

Chapter 11 Tooth & Nail

Moana

“Follow me,” the director of the orphanage, Sophia, said. Her sad expression when I mentioned my identity gave me cause for concern, and as I followed her blonde head of hair up the narrow wooden stairs to her office, I felt my heart start to beat faster than it had been before.

Sophia led me into her office and gestured for me to sit as she closed the door behind us. I sat on the edge of the straight-backed wooden chair across from her desk, clutching my purse nervously in my lap.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about your heritage sooner,” Sophia said as she walked over to one of the tall metal filing cabinets at the back of the room that contained records of current and past children at the orphanage. “It’s our policy to not bring it up, for the sake of the children’s mental health. I hope you understand.”

“Of course,” I replied. I watched as Sophia pulled open one of the drawers and began thumbing through the rows of manila folders. Sophia had been here since I was a child; at the time, she was a spry young woman, around the same age as I was now. Now, as I watched her search for my file, I noticed the slight hunch developing in her aging back, the tufts of gray hair that hadn’t been dyed yet at the nape of her neck, and the subtle wrinkles starting to form on her hands and forearms.

“Let’s see...” she whispered to herself, rifling through the folders until she found one with my name on it. “Here we go.” She pulled it out and walked over to the desk, setting it down in front of me.

I glanced up at her nervously for a moment, waiting for her nod of approval before opening the folder.

Inside of the folder, aside from my basic intake files and other basic information, there was only one thing: a single, sharp canine tooth.

I furrowed my brow and picked up the yellowed tooth, turning it over in my hand. There was a distinct crack down the center, but no other identifying features.

“What is this?” I asked, looking back up at Sophia.

Sophia sighed and sat down in her chair. “As you know, we get a healthy mix of both human and werewolf children,” she said, leaning back and clasping her hands together across her stomach. “But what we don’t often disclose is that werewolf parents will abandon werewolf children who were born without their wolves.”

My eyes widened, and my fingers involuntarily closed around the tooth. “Why?” I asked, feeling the resentment toward werewolves bubble up inside of me. “Why abandon your child?”

“Often, it’s because they’re ashamed of producing wolfless children,” Sophia replied with a sad expression on her face. “But not always. You see, children without wolves would also often be subject to an entire host of discrimination for their entire lives. Some parents believe that it’s better for them to grow up as humans, oblivious to their heritage.”

Sophia’s words didn’t make me feel any less resentful. If anything, they made it worse.

“So... My parents left me because I was born without a wolf?”

“I’m not sure, but that is my best guess.” Sophia said. There was a long pause as I processed everything.

“That doesn’t mean, necessarily, that they didn’t love you,” she said. “The way that they left you, bundled up tightly with this tooth proving your heritage in your possession, has always made me think that they did it thinking that it was for your own good. Perhaps they had no choice, even.” Sophia paused to take a breath, her lips spreading into a gentle smile as she began to reminisce. “I can still picture your chubby little fingers wrapped around that tooth. You wouldn’t let go of it, you know. We had to take it while you slept.”

I opened my hand and looked down at the tooth again; I had been gripping it so hard that it left an imprint in my palm.

“Do you think they left me with this tooth so I could find them?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

Sophia was quiet for a few moments before she reached across the table and took my hand, squeezing it gently. “That’s up to you to decide,” she said softly.

As I walked back down the stairs, I felt Mina’s presence again and asked her in my mind, “Why didn’t you ever show yourself before?”

Mina didn’t answer, but I knew that she was just as confused by her late appearance as I was.

I passed the recreation room once more on my way out and decided to stop by to say goodbye, and to thank Ethan for his invitation. As I poked my head into the recreation room and saw Ethan sitting on the floor and helping the children with their papier mache, I couldn’t help but smile. Even though what I had learned from Sophia made my resentment toward werewolves rise up inside of me, seeing an Alpha werewolf being so kind as to teach orphan children restored my faith once more. Maybe

werewolves really weren't all so bad — and maybe I wasn't quite as ashamed to be one, myself.

Ethan saw me looking and shot me a bright smile before jumping up and jogging over to me.

“I meant what I said about the exhibition, by the way,” he said. “I'd love to see your work. The children talk so fondly of you.”

I smiled down at the floor as I felt my face go a bit red at the Alpha's kind words. “Thank you,” I said, then bit my lip for a moment before speaking again. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” Ethan replied, sticking his hands into the pocket of his apron and c****g his head as he leaned against the doorframe.

“Have you ever heard of werewolf parents abandoning wolfless children? And if so, have you ever heard of those children finding their parents again?”

Ethan was silent for a moment, then nodded with a pained look on his face. “I've heard of that,” he replied in a hushed tone so that the children couldn't hear. “But I've never heard of the children trying to find their parents. I don't think most of them would even want to find them once they find out, and besides... Most werewolf parents would claim that the child died.”

I felt my heart sink.

Had my parents claimed that I died? Would they even want me if I tried to find them again?

“Oh,” I said, turning to leave. “Well, I was just wondering. Hope to see you again.”

I walked out of the orphanage and flagged down a taxi. As I settled into the back seat and watched the orphanage get smaller in the rear-view

mirror, I felt a prick in my palm and looked down to see that I was still tightly clutching the tooth in my hand.

I was clutching it so tightly that it broke my skin, and I watched numbly as a thin stream of blood trickled down my palm.

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When I returned to the training facility to pick up Ella, our driver was already waiting for us. I waved at him as I jogged up to the door to pick up Ella, but as I entered, I didn't see her amongst the other children who were still waiting to be picked up.

"Can I help you?" the attendant, a middle-aged man, asked when he noticed the confusion on my face.

"Yes," I said, walking over to him. "I'm here to pick up Ella Morgan."

The attendant scrunched his eyebrows together and looked down at his clipboard, shaking his head.

"She already left quite a while ago."