothing," Mia cut in quickly, giving her guardian a warning look. "The point is, what's our next move?"

"We wait," I said, though the words tasted bitter. "We trust Livvie, and we wait. And we hope this doesn't blow up in our faces."

"Should I tell Amber about me before Livvie can?" Mia asked, her voice uncharacteristically uncertain.

The question hung heavy in the air. I understood her fear - Amber wasn't just her best friend, she was family. And finding out from someone else...

"No," Hunter said firmly. "The fewer people who know-"

"The safer they are, I know," Mia cut him off. "But this is Amber. She's already involved in our world more than she realizes. And Rachel..."

"Is exactly why we keep this quiet," I finished gently. "Think about it, Mia. Right now, Amber's biggest worry is Fashion Week with Thara. Do you really want to change that?"

"Sometimes I think she suspects something," Mia admitted. "The way she looks at me when I have to suddenly leave..."

"But suspecting isn't knowing," RJ pointed out quietly. "Once you cross that line..."

"There's no going back," I finished. "Trust me, I know. Every time someone finds out, it changes everything."

"At least you don't live with the person you're lying to," Mia muttered. "Do you know how hard it is to keep this from Amber? To watch her with Rachel, to be part of their family, and have to hide such a huge part of who I am?"

"The point is," Hunter added, "telling Amber would just put her in an impossible position. She'd have to lie to Trevor, to her family..."

Mia sighed, running a hand through her hair. "Fine. You're right."

RJ put his arm around her shoulders in a gesture that made me do a mental double-take. The casual intimacy of it, the way she didn't immediately pull away... Oh god. Was this actually something? Were there genuine feelings developing between my insufferable frenemy and my ex-husband?



The thought made my stomach turn. RJ? Of all people? The man who'd walked out when I needed him most was now potentially involved with the woman who'd gone from trying to kill me to being Arissa's godmother? The universe had a sick sense of humor.

I caught Hunter watching them too, his jaw clenched slightly. At least I wasn't the only one disturbed by this development.

"So," I said, trying to redirect my thoughts from this horror show, "that was all I had."

"Not great news, but at least nothing Earth shattering," Mia stood up. "Well, should we take the girls for ice cream?"

RJ nodded, that soft smile back. "If you still want to."

"Of course I do. Hey, can I take Arissa?" Mia asked, as if this was totally normal and not completely weird.

I blinked, staring at her. "You're taking the twins for ice cream? And want Arissa to go? Like a family?"

"No," Mia's glare could have frozen hell. "Like friends."

I looked at Hunter, seeing my own confusion reflected in his expression.

"Fine," he said finally. "Arissa can go if she wants."

"Arissa!" I called out toward the back yard. "Come here a minute!"

Our oldest daughter appeared, looking wary - probably assuming she was in trouble for something. "Yeah?"

"Mia and RJ are taking the twins for ice cream. Want to go?"

Her face lit up. "Really? Murphy's?"

"Is there anywhere else?" Mia asked with a slight smile.

"Let me get my shoes!" Arissa dashed upstairs.

I watched this strange little group forming - my ex-husband, my frenemy, their charges all getting ice cream together like it was the most normal thing in the world. The universe really did have a twisted sense of humor.

"Don't say it," Mia warned, clearly reading my expression.

"I didn't say anything."

"You were thinking it very loudly."

Hunter's arm slipped around my waist. "Just... be careful," he said, though I wasn't sure if he was talking to Arissa or Mia.

Once they were gone, I scooped up Tomi, who had toddled in to investigate all the commotion. I looked at Hunter, completely bewildered. "I can't even..."

Hunter shook his head, his disgust evident. "Neither can I. I have no idea why someone as strong as Mia would have any interest in that fake zen wolf master wannabe. After everything he did..."

I couldn't help but smirk at his obvious disdain. "You really hate him, don't you? Even after all these years?"

"More than I can tell you, Mich," his arms tightened around us protectively. "I already didn't like him when I met him - something about him never sat right. But after seeing how he treated you?" His jaw clenched with old anger. "After he left you alone in that hospital? Yeah, few people do I loathe more than RJ James. You deserved so much better."

I leaned into him, grateful for how life had eventually led me to real, unconditional love. "I found better. I found you."

