

## Chapter 148

It was almost lunchtime when her father returned. She had been on her way downstairs to eat something when Alpha Morgan knocked the broken door out of the way and marched in.

She stopped when he noticed her and her heart squeezed in her chest. Her father was in pain. She could sense that as if her wolf senses were helping her, even though she still couldn't feel anything different inside her.

“They’re all over the boundary,” her dad said. “We have to find a hidden place to cross into the forest.

He was still saying ‘we.’

She walked down the rest of the stairs and went into his arms. When his arms tightened around her, she felt him tremble a little, and her heart broke again.

This could be the last day she saw her father.

But he would have to go. When the car came for him to take him to the airport, he would leave alone. He had the boys and the whole pack to take care of. She'd had the entire morning to come to terms with that. It was the only way.

"I will go into the forest, and then whatever the outcome, you'll have to leave tonight, Dad, she whispered.

Her father released her and then walked into the lounge, blatantly ignoring what she'd said. She sighed and followed him, knowing the boys were there. Zeke was already looking at the doorway when she walked through, and his mood brought hers down even more. She hadn't let him near her since she had decided that her father had to go.

"We have to go now. If it doesn't work, we need time to prepare for the next move: Can I use your phone, Zeke? I need to call my boys."

Just in case.

He didn't say that part, but she heard it clearly.

"Let's wait until we have better news to tell them," she said before Zeke could answer.

"So you've decided to go with my plan?"

They all turned to watch Mr. Patrick walk into the room.

"It's our only choice," her dad answered as he stood. "Let's go."

“What, right now?” she asked

She wasn't ready. She had only agreed to appease her father but hadn't allowed herself to think about what she had agreed to do.

“I already said that, Ava. We have to go now. Stop stalling, her father said as he headed out the back way.

“Should we come? Derek asked.

“No. Stay here in case anything goes wrong.” Zeke answered as he stood,

Zeke expected things to go wrong. Honestly, so did she. Their time in the forest still played heavily on her mind, so repeating that was just foolish. But she had nothing left to lose now. She only hoped that if she passed out again, her father would still leave when he was supposed to.

Zeke walked towards her and then held his hand out. She didn't push him away this time. She took it, knowing she needed him to soothe her, to take her fear of what was coming.

When they joined Mr. Patrick and her father, they were looking out over the woods as if they were trying to sense if there was any danger.

“Follow me,” Zeke said. “There's no one in the woods.”

Could he sense even further than her father? That was interesting. She had never seen a wolf like him and would have loved to discover more

about him. But their honeymoon was over, and it was time to do what needed to be done.

The canopy of the trees hid the sunlight the moment they walked into the woods, and she could already feel the darkness of the cursed forest dancing over her skin even though they were not close to it yet.

As Zeke led her forward, she turned her head to see her father following. He had already lost hope. He didn't think this would work either; she could see it all over his face.

She let go of Zeke and held her father's hand. He smiled slightly and gently squeezed her.

"I don't know if I ever thanked you for taking me in," she said to him. "I couldn't have asked for a better father."

"Stop giving me a goodbye speech right now, Ava," he said gruffly.

Soon, Zeke reached the clearing of their lake, but instead of going forward, he turned to the left. Up ahead was nothing but darkness, and she knew they had arrived.

She didn't know what to hope for. To find her wolf so her dad would be more hopeful when he left, or not to find her so she never had to talk to the monster the Council wanted to get their hands on.

"If it gets too much, connect with Zeke like you did in Isolation," Mr. Patrick said.

Would escaping into her imagination help anything? She didn't think so. But the sooner they tried, the sooner her dad could leave and be safe.

"I'll monitor things from here. When you start to feel scared for your life. I hope your wolf will push through, and then Zeke will take it from there. Your bond should sort out the rest."

She was already scared for her life. And there were a lot of assumptions in Mr. Patrick's plan. But she turned and hugged her father for a long time before she went to Zeke.

"No matter what happens in there, order him to go home," she said.

"Ava!" her father growled

"I love you, Dad," she whispered.

And then she stepped through into the oppressive darkness.

Because she knew what to expect this time, she looked back immediately and saw the distance had already been distorted. And the magic was already licking her skin probing her. She walked further in, looking up at the trees that looked like limbs and keeping her ears open for the hissing of the root snakes.

Her heart started pounding faster. What if this time she didn't make it out? What if the darkness claimed her, as it had been trying to do since she had escaped it?

Her breathing became labored. This was the wrong time for a panic attack, but she couldn't stop it. She turned back to start running before remembering that this was how she got hurt the last time.

But she couldn't stop it. She clawed at her throat to try to breathe as the purple eyes started opening all around her. The hissing started. The molasses drenched her body, trying to get inside like the last time. The stickiness turned to heat so intense it made her drop to her knees.

Something hissed under her, but she couldn't move. She couldn't breathe. And then the probing started in her head. She felt the icy fingers trying to dig in, causing excruciating pain that made her scream.

Her voice echoed in the endless night as the purple eyes came closer. And then the heat singed her body, burning her from the inside out. She drew in harsh, ragged breath, but each one seemed to cut her insides open.

The roots started to wrap themselves around her, and they were sharp. But she couldn't even scream anymore.

Cuts started appearing all over her body, and still, she lay there.

She would die like this. It had all been in vain.

A pair of purple eyes were within arm's reach when she heard the growl, and then almost immediately, she saw the red eyes attack the purple.

And just before she passed out from the pain and lack of air, she felt a little relief that she had not found her wolf after all.