

## Chapter 80

### Independence Day

When Ava opened her eyes, it was her own gray gaze staring back at her. She jumped, surprised to find the rest of herself slowly coming into view, starting from the eyes and growing outward until a picture-perfect mirror of herself stood before her.

She stared slack-jawed at the carbon copy. Her copper tresses falling to her waist in layered waves, her favorite black silk pajama set, even her sky-blue pedicure - it was all identical to the very slightest detail. Save for one thing. Her clone was glaring at her. And by 'glaring,' this was no run-of-the-mill disdainful expression. There was hopelessness, despair, and anger, all topped off with no spare amount of disdain. This 'other' Ava was a female wronged...but the target of her ire was unclear.

"Are you happy?"

Ava blinked in stunned silence as the lips that looked so much like her own moved without her say so. What a strange question. Of course, she was happy - in fact, she couldn't remember being happier in her life. "Yes," she said, her voice coming out soft as a whisper and coarse as a croak.

The clone tilted her head to the side, one corner of her mouth drawing downward. She didn't look impressed with Ava's answer, though whether she believed her or not remained to be seen.

What does that matter? Ava thought. This doppelganger's opinion holds no bearing over me.

"Then you're pathetic," the other Ava spat. "Content living half a life...."

The clone's words trailed off as her contemptuous expression slowly fell to one so suffused with sadness that Ava felt the echoes of that ache in her bones. The other Ava's gray eyes never left her own - never blinking, never wavering even as her crystalline eyes sparkled under the wave of welling tears.

"So much potential," her copy said. "You don't even know who you could have been. If you weren't such a coward."

The anger sparked back to life as the clone began backing away as if Ava carried the Plague on her body. Suddenly, the other Ava shifted, her

compact body instantly replaced by that of a lithe, russet Wolf. Mia or whatever simmering approximation of her was attached to Ava's evil twin.

Without a backward glance, the Wolf turned and ran. Without making the conscious thought to make chase, Ava was off following the not-Mia's tail as quickly as her human legs could carry her.

"You can't keep up because you're weak."

Ava heard the barb as clear as day within her own mind. It was made all the more disconcerting because the voice could have been her own just as easily as it could have been her double's. Goddess knew she'd repeated those words enough times to herself over the past few months.

"Please!" She called out, her chest heaving under the strain to keep up with the swift creature. "Tell me what you want!"

"I want you to stop hiding!" The response was swift and harsh as the Wolf sped up, quickly gaining more and more distance on Ava.

"But, I can't," she cried. "Mia's healing! I can't shift until she does."

The Wolf didn't slow, but suddenly trees crashed into view, rushing past as she continued to run. Where there had been unperceived nothingness, Ava was now deep within the woods, struggling to efficiently navigate the

brush and bramble that made up the forest floor. She stumbled over a branch but shook off the pain shooting up her ankle and kept going.

She needed to catch this Wolf and find out what she wanted - what she knew. Out of the corner of her periphery, Ava caught the whizzing shadows of other Wolven forms darting through the trees on either side of her. She was beginning to feel as if she were back in that mirror maze. The uncanny feeling redoubled as words sounded in her head once again, but this time, instead of her voice alone, her mind was filled with a disappointed cacophony.

"You think this is about your Wolf?" The voices scoffed. "One can't exist without the other. And you're killing her with your complacency."

Ava's legs finally faltered, and she went down hard, sliding forward on her hands and knees. Her head hung low as she struggled to catch her breath. What the voices were saying...was it true? Was she hiding? And if so, then what was she hiding from?

"Fuck! I'm just trying to live my life, for once," she breathed. "I just want some peace."

She looked up and shuddered. It was nowhere to be seen before she'd gone down, but now she sat underneath a familiar oak tree. Tall and broad, it had been a favored adventuring spot for Ava and her friends when she was younger. Over the years, she'd often thought back on that late afternoon

when she'd climbed her way up into that wide canopy chasing after a wayward birthday balloon.