He pressed a kiss to my head, holding both me and Tomi close. "I love you too, more than you will ever know. And I will never leave you to face anything alone."

Mia

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Murphy's Ice Cream was busy as usual, but we managed to find a quiet corner table.

Arisa immediately took charge of helping the twins with their ice cream choices, her natural ability with younger kids shining through.

"She's good with them," RJ observed quietly as we watched Summer and Autumn debating between flavors.

"She's had practice with Tomi," I said, trying not to think about how natural this all felt.

"Aunt Mia," Summer called out, ice cream already smeared across her face, "can we go to the park after?"

I caught RJ's eye. We had hours before dinner, and after the heavy conversation at Michelle's... "What do you think?"

"I think we could all use some normal time," he smiled, understanding exactly what I meant.

After ice cream, we had to make a quick stop at Amber's to return Niamh's car. "I can drive," RJ offered. "The rental has plenty of room."

The girls were already piling into his car, Arisa helping the twins with their seatbelts while chattering about the park. The afternoon stretched ahead of us, hours before we needed to drop them at Kara's, and something about the normalcy of it all made me forget to maintain my usual walls.

The park was surprisingly quiet for a summer afternoon. While Arissa kept the twins entertained on the playground, RJ and I found ourselves talking about everything and nothing - carefully avoiding any mention of Rangers or death magic or complicated histories.

When it was time to head to Kara's, Arissa called Michelle and got permission to stay with Kira. After dropping all the girls off, RJ and I found ourselves alone in his rental car, heading to meet Amber and Trevor for dinner. The silence felt different now, charged with something I wasn't ready to name.

The restaurant was one of Cork's hidden gems - not as famous as the Cantina, but elegant in its own right. Amber and Trevor were already at the table, my best friend's eyes lighting up with that dangerous sparkle when she saw us arrive together.

"Hey guys!" Amber's smile was far too knowing.

I stashed Kaya's carrier under the table before sliding into my seat. "Hey! How was work?"

"Absolute chaos until launch," Amber sighed, but her excitement was obvious. "The buzz is incredible though. I just hope my products live up to expectations."

"Of course they will, love," Trevor squeezed her hand. "No one knows cosmetics quite like you." He turned to us, clearly playing nice despite his culinary snobbery. "So, what did you lot get up to today?"

"Lunch, ice cream with the girls, bit of time at the park," RJ answered casually.

"Sounds absolutely quaint and lovely," Amber's tone made me want to kick her under the table.

"It was a nice day," I said pointedly. "Very relaxing. Much needed before I go back on tour. You know, for my career."

"Speaking of careers," Trevor turned to RJ, "when are you headed back to California?"

"Couple of days," RJ replied. "You know how it is, can't leave the restaurant for too long."

I caught Trevor's barely concealed cringe at the mention of RJ's pizza place, though he made an admirable attempt to hide it.

"Can't leave JKP for too long," RJ continued, either oblivious to or deliberately ignoring Trevor's disdain. "Though the staff has it well handled."

"I'm sure they do," Trevor's tone carried that subtle condescension he reserved for what he considered 'casual dining.'

"The wine list here is excellent," Amber cut in smoothly, ever the diplomat. "Though not quite as impressive as the Cantina's."

"Few are," I said dryly, accepting the menu from our server. "Though I suppose that's what happens when your husband is a Michelin-starred chef."

"It's not about the stars, it's about the standards," Trevor defended, making Amber hide a smile behind her menu.

"Speaking of standards," Amber's eyes sparkled with mischief, "Mia, didn't you mention something about enjoying JKP's pizza?"

I was going to kill her. Slowly. With witnesses present. "I might have mentioned stopping there when I'm in the area."

"On tour," I added quickly, though I wasn't sure why I felt the need to explain.

"Actually," RJ leaned forward slightly, and I immediately recognized the glint in his eye, "we've been experimenting with some new combinations lately. There's this Hawaiian fusion pizza with grilled pineapple and-"

"Pineapple?" Trevor looked physically pained. "On pizza? That's... that's culinary terrorism."

"Don't knock it till you've tried it," RJ said cheerfully. "We caramelize the pineapple first, add a spicy honey drizzle..."

"Sweet fruit does not belong on pizza," Trevor insisted. "It's an abomination against proper cooking techniques."

