



a howl in the
night

A Howl In The Night

Suicidal Beginnings

The wind swirls around a stick-thin girl, shoving the rain into her face so that it slaps at her cheeks. She is minuscule, short and skinny, her eyes a brilliant green that shines like emeralds. However, thick glasses hide their spectacular beauty, with lenses that dull her eyes' brightness and color. Her soft, wavy hair is a startling red, cutting off abruptly at the shoulders, giving her a childlike face to match her childlike body.

She is sitting, her thin dress sticking to her soaked skin as the rain pounds even more determinedly on her form, on the muddy ground. Thunder roars over her head, crackles of lightning striking the air. All she sees is darkness. For her, there is nothing but darkness.

She knows she is in danger of dying. The lightning is close, and if one tree catches on fire, the whole forest will burn. She has nowhere to hide if that happens, no one to call for help. Her cell phone lies beside her, dead from the constant downpour of water. However, it is easy for her to stay calm.

Life is not important to her anymore, though, so she does not care if she sizzles away.

A single tear evacuates her eye, swimming down her cheek, joining the rivers of water that rushes down her body. A living nightmare surrounds her, the terrible breeze slamming the rain into random destinations, the plants swaying. A tree is close to falling on her, leaning her way, precariously close to breaking away from its trunk.

She barely notices that she is crying heavily, her tears accompanying the storm's efforts to make her as miserable as possible. She feels dirty, the mud giving her a sick feeling in her stomach. On a whim, she wishes for a hot shower, with warm steam embracing her.

Movement is impossible for her.

She wants to end it here. Right now. It would be so easy... so sweet as the pains of life would fade away. She wonders why God had to give her the ugly face, the childlike form, and the snobby attitude that made so many people hate her.

Why does she have to be the unlucky one?

Now she cannot see, the rain blinding her. Her glasses slide off her nose, falling to the ground, the glass quickly sinking into the dirt. Unbelievably, the water starts to pour even harder from the hectic skies, temperature dropping by the second. Goosebumps appear on her arm. Her breaths become visible, clouds appearing in wisps directly in front of her.

The cold gets worse.

She looks to the ground, uncertainty in her features. Is she really ready to let herself die here? Is it time for her to leave this world?

A tiny sliver of fear enters her thoughts.

She realizes quickly that these may be her last breaths. She tries to savor each of them, reaching with a delicate hand to try to catch the clouds that lingered before her. The question pounds in her head, making her dizzy.

Is she truly ready to die?

The thunder looms closer, the clouds overhead parting a little. Through the crack in the clouds, she can spot a full moon. She stares at it, awe searing through her at its beauty. It truly is a wonderful sight, the perfect circle illuminated by pure white light, the only incandescence currently in her world. It is symbolic of hope to her, hope that she will go on. Hope that everything will be okay.

Suddenly a hard rock pounds against her shoulder. She gasps in pain, her shoulder throbbing from the impact.

The moon vanishes as the dark clouds steal it away from her.

Another object lands on her knee, the same pain recurring. The girl remains in her position, pain etched in her face. She grabs the strange rock, holding it close to her eyes so she can see it. Her eyes widen.

"Hail," she whispers as another rock comes hurtling towards her. It is big, about the size of a nickel, falling at an incredible speed. It is aimed for her head.

She sees it coming, an amazing ball of energy, ready to deal the death blow. She is frozen. Death is finally here to take her away. This is what she wants, right? She should be happy. Deliverance from the pain, the endless suffering, is here.

The fear is the thing that is taking away her happiness.

There is a split silence, and then there is a howl in the night as the terrible ice rock clamors to meet its destination.

He can hear it. Its accelerated breathing pounds in his ears, signaling its close proximity.

He ventures closer to the presence, the thing that dares to be in his territory at this time. It is terrible timing for the intruder, whatever it is, for tonight he is at his strongest.

Tonight is the night of the wolf.

He is alone, but that is just perfect. He works better when alone.

It sure is a horrible storm, the rain beating on his back, nearly causing him to collapse. He wonders why it is trying to trespass in this awful weather. The wind rips leaves from their perches on trees and throws them violently into the air, lightning flashing over his head. There is almost a constant roar, almost ruining his concentration. He shakes his head, trying to wave away the storm's efforts to distract him. His paws crunch the grass beneath him as he treks deeper into the forest. Trees loom before him, casting their dark shadows over his furry form. Danger is in every direction. But he does not hesitate.

He is fearless.

The presence is growing stronger, the wind sending the scent to his nose. It is a sweet fragrance, one he has never smelt before; a curious mix of strawberries, bananas, some flavor he cannot distinguish, and a tiny splash of mint. It is a delight, an intoxicating smell that he will remember forever, even when this "it" is long dead. He has never experienced this aroma around a werewolf before.

This smell is so sweet, he wonders if a human could have actually wandered into their midst. Humans generally have nice smells, although none as delightful as this one.

He feels like something is... bonding him to this smell. A longing suddenly starts to fill him, a desire to edge closer to the source. This pull is unrelenting, and he feels himself falling even harder into the realm of lust. He begins to crave this curious smell, and his paws start to move by themselves. He does not need to track it, for something about the scent is guiding him straight towards it. He begins to think that this creature might be a difficult thing to kill.

In fact, killing it might not even be an option, for he fears that if he does, he will lose his sanity.

It already entices him, begs him to come closer. The smell invigorates him even more as he gets closer to his target, weaving a web around him until he will never be able to escape. He is the fly, and it is the spider. A miserable feeling gathers in the pit of his stomach as he realizes that he is

helpless.

What sort of trick is this wily creature playing?

The scent is unbelievably strong now, nearly overwhelming him with its beauty. To werewolves, scent is everything, and he experiences pretty aromas every day. Nothing, though, amounts to this lovely emanation that makes his head spin with dizzy delight. He feels like he is getting close.

