

Chapter 56

The moment Ava stepped through the tree line, she felt the difference. The darkness was oppressive, pushing at her from all directions, almost like a living thing. Her heart started to pound. Had she made a mistake? But images of Claire's eyes as she had tried to kill her entered her mind and forced her to begin walking forward.

The trees were thicker than any she had ever seen, and their exposed roots looked like giant snakes entangled on the ground. Their long, thin branches looked like arms and fingers, making them look like petrified living creatures. She had never seen trees like this.

She carefully stepped over the roots, judging the direction she needed to go. She would walk just far enough to get past the guards and then get out of this forest.

Was it getting darker? How was that possible! It was already the dead of night it couldn't get darker than it was. She looked up and noticed she couldn't even see the sky anymore when she was positive that there was a half-moon when she had stepped into the forest.

A cold breeze hit her from nowhere. Rubbing her arms, she looked ahead again. Why was it so cold, like it was the middle of winter? She wouldn't make it very far without a coat or warm top.

Then something came over her, something in the frigid air that felt sinister. She felt it seeping into her skin like an unwanted caress. It felt like someone was pouring molasses all over her body. A shiver flashed down her spine. That wasn't normal. None of it was. From the first day she came through the forest, she knew something wasn't right in it, that something evil resided there. But she had prepared herself to physically fight other supernatural creatures, not this, whatever 'this' was.

The longer she stood there, the more it felt like it was seeping into her soul. It was a short walk past the guards, but she'd hardly taken ten steps into the forest. Would this feeling get worse if she went even deeper?

Maybe her best chance was to wait until the guards changed over or took a break. They had to do that at some point, didn't they?

With a defeated sigh, she turned back the way she had come to start making her way out, but she froze in her tracks. She couldn't see the spot she had come in through even though she'd walked in a straight line. She should have been able to see the gaps in the trees where she had entered and the light from the half-moon coming through them. Even the main road should have been visible. She stepped forward, and her heart started to pound louder. The distance in front of her looked much longer than the few steps she had taken. The darkness seemed to stretch endlessly.

What sort of sick magic was this? Had the Council created this to protect their precious academy, or was this an experiment gone wrong? The darkness seemed to press into her more, and the sticky feeling all over her body increased. Heat started licking her body, and almost instantly, it shot excruciating pain through every nerve. She started running forward, but the heat became worse. She was in a sea of fire

She tripped over the roots, landing on something sharp that pierced into her side and took her breath away. Her scream echoed through the night. The sound carried like she was in a tunnel and made her wonder if the guards would hear her. Or were her cries for help somehow contained within the darkness? Would she be forever lost in this place? She slowly moved and felt blood dripping down her side. But with the burning and pain that she felt all over her whole body, the pain from the wound didn't seem to register

Something was standing over her, something watching her as she lay vulnerable on the ground. And then the roots started moving, like snakes, around her. They were all around her, under her, shifting under her weight.

She stood quickly despite the pain but was so disoriented she didn't remember the direction she was supposed to go in. All she heard was the hisses and the slithering. But everything was completely dark now. Pitch black as if she'd lost her sight. She couldn't see the trees or the snakes.

Gritting her teeth against the pain, she reached into the side pocket of the backpack and pulled out her knives, and when she blindly started attacking, she hit something. She hit something! Something had come

close enough to touch her! When she dashed out again, there was nothing there.

Ice shot down her spine, even with all the heat around her. Her limbs started to shake so much that she almost lost her grip on her weapons. What the hell was that? Where had it gone?

She started to run again, away from the thing she had slashed. The roots or snakes caught her constantly, and they tried to wrap themselves around her every time she slowed down.

Something stabbed at her head. Pain greater than her burning skin and bleeding side combined shot through her. Screaming as she doubled over, the knives dropped from her trembling hands as she applied pressure to her temples. Her insides felt like they were shrinking as the stabbing pain continued. This was worse than after Claire had attacked her in the village. Her eyes were closed, but somehow, she could see everything as if the darkness had invaded her mind.

Violet eyes filled with such raging fury, watching her from every tree trunk. The branches reaching out to her like fingers. The snakes thicker than her thighs, slithering towards her. And creatures so big she couldn't tell them apart from the tree trunks, slowly coming towards her.

Was it real? Were her eyes open, or was this her imagination? She couldn't tell anymore.

She screamed, but no sound came out of her mouth. She was trapped in her head as the pain intensified and brought her to her knees. Sharp pain

slashed across her body as if something had taken her knives and was using them against her, getting every part of her body slice by slice.

A low, long growl sounded somewhere in her head.

Was it in her head!

Her eyes shot open just as the glowing red eyes approached, just as huge as the creatures she had seen blending with the tree trunks, and it launched itself at something that she couldn't see. There were pained howls and whines, but the snarling and sounds of a vicious attack continued. Despite the pain, she pushed herself to her feet, but everything went dark again. She couldn't see Ezekiel anymore.

Instead of the red eyes, it was another pair she could see, another wolf Giant claws ripping through two people. Their screams. The crunching sounds. The blood. She knew she was in the forest, but her nightmare came alive right in front of her eyes. It felt so real as it repeated itself over and over again.

The screams. The crunching sounds. The blood. Then the picture changed, and instead of the wolf, she was the one ripping them apart.

The pressure increased in her head as the fire continued to burn around her, and the thick, sickly molasses stuck to her skin.

But that didn't stop the nightmare.

Ezekiel's growls and snarls matched with the wolf in her head. The paws ripping the people in her living nightmare changed to her fingers, then

back to wolf claws again. Over and over until she couldn't tell who the monster was.

The fighting stopped. The screams in her head stopped. There was silence in the pitch darkness. And then a pair of arms picked her up and started running a dizzying speed. She knew it was Ezekiel because his cologne wrapped itself around her, cocooning her in false security.

And then her head exploded, and she faded into the darkness.