

## Chapter 90

### Blinding Truth

"Layla, you have to be more careful."

Ava pulled her friend aside and leveled her with a stern look. Layla's warm dark eyes shone back at her, far too unburdened by their current circumstances. But that was Layla - the girl could take anything in stride, and in turn, prison didn't seem to weigh on her the same way it did Ava.

Where life on the inside was a constant scuttle to make it one more day for Ava, Layla walked out of every situation with her head held high and a smile on her achingly pretty face. Even the effects of reduced sunlight and sustenance couldn't tarnish Layla's radiance.

It was no wonder that Ava had been drawn to her despite her reticence to form attachments. Despite her best intentions, Layla reminded Ava of Sophia, and that admittedly tangential connection was just too tempting

for Ava to ignore. "Ava," Layla sighed, Ava's name rolling off her lips like a melody. "You worry too much. Audra and the others are bullies."

"Prison bullies," Ava emphasized.

"They're all the same. They thrive on getting a rise out of people, so just don't give them what they want!"

"Clearly, your logic is flawed. I can't get them off my ass, and I steer clear of them any chance I get."

"Avoidance only tempts them. But, much like Neanderthals, their vicious, dumb, and easily distractible. Have you tried telling them a joke?"  
"Layla!"

She laughed and shrugged, "I'm just saying that if your current methods aren't working, maybe you need to change your approach." Ava sighed, "I wish it were that easy. I'm not like you. Prison isn't a cakewalk for me."

For the first time that she could recall, a flicker of something dark passed over Layla's expression, "Yeah, well, it's what we make it, isn't it?"

Before she could answer, their cell door slid open and thudding footsteps filled the small chamber. Ava and Layla both bolted to their feet as the aforementioned Audra strode into their space. It was both strange and

inexplicably menacing that Audra was both in their room and alone. Bullies like her never rolled by themselves.

"Audra!" Layla quipped, forcing joviality into her voice. "Where's your friends?"

"How did you get in here?" Ava demanded, cutting to the chase.

Audra only smiled, her teeth looking disturbingly fang-like despite the collar around her throat. "You've pissed off someone pretty powerful, Davis."

"Who? You?!" Ava's protective instincts took over, urging her to step in front of her Omega friend. "Last I checked, you were a prisoner like the rest of us. If calling yourself powerful makes you feel better about rotting down here, I guess you gotta do what you gotta do."

Audra's ferocious smile turned into an outright sneer, "Goddess, I'm going to enjoy this. Victor sends his regards!"

Out of nowhere, Audra pulled an eight-inch serrated hunting knife from under her shirt and lunged. The next thirty seconds were a blur, but by the end, the small cell would be filled with two dead bodies and bleeding, keening, alone and half-conscious, was Ava.

Audra ran toward Ava with her arm crooked and ready to send the jagged blade directly through her chest. Ava prepared to lunge, her atrophied muscles already beginning to shake at the sudden influx of adrenaline pumping through her. Suddenly, there was the thwacking sound of flesh hitting flesh, accompanied by the sick squelching of metal tearing through meat. Ava waited for the burning sensation of impact, but it didn't come. Instead, she watched in horror as Layla slid to the ground, any cries she may have uttered choked by the gurgling of blood flooding her punctured lungs.

"NO!"

Ava didn't have time to process what had just happened. Audra, seemingly unphased by her botched assassination attempt, made a move to try again. She aimed her bloody knife at Ava and moved to make another erratic lunge. There was no way to know how Mia managed to rise to the surface, especially after years of forced suppression, but she did. Rage and pure self-preservation flooded Ava's senses, sharpening them as her eye's changed first, followed by her teeth and claws. She wasn't fully formed - she hadn't even made it to her half-formed state completely - but it was enough.

Ava and Audra met one another in a clash of steel and claws. In a sick synchronicity, Ava felt her claws rip through the soft flesh of Audra's throat at the exact same time she felt the edge of her blade bite into her face. The blows sent them both to their knees, and through the haze of blood masking her vision, Ava saw Audra fall to her face. She never

moved of her own volition again. Ava's forehead was on fire, and she could hardly see, her vision made blurry by blood and spotty by shock.

Inside, Mia had gone completely silent - as quickly as she'd changed, she reverted back to normal, the pain in her head and face making her feel faint. But she couldn't focus on herself. Only a foot away was Layla, gasping for air that wouldn't come, blood pumping like a tainted river from the gash in her chest.

"Layla...." Ava moaned.

"B-be...free...."

Ava watched as the light left Layla's perpetually laughing gaze, her warm brown complexion already taking on a gray hue. Ava called for help between guttural sobs, throbbing pain causing her to fade in and out of consciousness. There was finally the sound of boots rushing on concrete and then shouts of distress.

Then there was nothing.