Suddenly, the scent turns bittersweet, a sharp note corrupting the melody. Fear and terror enters the scent, making the sugary quality go away and polluting the smell he needs so badly. Now, a sinister stench fills the air, and the terror the creature is feeling fills him also.

Somehow, he can tell the emotions it is experiencing through its smell. However, the bad part is that he begins to feel the same emotions it does. The smell now is still intoxicating, but filled with need. It needs him.

Want quickly enters his body. He wants to experience that smell once again, but not the one it was currently emitting. He wants to make it happy, so the taste of fear will disappear from the aroma. He desires that special sweetness with an intensity he never knew he possessed.

His paws start to blur as they zoom through the forest so fast that even he can barely see them move. The longing is coursing through him, intensely corrupting his mind until all he can think of is the scent. He has to have it.

He reaches a small clearing, next to a thin creek that spills into Lake Ray a couple miles away. It is a beautiful little area, with lovely flowers and green bushes, the trees graceful and tall. The aroma is overpowering here. The creature must be in this vicinity.

His eyes search for it, looking for the evil thing that manages to produce such an attractive smell. At first, it is nowhere to be seen. But after he adjusts his eyes a little, he spots a figure in the dirt. It is a tiny thing, a small form covered in the thick mud, only a slender back seen from his angle.

He suspiciously circles the creature, trying to make out its features. It is hard to distinguish, the mud camouflaging it in the dirt. When he travels right in front of it, though, his heart stops beating.

Though not an overly pretty creature, it is still the most beautiful thing he has ever seen.

It is a human girl, with bright green eyes that has a mesmerizing quality to them, pulling at him, never releasing his gaze. Her hair is a ruby red, tumbling to her shoulders, the rain making it wet and shiny. Her body is small, but shapely, the rain melding her tattered dress to her form.

A sudden stab of pain encircles his heart as he realizes what is happening, the beats growing faster. He begins to grow panicked. Is this really happening? Why now? Why, with a human like her?

But nature refuses to listen to his pleas, binding him even closer to the young woman. This could not be true.

A burst of white light comes forth, surrounding his being, then racing to meet the girl. It delves into her skin, soaking her with the white light. She doesn't notice, her eyes clogged with tears, looking at her toes.

He is affected, however. The realization that he has just done something terribly, horribly wrong shocks him, making his whole body flinch.

Shock, as well as anger and annoyance, races through his body. Nothing good can come of this. Nothing at all.

However, the reluctance fades as he watches her. As it begins to take effect, he feels himself falling into a bottomless pit of endless love. There is no going back. He is ensnared in the tempting spider's web forever.

Suddenly, another taste of horror explodes in the scent. Hail is beginning to fall, and he can tell that she has been hit. Her eyes, as she looks up, are listless. She stares past him, as if she doesn't notice he is even there. Painful tears evacuate her, pouring down her form. A small gash on her leg emits dark droplets of blood. He suddenly feels the need to protect her, to guard her. What is he doing, just standing here? He needs to move!

A tiny scream escapes her, ripping into the night as a huge piece of hail comes hurtling towards her. Her eyes snap shut, fear overtaking her. The scent is consumed by terror, terror he has to eliminate if he wants to experience that sweetness again. He jumps immediately, trying as fast as he can to land over her form. To protect her.

He releases a guttural howl as he soars to be her shield.

Introduced To An Incredibly Hot Psycho Man

~ Mona ~

I wake, my eyes fluttering as they focus to the brightness surrounding me. All I can see is a single blob hovering above me, a blur of colors flipping and weaving, twisting and turning.

"Are you awake?" a beautiful, musical voice rips through the void I am suspended in, bringing me to the present with a thud. Everything suddenly shifts into focus, the blurred edges sharpening into easily distinguished images.

Am I dreaming?

A spectacularly handsome man stares at me, his startling green eyes disconcerting me with their brightness. I feel myself get lost in them, examining their wondrous beauty, trapped in their spectacular gaze.

His skin is tan and muscled, his arms bulging, his hands strong and firm. Wearing a t-shirt and cargo shorts, he is dressed casually, yet he has an elegance that can't be explained.

Straight and long, his hair cuts off around his jawbone, framing his face with pride. Layers are all over the place, short wisps accompanied by long strands, carelessly tousled. The bangs make me subconsciously want to push them aside so I can gaze evermore into his eyes with no distractions.

The strangest thing about his hair, though, is that it is blue. A royal blue, even, that shines in the sunlight. But the hair suits him, complimenting his lightly tanned skin and emerald eyes.

"Hello?" he asks again, his voice soothing to my ears. I blink once, trying to adjust to the incredible handsomeness before me. A man this beautiful has never been within five feet of me before.

Finally examining myself, I notice that my leg is not bleeding anymore, covered with a thick bandage. My shoulder is covered likewise.

I am laying on a soft, plushy divan. The floor is of pure marble, a deep black with hints of white trying to squeeze its way into the tile. A huge chandelier, crystals dancing generously just below its metal limbs, hangs delicately on a thin, gray wire in the center of the chamber. There is an impressive array of books, a gigantic bookcase stretching from wall to wall.

But, of course, all my attention focuses on the man.

He chuckles as I scan his face yet again, taking in his perfection, looking at masculine features that, at my school, I used to only be able to observe from afar.

I cough once, attempting to croak some words out of my mouth. "Shh," he whispers, holding his hand over my mouth, "your throat is probably dry. Let me get you some water first." His hand feels so comfortable, and I feel, somehow, saddened when he releases it from my face.

As he travels over to a stainless steel sink, I am unable to find a single emotion conveyed in his saunter. He seems to glide, walking in a way that's almost impossible to describe.

That is only one of the strange things I notice about him.

Another thing that perks my curiosity is his eyes. When I skimmed over it before, I hadn't noticed the reflection of the light upon his pupils.