"Proper is boring," RJ countered. "Food should be an adventure. Like our new Thai-inspired pizza with peanut sauce base-"

"This is why Michelin doesn't rate pizza places," Trevor muttered into his wine glass.

Amber caught my eye across the table, clearly enjoying the clash of culinary philosophies. I had to admit, watching Trevor's growing horror at RJ's enthusiastic description of fusion pizzas was pretty entertaining.

"You should try our dessert pizza," RJ added, and I swear Trevor actually paled.

"It's just fusion, Trev. Isn't that what you're all about? Fusion cuisine?" I smirked, unable to resist needling him a bit.

"There's fusion," Trevor said with great dignity, "and then there's chaos. The Cantina blends Irish and Mexican traditions with respect for both cultures' techniques. Pizza with... with peanut sauce is just anarchy."

"Sometimes anarchy works," RJ shrugged, looking far too pleased with Trevor's reaction. "Our Nutella and banana dessert pizza is our biggest seller with kids."

"I think I need more wine," Trevor muttered.

"Speaking of wine," Amber intervened smoothly, though her eyes were dancing with amusement, "shall we order a bottle for the table? Something that pairs well with... culinary debate?"

"Make it a strong one," I suggested, watching Trevor's continued horror at RJ's cheerful dismantling of traditional pizza rules.

"You know," Amber said thoughtfully, swirling her wine, "maybe we should do a fusion night at the Cantina. Invite different chefs to showcase their interpretations..."

"Absolutely not," Trevor cut her off. "The Cantina's reputation-"

"Is built on innovation," she finished smoothly. "Remember that curry sauce you created last month?"

"That was different," he protested. "That was a careful blend of traditional spices and-"

"And RJ blends traditional pizza techniques with new flavors," I found myself defending him, surprising everyone at the table, including myself.

"Et tu, Mia?" Trevor pressed his hand to his chest dramatically.

"I think what Mia means," RJ said, his eyes twinkling, "is that sometimes the best things come from unexpected combinations."

The weight of that statement hung in the air for a moment before Amber's delighted smile made me want to sink under the table.

I cleared my throat, desperately seeking safer ground. "I want to make sure I get some good time with Rachel before tour starts. Not sure when I'll be back in Cork after."

"You know," Amber's voice carried that tone I'd learned to dread, "you could just get an apartment here."

"I like New York," I said firmly.

"Cork is so much better," she pressed.

"Better than New York City?" I scoffed. "Please."

"Rachel and Arissa are here," Amber's voice softened. "Your family is here. Like it or not, Mia, you have a family now."

I shot her a glare that would have made most people flinch. "I have a tour to focus on."

"And I'm not going to stop reminding you that you have people who care about you," she said with that stubborn determination I both loved and hated. "No matter how hard you try to resist it."

"What about you, RJ?" Trevor asked, mercifully changing the subject. "Do you have family in Ocean Bluff?"

"I have my dad," RJ nodded. "And my cousin Dustin and his family live nearby in Blue Bay Harbor."

I tried not to react to the mention of Ocean Bluff, though I caught Amber watching me curiously. She didn't know about my history there, about the battles fought on those beaches. Another secret to keep.

"Must be nice having family close," Trevor continued. "Especially with the twins."

"It is," RJ's expression softened at the mention of his daughters. "Dad loves being a grandfather, and the girls adore their Uncle Dustin."

Something in his tone made me wonder about Grace's family, but I knew better than to ask. Some wounds were better left untouched over dinner.

"Dustin was actually Michelle's best friend back in the day," I found myself saying. "Before she had Jeremy, she had Dustin. She seems to need a brother figure in her life."

"Yeah," RJ's smile turned wry. "She actually knew Dustin years before I ever met her. And he was not happy when she and I got together. Dustin's also friends with Hunter, so Michelle and I made things really awkward for him."

"Small world," Amber observed, and I could practically see her filing away this information for future use.

"Too small sometimes," I muttered, thinking about how interconnected all our lives had become. Rangers, civilians, friends, enemies - the lines kept blurring more every day.

"Speaking of small worlds," Amber's smile turned dangerous. "How exactly did you two end up having lunch together today?"

I blinked, trying to keep my voice casual. "He invited me and I didn't have plans so I went."

