

Curse of the Wolves by Jane Doe Chapter 4

Blakely

This was by far the stupidest thing I'd ever done.

Actually, scratch that. The stupidest thing I'd ever done was make a deal with a god, then shoot said God in the chest with a rifle.

Running through an ancient, magical forest in an entirely different realm with nothing more than an antique compass paled in comparison to that.

Once I was far enough away, I found a tree to hide behind and pulled out dad's compass. A warbled croak sounded in the distance and my heart leapt in my chest. Next came a series of scattered chirps, throatier than any birds I'd ever heard in the mortal realm.

The needle spun erratically, darting to the left and right, before finally pointing straight ahead.

North, that's where I needed to go.

I set off in that direction, my attention flickering between the network of root and stone at my feet, and the trees looming over my head. Clusters of plants dotted the forest floor, surrounded by bioluminescent bugs. If it weren't for their indigo glow, I might've mistaken them for fireflies.

A strange, slithering sensation tickled my flesh. It was the same feeling I'd get when Lina would sneak into my room and watch me sleep.

My pace quickened.

The foliage quickly became so dense that I could no longer see the moon and stars. I tried and failed not to think about how wholly unprepared I was. Apart from my wolf, who I could barely trust on a good day, I had nothing in terms of a weapon.

The crack of a branch echoed through the trees, much too close for comfort. I wiped my sweaty palms on my jeans and scanned the

darkness. It hung in a shroud so impenetrable that even my heightened senses couldn't break through.

I slipped in between two bushes, their branches like little fingers as they scraped along my flesh. Another crack sounded, even closer this time, followed by a third and fourth. They were spreading out, forming a half circle at my back that was quickly growing narrower by the second.

Something was hunting me.

No longer thinking about the consequences, I began to run. Even if I wanted to, I'd never find my way back to Azrael. All of the trees looked the same, and I swear something—or someone—had been covering the path I'd made with my feet.

At some point the forest began to change. I was so focused on getting away that I hadn't even noticed. The trees had thinned considerably, losing their billowing leaves and blankets of cushy moss. Now their limbs were bare, stretching into the sky like claws ready to rip the stars and moon apart.

Something had killed this part of the forest.

In the distance I spotted a few specks of a warm, golden light. Holding my breath, I pressed forward, running until a building came into view.

The gothic, Victorian house fit perfectly in this creepy, desolate forest. It's burgundy siding and onyx trim complimented the lopsided porch that jutted out from the front and wrapped around the side. A spiral tower stood to the right, the light in the windows dancing like living flames.

Not giving myself a chance to back down, I ran up the stairs and began pounding on the door. With each knock, I was certain the creatures hunting me were closing in. Faster and faster my heart began to beat until finally, it opened.

I caught a glimpse of the old woman's face as she ushered me inside. A sigh of relief crested on my lips, fizzling out when I took in the massive foyer. It wasn't the chandelier of broken bones and fragments of skulls

that rendered me silent, but the fact that every square inch of the walls was covered in mirrors.

There had to be thousands of them, all different shapes and sizes. Some had frames of gold, while others were nothing more than dusty slabs pinned to the walls.

“Heavens, look at the state of you. All flustered and out of breath. Oh, and a mortal no less! Poor thing. You must be parched, dear. How does some tea sound?”

Her whimsical voice stunned me so much that I turned in her direction. Standing before me wasn’t an old woman, but a girl around my age. Piles of umber curls sat atop her head, bright in comparison to the pale nightgown she wore.

“What—weren’t you just an old woman a few seconds ago?”

“I suppose I was. That’s magic for you, always changing. Tea it is, then?”

“Um, yeah. Sure.” Not a chance in hell was I drinking that tea.

“I’ll be right back.”

She flitted through a doorway to the left, beneath the staircase that wrapped around half the room.

When she returned, her appearance had once again changed. A young man stood in her place, a blonde braid trailing down his back. His hands were steady as they handed me a porcelain teacup and saucer. I made a show of bringing it to my lips. The warmth of the liquid touched my cupid’s bow, leaving a sheen I wiped away with the back of my hand. The man nodded, seemingly pleased by my reaction.

“I see you made it here safe and sound. Good thing too, with Adira’s huntresses tailing you.” There was something about his voice that felt calming, but it didn’t erase the fact that I was a trespasser in this realm, a realm of magic and danger.

“That’s who was chasing me?”

“As I’m sure you know, Adira has a thing for mortal women. Particularly damsels in distress. She likely spotted you running through the forest and thought she’d offer her help. She never was fond of the princes.”

His eyes, a startling shade of ocean blue, darted between my face and the teacup. I brought it to my lips a second time, faking a drink.

“The princes?” I replied.

“Your gods, dear. The one’s your people worship. In this realm, they’re princes. You’re here now, though.” He said with a gentle smile. “Come, come. I have something to show you. Something that might help your situation.”

I followed him through an arched doorway to the right, into a circular room that looked to be a lounge of some sort. Velvet sofas sat in front of a massive, wood-carved fireplace. The flames dancing within were those I’d seen through the window.

On the walls were even more mirrors.

“You said you had something that could help me with—with the princes?” I asked, noticing the person had yet again changed their appearance.