Now, as I more carefully observe, I realize there is no reflection. The light doesn't bounce off his eye, but rather, sinks into it. It is barely noticeable, even by me, the queen of scrutiny, but I now can see the difference. The bright, emerald green seems to snatch the light and display it in his irises, his pupils a deep black in comparison. When I look at them, and he returns my gaze, my form is not visible in his pupil.

He brings a cool glass of crystal clear water to my lips, gently pouring it into my mouth. "Can you speak?" he probed.

"Yes," I barely whisper.

"Okay, good," he smiles brightly.

I suddenly find it hard to speak. "T-thanks for s-saving me," I stutter. He lets loose a musical laugh, the most beautiful one I've ever heard.

"It was a pleasure."

I feel self-conscious; suddenly disconcerted by the way he is scanning my face, my body. I start to feel nervousness when I meet his gaze, even one glance at his beautiful, appraising eyes causing butterflies in my stomach. The need arises to avoid this strange, alien behavior towards me, to return to the orphanage and work on that science project I didn't do earlier because I thought I would die today.

I quickly sit up, my back reposed on the fluffy pillows, and then I attempt to swing my legs over the side. Before I succeed in depositing my feet on the floor, though, he catches my legs and deposits them back on the divan, the hint of a smile in the corner of his lips. I feel a tingle of a delight as he touches them, his fingers lingering a little before pulling away. "Just what do you think you are doing?" he demands, rather laughingly.

"Leaving." I decide to tell him the truth. "Thanks again for the help."

His eyes widen, "But you can't just leave! We have to find out more about each other! I don't even know your name."

He is so different from any guy I've met. He actually seems like he wants to know more about me. His gaze tugs at mine, his expression of disappointment. If I didn't know better... I'd say that he likes me, or at least my appearance.

But, the thing is, I know better. Being liked is a privilege reserved for prettier people than me.

I shoot up so quickly my movement is almost a blur, ignoring the pain that my motions are invoking within my injuries. The joke is over. "Well, sorry. I'm leaving," I say sharply. Why does my rudeness have to flare up at a time like this? I really need to work on my social skills. He did save my life, after all.

I guess his behavior is scaring me. The way he is earnestly looking at me, with so much devotion, is rather unsettling and strange. It is like nothing I've ever experienced before, and, honestly, I have never been so afraid in my life.

I start walking to the door, my slightly damp red hair waving in the light breeze. Maybe this is all just a dream. Maybe in a matter of minutes I will wake up to find that the man is only a figment of my imagination.

"Please stop!" I hear his relaxing, hypnotizing voice, but I manage to shake his command from my mind. He can't coerce me into continuing on with this joke any longer. Obviously he is just toying with me by pretending to be attracted, in order to get a good laugh out of his friends later. However, as I continue to walk, there is a blur, and then...

He is standing right in front of me, blocking the door.

How did he do that? He had been standing more than ten feet away from me before.

I become like a sheep that has been backed into a corner. "What are you? What do you want from me?" I beg, my eyes drilling through his, pleading earnestly.

His eyes flash at my comment, then, strangely, he wears a resigned expression. "Come, sit down while I explain."

He leads me back over to the divan, and I cautiously sit down upon it. I have to admit, no matter how creepy this feels, I am shamefully happy to

spend a few more seconds gazing at his enticing face. However, I try not to show it, instead displaying a dubious frown.

He takes a deep breath, and then speaks. "My name is Xavier, and I am what you would call a werewolf."

Shock and incredulity run through my mind, freezing me to the bone. Oh, what a pity, I think sadly, this incredibly hot guy, the only one that's ever talked to me, is a weirdo. I can tell he believes his outlandish claims too. His eyes are trying to catch my gaze, a hopeful expression displayed in them.

"Werewolves don't exist," I tell him slowly, as if he is a kindergartener. I know he doesn't deserve my disdain, but... really?

"Are you saying I don't exist?" he asks, irritated. I can't help but notice how cute he is when he is vexed, and I wonder if I really want to wake up from this dream.

"No, although you might need to go talk to a counselor or something about some mental problems," I automatically snap, then immediately wish to take back my harsh words. For me, insults are default, almost encouraged by people's equally disdainful response.

He seems frustrated now, a tiny pout on his plump lips, streaks of his blue hair falling into his eyes. The strange thing is, he doesn't seem to be angry or even annoyed by me, but by himself. What kind of guy is he? He is proving almost everything that I thought was true about every guy wrong.

"I guess I'll just have to prove it to you," he mutters quietly. His eyes fly shut, his lips pursed in concentration. He seems to be focusing on something, something I can't possibly detect.

"There is no way you can prove to me that—"

I am interrupted by his sudden transfiguration, staring in shock and amazement as the handsome man suddenly melts, his head tumbling into his body. It is like a waterfall, the way his body just crumbles into itself. However, there is a shimmer of light before he becomes a puddle on the floor, his-body-liquid-I-don't-really-know making a shape. Another millisecond and he is that shape.

A colossal wolf with sharp white teeth and dark eyes that matches his pupils.

I jump back in horror. Nothing I had read or seen about werewolves had prepared me for this.

It barks once, a deep sound that reminds me roughly of his baritone laugh, his shaggy fur a creamy light brown color that matches his skin. He, like his human counterpart, is absolutely beautiful. My breath is taken away as I examine him and his huge, graceful form. What absolutely astonishes me, most of all, is his authoritative aura, demanding respect even from me.

Similar to the previous morphing, he suddenly crumbles, falling towards the ground speedily. There is a flash of light, and he becomes the incredibly hot man he was before.

Scared, I take a step back, not watching where I am going. Xavier, no matter how beautiful, seems ethereal. Somehow, my brain refuses to believe that werewolves exist, and even though now I am given proof, it still is a lot to take in. It is almost too much for me to accept, no matter how true it is.

My feet slip out from under me as I collide with a hard, firm object. I feel the floor rush to meet me, my arms flaying about, trying to catch my balance.

A pair of strong, firm hands reach beneath me, propelling me back into my standing position. They feel warm, releasing shocks through my body. I am definitely aware of his presence.