I heard Kaya's distinctive cough from her carrier under the table - her standard method of disguising laughter at my expense. I resisted the urge to kick the carrier.

"That simple, huh?" Amber's tone dripped with skepticism. "Just a casual lunch between... friends?"

"Yes, actually," I said firmly, though I could feel my cheeks warming slightly. "Sometimes lunch is just lunch."

"And ice cream and the park after?" she pressed, clearly enjoying my discomfort.

"The twins wanted ice cream," I defended. "And it was a nice day for the park."

"Mmhmm," Amber hummed, sharing a look with Trevor that I chose to ignore.

Kaya's "coughing" grew more pronounced, and I seriously considered ordering fish just so she'd have to smell it all evening.

"Kaya okay? Does she have a hairball again?" Amber asked with concern.

I nudged the carrier with my foot. "She's fine. You know, the salmon tartare looks amazing."

"Make sure it's not rancid," Amber said with a knowing smile as Trevor playfully pushed her shoulder.

"Rancid?" RJ looked between them, confused.

Amber's eyes lit up with that spark she always got when telling this story. "It's actually how Trev and I met. I was... not in a great place back then. Running a con to get a free meal by ordering steak tartare and claiming it was rancid. Didn't count on the chef being an ego-driven perfectionist who'd confront me directly."

"I could have had her arrested," Trevor's voice softened with the memory. "But I recognized that look in her eyes. That desperation. So after she withdrew the complaint, I used my employee meal to cover it and we split dessert."

"Next thing I knew, I had a best friend and roommate," Amber leaned into him. "Fast forward a decade or so, and here we are."

"That's quite the story," RJ said, and I caught something in his expression - understanding, maybe, of how life's strangest moments could lead to something meaningful.

"Sometimes the best things in life come from unexpected places," Amber said pointedly, her eyes flickering between RJ and me.

"Or unexpected people," Trevor added, and I seriously considered whether I needed new friends.

"Speaking of unexpected," I tried to change the subject, "how's Thara handling her upcoming modeling debut?"

"Oh, she's being absolutely insufferable," Amber groaned. "Michelle's clearly been coaching her. She actually hissed at the photographer during the test shots yesterday."

"That's because you tried to put a bow on her," Trevor pointed out.

"It was a Burberry bow! Do you know how much that cost?"

"Probably less than the scratches on your arm cost to treat," he teased.

The conversation mercifully shifted to Fashion Week preparations, though I could feel Amber's knowing looks every time RJ and I interacted. This was going to be a very long evening.

"You realize that cat is used to amethyst and diamond encrusted collars?" I smirked. "She probably thought a bow was beneath her."

Kaya's muffled snicker from her carrier made me nudge it gently with my foot.

"Michelle does spoil that cat," Trevor shook his head. "Though I suppose when you're a celebrity..."

"Speaking of celebrity cats," Amber's eyes gleamed. "Kaya's quite the diva herself. Remember when she hissed at the idea of flying coach?"

"That was one time," I defended, while Kaya made a sound suspiciously like a scoff. "And it was a long flight."

"Your cat flies first class?" RJ asked, amusement dancing in his eyes.

"My cat has standards," I said primly, ignoring Amber's knowing grin.

"Like owner, like pet," she teased.

"Look, Kaya and Thara travel all over the world with us," I said defensively. "Michelle and I just want to keep our companions comfortable."

"Wait," Amber's eyes widened with delight. "Are you actually defending Michelle?"

"Absolutely not," I said firmly. "I'm defending Kaya."

"You know," RJ observed with that infuriating zen master smile, "for someone you claim to hate, you seem to understand Michelle pretty well."

"Understanding someone doesn't mean liking them," I muttered, though even I could hear how weak that sounded.

"Right," Amber drawled. "Just like understanding pizza doesn't mean enjoying it?"

"I will actually murder you," I threatened, but there was no heat in it. These people - my chosen family, as Amber kept insisting - were getting far too good at reading me.

Kaya's distinctive snicker from her carrier wasn't helping matters.

I ordered the salmon tartare out of pure spite, enjoying Kaya's muffled protests every time the fish scent wafted near her carrier. The conversation flowed easily through dinner, though Amber's knowing looks and not-so-subtle hints about my social life had me considering finding a new best friend.