They now looked to be a middle-aged woman with a round face, and soft grey eyes. Locks of dark hair fell past her jaw, barely grazing her shoulders. She ushered me forward, past half a dozen mirrors before she reached one at the far end of the room.

A crackle of pain danced across my temples. I rubbed my eyes and blinked several times. I could’ve sworn that as she passed each mirror, her reflection changed.

There was an odd feeling in my belly as I stepped up to the gilded monstrosity. It stood a foot taller than me, the glass pristine without even the smallest fleck of dust. The moment I locked eyes with my reflection, I felt it.

What started as a subtle tug, quickly became a violent pull. It latched itself onto my chest, digging invisible claws into what I knew was my

soul. A ragged gasp escaped my lips as I tried to pull away. My muscles were stone and my bones lead. I couldn't move, couldn't even blink.

"That's it, just let it happen." The woman murmured. She ran her fingers down my hair, combing through the cobalt strands almost lovingly. "Such pretty, unusual hair. I've never had someone so exotic in my collection before."

Her collection?

"What—" Each word calcified in my lungs. "—are you doing to me?"

The woman standing behind me wasn't visible in the mirror. She had no reflection of her own. With startling clarity, I realized it hadn't been her I'd seen in all of those mirrors, but other people.

"I'm becoming you, dear. I'm stripping you of all that you were, are, and could have ever been. It won't be long now. All of that pain will fade, and you'll be free. Free to live here forever."

I'd already spent my entire life trapped, a prisoner to a fate I couldn't escape. I would not exchange my cage for another, no matter how pretty the golden bars were.

Rage unfurled in my chest, the same rage that had exploded from my body that fateful day at the mage's village in the mountains. The knowledge of the terrible, unforgivable thing I'd done hung at the cusp of my thoughts. I pushed it aside and gave into the cold heat. The invisible claws in my chest vanished.

I cocked my fist back, and slammed it into the mirror, watching as the glass exploded into a million glittering shards.

An inhuman screech carved at my ears. "How did you—"

Grabbing a single jagged piece, I spun and slashed wildly. There was a gut churning squelch, followed by a splatter and a wail of unfathomable pain. I didn't look at the woman—or whatever she was.

I ran, knocking as many mirrors over as I could without slowing, and darted out of the room. Her guttural screams chased me the entire way. Once in the foyer, I veered left to the front door. My fingers grasped wildly at every gilded frame within reach.

“No, stop that! Not my mirrors, my beautiful mirrors!”

They clattered to the floor in a sea of glass, and somewhere in the back of my mind, I swore I could hear people cheering.

I leapt over the porch steps and hit the ground, resuming my frantic run. Bushes scratched my legs as I barreled through, leaving them raw and angry. The gnarled tree’s all but reached out, welcoming me back into the fold.

Minutes passed, and despite the fire in my lungs, I continued running. I finally stopped when the flickering lights of the house had vanished. Leaning against a tree, I pulled out dad’s compass and released a breath. Thankfully, it hadn’t been damaged in the scuffle.

Following the needle, which still pointed North, I continued walking until a small dirt path appeared. It stretched far up ahead, winding through the trees until I could no longer see it in the distance.

I’d just stepped onto it when I heard the voice. Its cry was soft and feminine.

“Help me. Someone, please help me. I’m so cold. I’m so, so cold.” It sniffled, the words giving way to a series of gut-wrenching sobs. My steps stalled for a fraction of a second. Suddenly, the voice was closer. “Help me, miss. Please! I’m all alone out here.”

‘Do not acknowledge it.’ My wolf’s voice floated through my head.

My mind began to conjure up images of Lina alone and afraid. What if it was a child? Perhaps they wandered across the border and found themselves trapped here too. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if that were the case. Perhaps, I should help—

Branches crackled behind me.

‘Do not turn around.’

A shadow hovered just out of my peripheral, slowly creeping closer. The thing whimpered, “Why won’t you help me? Why don’t you care?”

‘Do not look at it.’

I dropped my eyes to the ground.

“Why are you ignoring me? Don’t you care? Why don’t you help me? Help me, please!” It demanded, growing louder and more urgent. “I just want to be friends, that’s all. I don’t want to be alone anymore. Now that you’re here, I’ll never be alone again. All you have to do is look at me. It’ll only hurt for a second, I swear.”

‘Run.’

“Look at me, Blakely. Look at me, look at me, look at me, LOOK AT ME!”

‘Run, now!’

Fear and adrenaline created a heady cocktail that raced through my veins, propelling me down the path. I pushed my body harder than ever, trying desperately to ignore the thunder of footsteps just a few feet back.

Blood roared in my ears, so loud that I could no longer tell if I was being followed. I ran and ran until a shadow stepped onto my path. It was too late to stop, and I braced myself for the pain as I collided with the dark figure.

Hands grabbed my upper arms and I reacted, swinging the shard of glass I had used against the old woman.

Fingers snared my wrist, holding it in mid air. I expected to see sheer fury on Azrael’s face, but instead there was genuine surprise. I might’ve found it amusing if it weren’t for the tremors wracking my body.

He cocked his head, scanning my eyes as though they held the answers to all his questions.

“You have no clue how long we’ve been waiting for you, little wolf.”