"Please believe me," he takes his hands away from my back, coldness now flooding to the previously warm spot where his hand had been.

"I... I..." I mumbled softly, disconcerted by his close proximity, yet shivering from the absence of his big, toasty warm hands. He seems to sense that, leaning in and grabbing my right hand, heat spreading like wildfire throughout my body.

Nervousness takes me over and I yank my slender hand away. His eyes widen in surprise as I shove them in my pockets. "You don't want me to touch you?" he inquired curiously, "You don't trust me?"

Yes, I want you to touch me. Yes, I trust you. Although I have no idea why.

"I don't know you. Why would I?" I carelessly throw at him. He blinks once, almost from surprise rather than irritation. Bafflement is etched into his features, as if he is actually confused at the thought that I don't.

I begin to get angry at myself. Why do I have to be so bitter?

"Okay, I'll wait then," he grins faintly. Other than his slightly diminished smile, he seems undeterred, though, continuing almost as energetic as before.

Is this guy for real?

"Well, you might as well give up now then or else you'll be waiting forever," I look away, letting the harsh words leave my lips.

"Don't worry; I am prepared to wait forever. I have all the time in the world," he says softly, his words startling me.

Of course. How can I forget? He isn't even a human.

"I think you forget that I will die in about seventy five years. I don't have forever," I murmur, my voice picked up by his sensitive ears. Silence stretches between us as the seconds tick by. I feel uncomfortable, trying to look anywhere but him.

He laughs again, a sound that starts to melt my heart. "I think you underestimate me, Mona."

Whoa. Wait a second.

"How do you know my name?" I furiously demand. He winks at me in response, waving my school ID before my eyes. Narrowing my eyes, I hold out my hand towards him. "Give it back."

"Should I?" He teases, sparking my anger. I launch myself at him, and he smiles wickedly. "Oh, well this is getting interesting."

It only takes a few seconds of violently grabbing at thin air before I realize I am not going to get my ID back by force. He is moving his arms so quickly that it's impossible to even touch him. Rolling my eyes in resignation, I lean back and fall against the divan.

"Are you ever planning on giving it back?"

"Sure. Someday. I'm rather fond of this picture of you." He looks at it again, and my mind flashes back to the time when that picture was taken. It was about six months ago, and also the day when I lost my glasses yet again, leaving me half blind and unable to even tie my shoes, let alone comb my hair. I had even worn my shirt inside out. It was awful.

I now realize he truly has been making fun of me.

I say nothing, my eyes returning to him. I subconsciously focus on how the sunlight seems to catch on his azure hair and sparkle, making his whole head look like it is sprinkled with stardust. He doesn't wait for me to speak. "But anyway... I doubt it will take you long to fall in love with me."

"How come, wolfboy?" I look at him, astounded at his pompousness and how honest he looks while saying those words.

"My charm is so overwhelming." He flips his hair and flashes me a bright, astounding smile. I am almost blinded by its beauty. "How could you not?"

"How could I, you arrogant brat?!" I respond biting, "I prefer a trait in men that you don't possess—humility." And a brain, of course.

"I was joking," he defends himself, "come on Mona, you know that! I'm not like any boy you have met before. I would sacrifice anything, even my life, for you. I know that's a strange statement to make, but I genuinely feel that way. Every werewolf feels like this towards his or her mate. You can

trust me—"

"What was that you just said?" I ask dangerously, interrupting his rant. I can't believe my ears, my eyes narrowing. He did not just say that...

"You're... my mate," he says hesitantly, pausing slightly before he continues, "If you weren't my mate, I would have killed you in the forest. I'm usually not very kind to trespassers that stumble our way." After a short span of shocked silence, he grabs my hands and squeezes them. "I'm all yours," he whispers, staring deeply in my eyes with an unfathomable intensity.

I laugh at the way he mentions it so lightly. He tells me that I'm his "mate", bound to him for life (or afterlife), and he expects me to just take it in? To immediately obey his request?

I can see the seriousness and fear in his beautiful green eyes, silently pleading with me to understand.

I'm amazed the most at the fact that he expects me to take him seriously. Or maybe he doesn't. Maybe he just wants the satisfaction of having me fall for his wily tricks. I have to say, he is a marvelous liar.

Anger overwhelms me, my heartbeat rising. Why don't I get a choice on whether to be his mate? Is he so superior that he can't give me the option to be free?

"Uh, well, um..." I inch towards the door, edging to the exit that will free me from this nightmare. My red hair falls into my face, my hands shaking. Xavier smiles as the phone begins to ring, causing my stomach to unwillingly flip flop.

"Excuse me while I take this call," he says quickly, retreating from my sight. I hear the pounding of footsteps, then nothing. I sigh in relief. The coast is clear.

Oh wonderful phone, you are my savior.

I run towards to door, flinging it open and rushing out into the considerably lightened rainfall. The light mist sprinkles on my nose, dancing around my toes as I slosh through the muddy dirt, my bare feet dyed brown. My red hair is loose and wavy, flying as a blast of cold wind forces it far behind me. I carry my flats in my hands, sticking my tongue out carelessly to catch a drop of the water that falls from the sky.

Freedom is at hand.

BEEP! BEEP!

I slap the button on the alarm clock, trying to stop its irritating wails. I am lying in my bed, my fluffy stuffed animals surrounding my heavily buried form. I have many of them, a whole collection from my childhood, which I can't bear to get rid of. Gold tones flood through my small windows, illuminating my face as I sit up into the glaring sunlight. Just beyond the glass lays a beautiful milieu of crisp, green grass, crystal clear lake water, and tall trees. Puffy clouds hang in the blue sky, birds cruising across the horizon.

I wearily drag myself from the covers, my feet causing a thump as they collide with the floor. Stumbling over to my dresser, I carelessly grab a t-shirt and a pair of jeans, sliding it over my form. My spare pair of glasses, the other lost in the storm, squeak as I slide it onto my nose. I, by chance, catch a glance of my body in the mirror, and gasp.