As we finished our wine and settled the bill, I found myself surprisingly reluctant for the evening to end. Something had shifted during these hours together - the easy laughter, the shared looks, the comfortable silences between conversations.

Outside the restaurant, Amber hugged me with a whispered "Be happy, see you later" that I pretended not to hear. After they drove off, RJ and I stood by his rental car, that charged energy from earlier returning.

"I... um..." RJ ran a hand through his hair, uncharacteristically nervous. "Do you want to go back to my hotel? Maybe have a drink before we call it a night?"

I took a slow breath, trying to ignore the sudden heat that rose in my stomach - a feeling I hadn't experienced in years. "Sure," I heard myself say. "I'd like that."

"I swear I heard Diamond groan," Kaya muttered from her carrier as we got into the car.

"Shut up," I whispered, though my heart clenched at the mention of his name. Especially after seeing him in the Netherworld, after what he'd said about living...

"One second," I called to RJ, jogging to catch Amber before she reached her car. "Hey, can you take Kaya for me? Not sure she'll be welcome if we end up at a pub or something."

Amber's knowing smile made me want to reconsider, but she took the carrier without comment.
"Sure. See you later."

"Thanks," I said quickly, hurrying back to RJ's car before she could start with the meaningful looks.

The drive to his hotel was quiet, but not uncomfortably so. Just... anticipatory. Like we both knew something was happening but weren't quite ready to name it.

The drive to his hotel was quiet, but not uncomfortably so. Just... anticipatory. Like we both knew something was happening but weren't quite ready to name it.

The Metropole was one of Cork's nicer hotels - not quite as posh as the Imperial where I usually stayed, but elegant in its own right. RJ led the way to the hotel bar, a cozy space with low lighting and comfortable seating.

"What's your poison?" he asked as we found a quiet corner.

"Whiskey," I said without hesitation. "Neat."

His smile suggested approval. "A woman who knows her drink."

"I've spent enough time in Ireland," I shrugged, trying to ignore how the lighting made his eyes look warmer.

The bartender brought our drinks - whiskey for me, some local craft beer for RJ. Another comfortable silence settled between us, but this one felt heavier with possibility.

"So," he said finally, "this has been... unexpected."

"What has?" I asked, though we both knew exactly what he meant.

"What has?" I asked, though we both knew exactly what he meant.

"Today," he said carefully. "This evening. You and me, here, now. After everything..."

"After Michelle?" I supplied, taking a slow sip of whiskey. "After loss?"

"After convincing ourselves that being alone was safer," he corrected gently.

The truth of that hit harder than the alcohol. Since Diamond, since Grace... we'd both built walls, created distance, focused on other things - my music, his restaurant, our respective charges.

"Diamond told me to live," I found myself saying. "In the Netherworld, he said... he said existing wasn't enough anymore."

"Grace would have said the same thing," RJ's voice was soft. "She always said life was meant to be lived fully, not just survived."

I studied my drink, afraid to meet his eyes. "This is terrifying."

"Which part?"

"All of it. Feeling something. Risking something. Knowing you're leaving in two days..."

"I don't have to," he said quietly.

I looked up sharply. "What?"

"Leave in two days," he clarified. "I could... stay longer. The staff can handle JKP, and the girls love it here."

"RJ..." I started, not sure if I was about to encourage or discourage him.

"I'm not suggesting anything dramatic," he added quickly. "Just... more time. To figure out what this is. To see if maybe Diamond and Grace knew what they were talking about."

I took another drink, buying time to steady my voice. "I leave for tour in a week."

"I know."

"And I live in New York."

"I know that too."

"And you have a life in Ocean Bluff."

His smile was gentle. "I'm starting to think life isn't as fixed as we pretend it is."

The words hung between us, heavy with possibility. Dangerous possibility.

"The twins need stability," I said, though it felt like I was grasping at excuses. "And my career..."

"Can happen anywhere," he finished. "Just like a pizza place can operate anywhere. But that's not what this is about, is it?"

I stared into my whiskey. "No."

"What are you really afraid of, Mia?"

"Losing someone again," I admitted quietly. "Caring about someone and having them... not be there anymore. Diamond, he was... he was everything. And then he was gone."

"I know," RJ's voice carried the same weight of loss. "Grace... it happens so fast. One normal day and then..."