Ava woke with a start. It was nearly impossible to sort out the influx of information flooding her brain. Small, intertwined snippets of foggy memories swam their way to the forefront of her mind only to be pushed aside and rapidly replaced. Her heart beat a thunderous tattoo against her ribcage as she struggled to suck air into her lungs. There was too much

going on inside of her, too much energy filling the atmosphere around her  
- she felt supercharged and too confused to process the extra energy....

"Ava."

Ava's darting eyes snapped to Marnie, who had rounded her desk and now stood at her side with a steadying hand cautiously outstretched in her direction.

"Ava, you're okay," she reassured her in a soft, careful tone. "You just processed a bunch of energy, is all. You'll be fine."

After another moment of hesitation, Marnie reached forward and placed her hand on Ava's. The witch's hand glowed a vivid purple, and almost all at once, the clamoring inside of Ava's skull went blessedly quiet.

Ava squeezed her eyes shut and focused on catching her breath as her thoughts finally realigned, flitting back into the mental compartments they'd been rooted from. Soon, all that was left ringing clear as a church bell across her mind was a need. A call.

What I need to see....

Who I need to find....

Marnie jumped back as Ava shoved to her feet and rushed toward the door without a second glance.

"Hey!" Marnie followed close on Ava's heels as she quickly strode her way through the mystical old house and out the front door. "Where are you going?" "What's going on?" Aiden joined Marnie as Ava continued past him, heading straight for the tree line bordering the property. "Ava, where are you going?" "Already tried that," Marnie muttered. "I think she found a thread, and she's going to follow it."

"The hell she is," he scoffed.

Aiden took a step in Ava's direction but stopped when Marnie's hand came down on his arm. "I think you should let her go," she said. "This is what she came here for."

Aiden looked between the witch and his sister before backing down with a curse. He would track her from a distance, but Ava was on a mission - the events of the last hour had made that abundantly clear.

While he didn't like it, he could recognize that this journey was hers to reconcile, even if it meant that he couldn't stand by her the entire time, protecting her now since he'd failed to do so before.

That was his own burden to carry, though, and it would do neither of them any good if he stood in Ava's way. But he had no intention of letting her walk her path alone.

"Thanks for all of your help," he said to Marnie as she released her hold on his arm. "And, sorry about...all the- "

"Oddly specific grudge you have against witches?" Marnie cocked an eyebrow at him and nodded toward the road. "This patch of forest leads the back edge of town. If you take this left, you can head her off at the bridge." Aiden nodded his thanks and slid back onto his bike, revving the motor back to life.

"Hey!"

He paused and looked back to where Marnie stood silhouetted against the nearly full moon, wearing the night sky like a cape.

"Just...whatever she's doing, it's important. To her. She might not even know why, right now." Marnie insisted. "You should let her do what she needs to do."

With a final nod, Aiden twisted the throttle and peeled away from the curb and took off on Ava's tail.



Ava didn't make it more than a few feet into the cover of the tree line before the strength of the force pulling her sent her to her knees. Her breath made a sharp staccato as she panted out in short, pained breaths. It felt as if her entire body were made of one large, throbbing bruise.

There was a metaphorical line that she was following, a string of energy that she'd found while sitting entranced in Marnie's office, hidden, and suppressed within the depths of her mind. Marnie's spell had unlocked it, given it the power to at last reveal itself, and now it would not be ignored.

She had come to the forest at its insistence, but now that she was here, it wasn't enough. Ava's skin itched and crawled. When she looked down, every hair on her arms was standing on end and bristling with agitation. The call was unsatisfied. She was doing something wrong.

"I'm trying...."

The incessant calling wasn't the only thing that had awoken after Marnie's spell, and it wasn't the only thing clawing for absolution. From within, Mia rose to the surface and stretched. Ava cried out as her muscles bucked, feeling as if she were being split from the inside out.

The sensation was awful and uncomfortable, and Ava could only imagine it was nowhere close to the hell her Wolf had been living in for the past few months...years, even. If this was the price for her negligence, she'd do

what needed to be done to repay Mia, and hopefully, they'd both end up where they needed to be.

"Okay," she panted. "Okay...If you want the reigns, I won't stop you. Take us where we need to go."

With that, the pain redoubled, suddenly building to a raging conflagration of shredding muscle and stretching bone. Ava gritted her teeth against the pain and bore it, knowing that the agony of the transformation was only temporary. The joy of Mia once again reclaiming her place in their world was worth the pain and so much more.

The full transformation was slow going, lacking any of the ease and grace that came with regular shifting. Dark russet fur sprouted across her skin as her body compressed and elongated. Although it felt as if she'd gone years without stretching and every muscle she had was being pulled at once, the mechanics of the change were familiar to her.

What was altogether new and utterly frightening was the way the darkness of the forest rapidly grew darker, starting from the edges of her vision and quickly rushing inward as Ava's eyes were replaced with Mia's.