A huge, black-and-blue bruise sprawls across my left shoulder, extreme redness surrounding it. Another one, though not quite so major, decorates my knee, bringing back painfully stark memories from the previous night. It isn't only a dream.

I really did meet a handsome crazy man last night who saved me from certain death.

I can still remember his perfect face, his startling green eyes, and his uniqueness I did not understand. Even thinking of him sends tingles through my body, alertness flooding through me. How can a brief memory affect me so much?

I shuffle to the door, looking out along the hallway. Rows of doors greet me, stuffiness overtaking my senses. A repugnant stench makes my nose wrinkle in disgust, but not surprise. It always smells like this. The other kids all got used to it, but I never did.

From the very beginning, my ninth birthday spanning until the present, I have felt like I didn't belong. Almost... like my parents were not fated to die, that I was meant to be by their side even now. It was just a feeling, in the pit of my stomach, that something was terribly wrong. The other kids, as I grew up, seemed to understand that also, gladly treating me like I didn't belong. At first, I was a pretty nice kid. I wanted more friends. I wanted to play in their games. I wanted Ms. Penn to treat me just like everyone else. And, most of all, I wanted desperately to laugh. To smile.

But I soon gave up on that fantasy.

I soon gave in to the other kids' coldness, turning into a hard shell that was sharp, bitter, and tough. I didn't need anybody. I didn't want anybody.

I was above them all.

I would stay in my room for hours and hours, studying and reading, making myself smarter and even more above the crowd. Now, to accompany my newfound pompousness, I had the smarts to encourage it.

And these long years, full of awful puberty and other struggles, did nothing to change that.

I check my old and slightly tattered watch, gasping as I realize that it is almost time for school. It begins at 8:00 AM, and it is 7:40. No wonder all the other orphans are gone, the only noise being the whistle of the wind. What the crap was wrong with my alarm clock to wake me up so late?

I am in so much trouble.

The wind floods through my hair as I race down the stairs. I blast past Ms. Penn, our supervisor. She raises her eyebrows as I quickly snatch my backpack. "Mona!" she calls after me, her voice shrill and commanding, "After school you will be punished!"

"I'm sorry!" I exclaim. I couldn't help that I went to bed at two o'clock the last night! I mutter angry retorts, too low for Ms. Penn to notice.

I stumble to the kitchen, grabbing a small pop tart, stuffing it in my mouth as quickly as I can. Ms. Penn glares at me as I hurriedly down a glass of water, my frenzied gulps echoing in the room. "Don't you think," she snaps in a dangerous whisper, "it MIGHT be too late for breakfast?"

The evil, fire breathing dragon is furious now. It might do me some good to leave.

I grab my shoes; white sandals that just happen to be the only pair of shoes I have. They are old and worn, flowers dancing along the sides, a size too small for comfort. I shove my feet into them, making the straps loosen as far as possible, my toes falling off the sole. They look horrendous on me, but that is to be expected. I am a poor, impoverished orphan girl with no family. I don't have a home to go to.

There is a sudden knock on the old, wooden door, the sound reverberating around the orphanage. I glance around quickly. Ms. Penn is nowhere to be found, probably in her office to write me up for another cleaning duty. I walk to the shaken door, where even one polite knock can hurt the worn wood immensely.

A mirror hangs precariously on a single nail, right by where I am standing. I examine myself once again, taking in my ratty red hair, matted and tangled, that I usually pull back into a frenzied ponytail. My nose, crooked as always, juts out slightly, an annoying feature I absolutely hate. My slightly curvy body hides under some of the only clothes I own, a baggy t-shirt and loose jeans, letting no one know I even have a figure. Even if I wear skin-tight clothing, I am so short that guys would have to stoop to see my shape. My lips and complexion? Nothing special.

My eyes are the only things I like about myself at all, and even they are not spectacular compared to that god-like man I saw last night. I am the

least desirable girl at school, and for good reason. I don't even show what little I do have, hiding my eyes behind thick glasses and burying my kindness under arrogance.

I grasp the metal doorknob with my fingers, twisting it, and then pull it open quickly. My eyes widen in surprise, my form still, frozen with shock.

"Hey Mona," a deep, masculine voice whispers to the wind, weaving its way towards my ears.

Now The Incredibly Hot Psycho Man Won't Leave Me Alone

"What the crap are you doing here?" I demand, my voice sharp and shrill. Quickly, I remember that Mrs. Penn is just inside, and I shut the door behind me. Shifting my gaze back to the incredibly handsome man, I take in his beautiful eyes as they gaze at me, and me only.

"Walking with you to school," he grins, his expression absolutely breathtaking. His eyes are full of eagerness, reminding me of an energetic puppy when playing with its master. Joy races through his features, undaunted by my lack of a smile. In fact, I can't even disguise a scowl.

I begin walking down the sidewalk, him eagerly trotting by my side. After a few more unbearable moments of complying with Xavier's will, I turn to face him, my features indignant. "Go away," my voice bites at him, trying to chip away at his insufferable happiness. His grin, surprisingly, grows wider.

"Hey Mona... do you think I'm hot?"

I'm ashamed at the way an egotistical idiot can disarm me so effectively. For a few seconds, I resemble a goldfish, moving my lips without any sound coming out of them. My cheeks are beet red as I finally stammer out an unconvincing no.

He triumphantly grabs me, whirling me into a bear hug. "I knew it! Mona loves me!"

"NO!" I yell, trying to yank away from his death grip. Unsuccessful, I beat my hands against his muscled chest, trying to ignore the feel of his masculine arms around my waist. "I DON'T LOVE YOU! YOU'RE A STALKER! HOW DO YOU KNOW MY NAME AND WHERE I LIVE? ARE YOU FOLLOWING ME TO SCHOOL?!" I fire at him furiously, trying to keep my tomato-red cheeks under control.