"So why risk it?" I asked, finally meeting his eyes. "Why put ourselves through that again?"

"Because maybe they were right," he said softly. "Maybe existing isn't enough anymore."

For a moment we just looked at each other, years of carefully constructed walls crumbling in the space between us. When he leaned in to kiss me, something inside me broke open. I wasn't sure if it was the whiskey or the weight of loneliness finally lifting, but that kiss felt like drowning and being saved at the same time. His arms pulled me closer as I pressed against him, years of not letting myself feel anything suddenly catching fire.

When we finally broke apart, we were both breathing hard, the rest of the bar forgotten.

"Do you want to go upstairs?" His voice was rough with emotion.

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. I hadn't been with anyone since Diamond, hadn't wanted to be. But right now, in this moment, I wanted RJ with an intensity that scared me.

He tossed some cash on the bar and took my hand, leading me toward the elevator. The simple contact of his fingers intertwined with mine sent electricity through my body.

Back in his room, he pressed me against the door, his kiss deeper this time, more urgent. Years of holding back, of keeping everyone at arm's length, dissolved in the heat between us. Clothes fell away as he lifted me, carrying me to his bed with a gentleness that contrasted beautifully with the passion of the moment.

Feeling his body against mine awakened something I thought had died with Diamond. Every kiss, every touch felt like coming back to life. Part of me wanted to pull back, to protect myself from feeling this much again. But another part - the part Diamond had urged to truly live - wanted to surrender to it completely.

RJ's touch was different from Diamond's - less demanding, more patient. Where Diamond had been all aristocratic control, RJ was zen-like calm mixed with surprising passion. I found myself responding to him in ways I hadn't expected, hadn't allowed myself to imagine.

This wasn't just desire - it was healing, awakening, terrifying and beautiful all at once. For the first time in years, I let my walls down completely, let someone see all of me.

Afterwards, we lay tangled in hotel sheets, catching our breath. RJ had been... incredible. The thought flashed through my mind that Michelle must have been crazy to let him go, but I pushed it away. This wasn't about the past.

I rested my head on his chest, feeling his heart racing beneath my cheek as his arms wrapped around me. The simple intimacy of being held like this, of letting myself be vulnerable with someone, felt almost more intense than what we'd just shared.

"Are you okay?" he whispered finally, his voice carrying gentle concern.

I took a moment to really consider the question, to check in with my heart that had been closed for so long. "I'm great," I said softly, meaning it. "You were great."

He pressed a kiss to my head, his arms tightening slightly. "So were you."

We lay there in comfortable silence for a few minutes, his fingers tracing lazy patterns on my shoulder. Part of me wanted to stay here forever, protected in this bubble where the rest of the world couldn't touch us.

But reality had other plans.

"We should probably get the twins," I said reluctantly. "Kara's probably wondering..."

"Yeah," he sighed, but made no move to let go of me. "Though I'm having trouble remembering why we can't just stay here."

"Because we're responsible adults with obligations," I lifted my head to look at him. "And because if we don't pick them up soon, Amber's going to start texting, and I really don't want to deal with that right now."

He laughed softly. "Fair point. Though... this conversation isn't over."

"Which part?" I asked, though I knew exactly what he meant.

"The part about what happens next," he said quietly. "About me staying longer, about... us."

"Breakfast tomorrow?" I asked, surprising myself with how much I wanted it.

His smile warmed something inside me. "I'd like that. The twins have been wanting to try that café near the park..."

"The one with the amazing scones?" I sat up, reaching for my clothes. "Good choice. Though we should probably get dressed and get them from Kara's first."

"Probably," he agreed, but caught my hand before I could move away. "Mia..."

"I know," I said softly. "This is... complicated. Tour, Ocean Bluff, New York... but maybe we could just... see what happens?"

"One day at a time?" he suggested.

"Starting with breakfast," I nodded, trying to ignore how natural this felt, how right. "But first, we really need to get the twins."

We finally got dressed and headed back down to the car. The night air felt different somehow, charged with possibility. The drive to Kara's was quiet but comfortable, our hands finding each other across the center console.

"I should probably warn you," I said as we pulled up to the Jordan house, "Amber's going to be insufferable about this."

"About what?" he asked innocently, though his smile suggested he knew exactly what I meant.