She'd ended up slipping and falling into love with the boy who'd caught her. And for too long, she'd never looked back, even when it had become clear that he'd never feel the same. But she'd forgiven him - for things that should have been unforgivable, she'd forgiven Xavier. So, why did this tree, where it all started, look so foreboding?

The other Mia stepped from behind the tree, followed by the droves of shadow Wolves that came and sat, flanking either side of them.

"You say all you want is peace," the voices echoed in her head as the other Mia stepped toward her. "Peace isn't given, but you can have it if you earn it."

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Ava shivered as the Wolf came to a stop just before her. The Wolf stared her down before dropping her head low, meeting Ava eye-to-eye.

"All you need to do is wake up."

The Wolf suddenly began to snarl; dagger-like teeth bared only inches from Ava's face.

"Wake up. Wake up. WAKE UP!"

The Wolf gnashed her teeth, causing Ava to jerk back just before its powerful jaw snapped shut where her nose had just been. The words chanted on repeat, growing louder and more ferocious with each snarled recitation. Ava shrank back, her hackles rising.

When she felt a stirring from within her, she didn't immediately shrink away. Not until it became clear the Mia - her Mia - was adding her energy to the discordant symphony, finally rising to the surface in spite of the physical pain changing would cause Ava and the emotional turmoil that would suffuse them both.

Not a coward, Ava felt through their bond. Want to be whole.

The creaking came first - an ominous prelude to the agony that was to follow. Ava's muscles, her bones, the very sinew that held her together slowly rent apart as it stretched and reformed into something new. The intense subdermal itching that sent her entire body up in flames burst like a damn as thick autumnal fur sprang forth across her body.

Ava's eyes squeezed shut, her teeth gritted against the anguish of being torn apart and being remade anew. All the while, Mia rejoiced in the

letting go, even as Ava sensed her fear of the unknown. She wasn't the only one facing her demons. With a final cry that morphed into a pained howl, Ava's transformation was complete. Slowly, on shaky, unused paws, she climbed to her feet. With a great shake of her thick fur, Ava opened her eyes. And then opened her eyes again. Nothing. The panicked whines that filled the air weren't only her own as Mia shuffled nervously from leg to leg, casting their wide head around, looking for something - anything - to cut through the unending darkness.

Ava came to terms with their new reality long before Mia did. The Wolf continued to frantically tread around in circles, acutely aware of how thick and unknowing the darkness was but completely unprepared to navigate it. Mia, Ava breathed. You're blind.

The Wolf's legs stumbled from under her, startling her as her flank came into unexpected contact with the trunk of Ava's childhood tree. She felt Mia let go of her grasp on their physical form as she dejectedly succumbed to the overwhelming emotion that had been dogging her ever since her return. Where, before, there had been uncertainty tinging the Wolf's every emotion, now there was only a grim acceptance.

Mia had been her own stalling, unwilling to face the extent to which the Wolf had been changed. Ava wished with everything in her that she had some word of comfort to give her only true companion - some explanation. But those memories remained obstinately blank.

Hopelessness suffused Ava as the Wolf shrank away, and the human remained. Naked, alone, and devastated, Ava didn't have time to further process all that she'd just learned before her consciousness was abruptly thrown into wakefulness. "Happy Independence Day!"

Ava's eyes flew open and immediately dilated at the sudden influx of light. "Ah!"

"Whoa! Are you okay?"

Clattering sounded as someone rushed to dim the lights. Soon enough, Ava was able to make out Noah's shape surrounded by balloons.

"Noah!" She said as she sat up. "I didn't realize you'd be back this morning."

Carefully, Noah came to sit beside her on the bed. Finally, she cast a look around to the rest of the room at the heaps of Fourth of July decorations covering the space.

"What's this?" She asked. "How'd you find all of this in October?"

"It was a task, believe me," he sighed heavily. "But it felt appropriate given the day. I wasn't about to let it go uncelebrated."



He smiled as he held out a check that was absolutely loaded with zeros. Her eyes went wide at the sight and then immediately filled with tears. Noah leaned forward and kissed away the tear that escaped. "Your contract is finally over, A. Happy Freedom Day."