"Well, first off, I'm not following you," he points out, "I'm walking with you." I shoot him a glare, hoping he will get the message, but he conveniently ignores it. "The reason why I know where you live and your name," he continues, "is because I happened to see you run home-"

"So you did follow me," I state dubiously.

"Well, then I did... but you said I was following you now..." he protests feebly, trailing off when he realizes that there is no point. I hide a teasing grin from bubbling to the surface. I don't want to encourage this man, no matter how attractive he might be. If I release one smile, one kind word, he will never leave me alone.

Coldly brushing past him, I walk faster, taking longer strides with my short legs. My medium length ruby red hair flows past my shoulders, pushed behind me by the roaring wind.

"Wow, you walk fast," he comments sweetly. His startling green eyes crinkle with enjoyment as he said, "I like walking fast too." He evenly matches my pace, completely defeating the purpose for speeding up in the first place.

This naive man really is insufferable.

But I have to admit once more, as I stare into his perfect face, that he is beautiful. His azure hair waves in the breeze, the sun catching random strands and making it sparkle. His plump, desirable lips give in to a flawless palette, a face that God must have specially crafted. A set of two intoxicating, amazingly green eyes rest below thin eyebrows and a wall of long, enviable eyelashes.

I can't understand why he makes my heart beat so fast.

"Mona, I love you," he spurts, perking up after a long stretch of silence. Chills race up and down my arm. Is there no way out of this nightmare?

There is a whoosh, and a familiar pair of bronzed arms sweeps me up into a tender embrace. "You sure are clumsy," musical, manly chuckles escape Xavier as he stands me back up. I look up into his green eyes, so incredibly beautiful, feeling myself slipping.

No, I scold myself inwardly; don't let even a slip of vulnerability show. If you do, you will never be alone.

My face hardens as I speak, disconcertment still in my tone. "You don't say that if you don't mean it," I whisper, knowing that he would hear me.

He just looks at me, confusion etching his face. "Of course I mean it, Mona," he says matter-of-factly, "you are my mate. Of course I love you."

"Can you shut up?!" I roar, my voice searing, "I hate you!" Once the words escape my mouth, I quickly look away so he will not see the blush. The real emotions boiling beneath the facade.

Time seems to be suspended between us, his hand still latching upon my arm, his face reeling in shock. However, this moment quickly ceases, and Xavier does what is considered impossible to do in this type of situation.

He smiles, his eagerness unrelenting. "This is something new. I have never heard of a mate not being in love with their destined one," he says softly.

"You know, Mona, hate is the first step to love." His eyes grow fierce, determined. He steps closer to me, capturing me with his beautiful eyes.

"I will make you fall in love with me." He takes my hand, and I am unable to resist him. I am frozen by his stare, his words. After holding my hand for a few seconds, he presses his lips to it and then releases me.

My hand burns from where his lips had brushed it.

He then smiles, as if he is actually looking forward to the time when I will finally accept him. Which, by the way, is never coming.

I glance his way, though refusing to meet his gaze. I am truly curious as to why he felt so determined to make me love him. It can't possibly be because he is attracted to me, for I am too ugly for that. It can't be because of my personality, for it is the worst I've observed so far in my lifetime.

I listen keenly as he begins to speak again. "You seem to believe that I'm a werewolf, not asking any questions about it after seeing me morph," he says softly, "it is usually hard to accept."

"Who says I believe it?" I scoff, turning away once more so he can't see my fiery cheeks. I mean, it is hard for me to not believe it, I saw him morph into one of those sharp-toothed, furry beasts. But I don't want to accept it. I don't want to acknowledge that my life is suddenly spiraling out of control.

"Yes you do," he smiles, making my heart jump out of my chest, "I can see it in your eyes."

"Shut up," I demand, tilting my nose up slightly, though inwardly shaking with embarrassment. I have never talked to a boy, let alone a beautiful one, for this long. And on the very first long conversation I have with a guy, he professes to be in love with me?

This is seriously messed up.

Xavier peers at me, at my face hidden behind my thick bangs. "Did you have glasses in the forest where I rescued you?" he asked.

I nod in reply, "yes, but don't worry about trying to find it. I have this one," I finger my thick lenses. He seems unsatisfied, his facial expression of sadness.

"Like this," he comments sadly, "I can't see your cute eyes that well. Is there any way you could go without them?"

I shake my head, my cheeks flushing once more. He stops completely, bending down so he can be at my level. Quietly, halting me with a gentle touch, he observes me, examining my face. He frowns, his sparkling eyes creasing a little in disappointment. "Mona," he says, "you look very different from when I first met you."

Yeah, I think inwardly, probably you didn't realize how ugly I am until now. "Disappointed?" I ask scornfully.

"No," he smiles, "you are just as beautiful as you were yesterday."

I choke on my own breath, shock coursing through me. No one, let alone a shockingly handsome man, has ever called me beautiful, or even pretty.

"It's just," he complains, "that your bangs cover half of your face, and your glasses cover your eyes. It's almost as if you're hiding from me," His facial expressions bend in a frown.

I glare at him, my face now almost permanently red. This conversation really is introducing a lot of firsts for me, and a ton of embarrassment. "Oh really?" I ask, trying to make my voice indifferent, uninterested.

"Yeah," he says, deep in thought. We both are silent, walking together calmly, neither of us knowing exactly what to say next.

"Hey Xavier?" I finally speak, surprising Xavier a little. He glances at me, his face of bafflement at the fact that I am starting the conversation this time around.

"Yes?" he replies, "ask me anything." His face perks up a little.

There are so many questions I wish to ask him. For one, why is he insisting on calling me beautiful? What sort of lunatic man would think I am beautiful in the first place? Why the crap do werewolves actually exist?

But instead, this question just has to escape my lips. "Why don't you just leave me alone?" I ask biting, mentally slapping myself in the face for wasting an opportunity to ask a better question.