"About everything. She's been trying to... I don't know, fix my life or something. Get me to open up more." I shook my head. "She's going to be unbearably smug."

"Would it help if I told you Michelle's probably going to be equally horrified?"

That startled a laugh out of me. "Actually, yes. Yes it does."

The Jordan house was quiet when we arrived - Michelle and Hunter had already collected Arissa. The twins were half-asleep as we loaded them into the car, the drive to Amber's passing in peaceful silence.

Pulling into her driveway, I found myself reluctant to leave. "I guess I'll see you in the morning?"

"I'll be here," RJ said softly, bringing my hand to his lips in a gesture that shouldn't have made my heart flutter, but did.

I watched his car disappear around the corner before heading inside, where exactly what I expected awaited me. Amber sat perched on the sofa, Ellie on one side and a very smug-looking Kaya on the other, both of them radiating judgment in their own unique ways.

"Did you get laid?" Amber blurted out immediately.

I rolled my eyes, but couldn't quite hide my smile.

"Oh my god! You did! Finally!" She practically bounced with excitement. "Was it great?"

I sighed heavily, dropping onto the couch. Experience had taught me that if I didn't give her something to work with, she'd keep pushing until I cracked.

"Yes, okay? It was great. It was... more than great." I couldn't quite meet her eyes. "Happy now?"

"More than great?" Amber's smile was impossibly wide. "Like, seeing-him-again-tomorrow great?"

"We're having breakfast," I admitted, then quickly added, "With the twins. It's not a big deal."

Kaya made a distinctly unimpressed sound from her spot on the couch, earning a glare from me.

"Not a big deal?" Amber's voice softened. "Mia, this is the first time I've seen you actually let someone in. Like, really let them in. Since... well, you know."

"It's just breakfast," I protested weakly, though Kaya's tail twitching suggested she agreed with Amber.

"No," Amber shook her head. "It's you finally living again. Actually living, not just existing."

The words hit too close to what Diamond had said in the Netherworld. "Don't," I warned. "Don't make this into some big symbolic moment."

"Fine," Amber held up her hands in surrender, though her smile remained. "I won't point out how you're actually smiling. Or how your eyes light up when you talk about him. Or how-"

"I'm going to bed," I announced, standing up. "Some of us have breakfast plans tomorrow."

"With the twins," she added innocently.

"Yes, with the twins," I grabbed Kaya. "And that's all I'm saying about it."

"For now," Amber called after me as I headed upstairs. "But we're definitely talking about this more tomorrow!"

In my room, I finally let out a long breath. Kaya jumped out of my arms and gave me that knowing look she'd perfected over centuries.

"Don't you start too," I warned her.

"I didn't say anything," she replied primly. "Though I notice you're still smiling."

I touched my lips, realizing she was right. "Shut up."

"You know," Kaya settled onto my bed, "Diamond would be happy for you."

The mention of his name didn't hurt quite as much as usual. Maybe because I'd just seen him, or maybe... "He told me to live," I said quietly, sitting beside her. "In the Netherworld, he said existing wasn't enough anymore."

"And?" she prompted gently.

"And tonight, with RJ... I felt alive. Really alive, not just going through the motions." I flopped back on the bed. "Which is terrifying."

"Because feelings are messy?"

"Because he lives in Ocean Bluff. Because I live in New York. Because I go on tour in a week. Because..." I trailed off.

"Because you might lose him too?" Kaya's voice was uncharacteristically soft.

"Yeah," I whispered. "That."

"Maybe that's exactly why you should try," she said. "Because you know better than most how precious time is."

I stared at the ceiling, letting her words sink in. "When did you get so wise?"

"I've always been wise. You just rarely listen to me."

My phone buzzed - a text from RJ: *The twins are already excited about breakfast. Thank you for today. For everything.*

Something warm bloomed in my chest as I typed back: *See you in the morning.*

"You're smiling again," Kaya observed.

"I thought you were supposed to be the voice of caution," I said, changing for bed. "Warning me about risks, telling me to be careful..."

"I am being careful," she replied. "Careful that you don't miss out on living because you're too afraid of loss. Diamond wouldn't want that."

"No," I agreed softly, thinking of his words in the Netherworld. "He wouldn't."

Another text from RJ: *Sweet dreams*

This time, I didn't try to hide my smile.