However, Xavier doesn't seem to be as disappointed as I am. "You really want to know?" he warns, "even I don't truly know why, and what I do know might upset you."

I reel back in confusion. "Um, sure," I nod slowly. That was supposed to be a rhetorical question, but if he has an answer, I want to hear it.

"Okay," he says, "well, let me start off by saying that werewolves are very similar to wolves in that they have a very keen sense of smell."

"No duh," I murmur under my breath, earning a brief scowl from him.

"Work with me, okay?" he asks. I just nod again, dubious.

"A werewolf, in fact, has an even better nose in many ways. They are able to associate an individual person with their "signature" scent, an underlying smell every creature in the world has. They are all a little different, and never changes from the moment the creature is born," he explains slowly, his voice melodious and smooth.

"What does that have to do with-" I say, only to feel a single hand cover my moving lips. He looks at me, stunning me with his seriousness, tugging me to stay silent.

"Generally," he continues, "all humans have sweet smells. However, yours is extra attractive. I have no idea why, but your aroma is very appealing to me."

"Is that because I am your mate?" I ask curiously. He shakes his head.

"It is not just a mating thing," he says, looking away. "This was even before I mated with you." At my angle, I can see his beautifully blue hair, sparkling in the bright sun. As he ponders, his eyebrows narrow a little in deep concentration. Finally, he turns to me, his expression hard. "I don't know why, but I... can't stay away from you," he confesses, though with a straight face. His sparkling eyes look ashamedly at the floor, knowing that his words are not the ones I want to hear.

The world crumbles around me, hope obliterated.

"Are you saying that I am stuck with you for the rest of my life?" I ask miserably.

"I really don't know. That is why, after school, I am going to take you back to the mansion so we can find out."

"WHAT?!" I exclaim, my interjection scaring even the birds away. He looks at me, his emerald eyes creasing in sorrow.

"I knew you wouldn't be happy," he comments, his face reflecting my own, "but we both have to work through this. Maybe, in some way, my friends can help." He grabs me once more for a spine-crushing hug, sending electricity through my body. "Why can't you be more accepting of me?" he complains, his voice teasing, "am I not lovable enough?" His face perks up immediately, his tone changing slightly.

Not knowing quite what I am doing, I raise my hand as if to slap him. I bring my hand rushing forward to meet his arrogant cheek, only to be stopped by a blur of movement. "You have to do better than that," Xavier grins, "if you want to slap a werewolf." He pulls me closer, his hot breath dawdling on my cheek. "Here is your punishment," he places one muscled hand on my chin, tilting my head up slightly. My heart beats faster as he brushes his plump lips across my blushing cheeks.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!" I yowl, jumping away from his smirking form. Quickly I race away from him, my voice high and screeching. He just smiles at the obvious disconcertment hiding underneath my anger. Without a word, he meanders ahead of me, never looking back.

For he knows I will follow.

Matherson Public School creeps upon us until we can see its brick walls and rather drab surroundings. It looms above its students, standing two full stories tall, casting a shadow upon their forms. Weeds sprout in little bursts all over the premises, grass untamed and wild. All in all, it is the reshaped image of a normal high school that stands to be many students' second home.

Xavier pauses so I can finally catch up to him, assuming that my anger would have cooled down by this point. As I unwillingly head to his side, forced by my probable tardiness, I spy his excited face. "Why are you so happy, wolfboy?" I snap, my voice harsh and abrasive. My bangs droop in front of my eye as I slump slightly, shifting into my regular position when I'm around people at school.

He peers at me strangely. "Why are you slumping? I thought you had perfect posture," he inquires quietly. I frown, my eyes narrowing.

"None of your business," I curtly say, looking away from him, "answer my question instead of asking your own."

Xavier seems unaffected even though I've treated him so rudely, an action, or rather, lack of action I have come to predict from him. "Well, you sure did taste good," he smiles brightly, winking at my form. I boil, my eyes now in a squint. Once again, Xavier just looks on, oblivious to my anger and embarrassment. I wonder how he so conveniently shuts out my reluctance, innocently disregarding it.

Suddenly, all consternation evaporates as I survey the huge clock situated on the front of the monotonous school. "Crap!" I yell, watching the second hand tick towards the 12, prompting the minute hand to gravitate towards its next number. I grab Xavier's hand, dragging him along with surprising force. As I run, I spurt out, "Xavier, if not for you I would have gotten to school on time! I can't be late... I can't..."

The doors snap shut as I slide to meet it, barring my way.

I hang my head in utter defeat, my eyes staring towards the floor in shame. I am late. Ms. Penn is going to kill me. I should have just died yesterday.

I forget that I'm even holding Xavier's hand until he grips it tightly; sending electric sparks throughout my body. I hate the fact that I am so aware of him, the smallest touch alerting me and making butterflies flutter in my stomach. Why can't I just avoid him? Why can't I hate him with all of my

energy instead of harboring this little feeling of admiration for his beauty and perseverance?

A portly lady with a stomach the size of a beach ball walks up to the glass, staring at our forms. Her practically nonexistent eyebrows—obviously they have been plucked too much—rise as she surveys Xavier's glistening blue hair and sparkling green eyes. Wordlessly she swings the door open, not lifting her gaze from his magnificence.

"Who are you?" she queries, her mouth almost dropping to her knees. He cracks a million dollar smile, melting the woman into slush on the cold floor.

"My name is Xavier, and this is Mona, my ma-" he begins, only to wince as I squeeze his hand in a deathly grip.

"Well, hello Xavier," she grins, her dull, coal black eyes glistening as she absorbs his masculine features. "I haven't seen you before. Are you new?" she inquires, completely ignoring me.

"Yes ma'am," he confirms, "Mona came with me to show me around the school." The fat lady finally turns her laser like gaze upon my form, her eyes narrowing as she takes me in.

"You aren't new, correct?" she asks coldly. I nod in response, not opening my mouth for this witch. "You will be counted tardy," she informs me, my eyes widening in alarm at her words. I yank my hand away from Xavier, feeling a sudden burst of anger.

"Please, miss," Xavier says pleadingly, "she was just telling me about the school, and we lost track of the time... it is my fault." His touch is now comforting, filling me with warmth even I can barely comprehend.

The woman now is flustered, I can tell, torn between her disgust with me and her obvious liking of the beautiful man beside me. Finally, she replies, "okay, if that is all. Please don't do this again. Consider this to be a warning."

Xavier flashes another heart-melting grin, stunning us both, although I desperately try to fight it. "Thank you," he bows, taking her hand and brushing his lips across it.

I can't explain the anger flooding through me at that moment. I hate him. I want him to disappear.

He elegantly stands straight as the woman embarrassedly orders us to follow. Her face is flushed as she wobbles down the hallway, obviously affected by his alluring gentlemanliness.

Xavier chuckles a little, grabbing my hand once again as we follow her. I jerk my hand away again, anger rushing through me. "Don't touch me!" I demand. Now there is full-out laughter. I shake with irascibility, my emotions running hot through my veins.

"Mona, you are jealous, aren't you?" he asks. I try desperately to contain the blushes, but it still spreads all over my cheeks. I don't understand why I am behaving this way. "Don't worry," he whispers, leaning in, his breath dancing across my ear, "I will only kiss you from now on." His intimacy distracts me, destroying my defenses. Briefly, I enjoy his sugar sweet words, his flattering promise.

Then I remember that I hate him.

"As if I'd let you," I snap at him, carefully veiling my guilty pleasure. He seems to sense it, though, a smile stretching across his features.

"I didn't know that you would come to love me so quickly!" he says happily, only to receive a jab in the stomach.

"No you idiot!" I protest angrily. However, my feeble comebacks are useless against his unrelenting grin and assurance that I am in love with him.

The lady leads us both to a tiny, narrow door. "This is where you will get your information," she directs Xavier, a hint of redness still dusting her plump cheeks. With a flirty smile, she says, "I am the school nurse, Mrs. Teal. Please come to me if you ever need anything." Walking away, she deliberately sways her hips, hoping that the enticing man will watch her.

I am ashamedly happy to say he doesn't.

Xavier grins at me, and then swings the door open so that we both can enter. The most cluttered, disorganized place I have seen in my entire life lies before me, shocking me still. "Wow," I whisper as I survey the mess: the collage of papers, staples, pens, and sticky notes that buries everything else.

Reclining right behind the disastrous disorder is a stick-thin, rather short lady with a beehive hairdo that climbs about seven inches into the air. It is a masterpiece, reminding me slightly of those wigs in the medieval times, and rather typical of an elderly woman like her.

Her voice is nothing short of hysterical. "Hello children," she squeaks like a mouse, her words almost indistinguishable, "how may I help you?"

Xavier once again takes the lead, leaving me cowering in his shadow. "I am new here," he informs her, flashing a smile at the minuscule, shriveled up plant that just happens to have a voice and a towering hairdo.

Her facial expressions unchanging, she reaches down to the floor to pick up some forlorn papers. "Ah, the new student. I have your schedule in this stack... somewhere..." she comments as she places the pile in her lap. A truly monstrous pack of papers... I wonder how she can possibly sort through all that junk.

However, in a record time of three seconds flat, she whips out a thin sheet of paper, distributing it to Xavier as we look at her in complete and total surprise. The lady glances at our faces, unblinkingly. "You need some passes, correct?" she inquires quickly, shuffling through the papers like lightning. After another blindingly fast search, she pulls out five or six passes and hands it to him.

"Thank you, Mrs..." Xavier searches the lady's clothing for a name tag, "Miss Lori." There is a slight, almost undetectable crease in her forehead as she turns to her computer, annoyance flickering in her features. We stand for a minute, and then Xavier pulls on my hand. "Come on, let's go," he urges, dragging me out of the doorway.

When we finally escape the messy room, I burst into laughter. Xavier tries to compose himself, but soon he is chuckling with me. "Her voice..." I nearly moan, drowning in a fit of giggles, "her hairdo..." When the crap did I start to laugh with him? What is wrong with me?

"Now Mona," Xavier gently chastises, "let's not make fun of others..."

"Look at you," I tease, "striving to be the perfect gentleman." I get swept into laughter, temporarily forgetting myself.

"Shut up." In one swoop, he swings me into his arms, cradling me in his firm embrace. His arms surround me, squeezing me tightly. "I'm your gentleman," he laughs, "and I won't let you go until you admit it."

Alarm, awareness, and pure electricity shoots through my body all at once as I realize how close he is to me. His grin is inches from mine, his breath dancing on my cheek.

If I tilt my head towards his even slightly, I could taste his warm, fresh lips.

Quickly I hold myself back before I give into temptation, resistance regaining. I remind myself once again that I hate him. I am not supposed to get along with this crazy, beautiful man. I stiffen, rebuilding the walls around my heart as quickly as they had fallen.

I also notice that we are in the middle of the school hallway.

He seems to suddenly notice my hesitation, and asks quietly, "what's wrong, Mona?"

I look away from him as I emit these next few words, each one harsh and bitter. "Let me go," I demand, my voice firm.

I am afraid to look into his eyes, lest they betray the truth to him.

He releases me, and I step away from him, my head still bowed. "What happened?" he persists, "you were just fine a few seconds ago-"

"Let's just get you to class," I mutter, not wanting to listen to his dissection of our previous conversation, trying to seer out the offensive words he must have said. Swiftly I snatch the paper out of his reedy hands, observing it closely. Xavier stares at me with a forlorn expression as I avoid his gaze.

"You," my eyes widen, "idiot!" I whirl on him, anger pulsating through my veins. I grip the paper tightly in my hands, until it nearly crumples in my fingertips. "Why do you have the EXACT same schedule as me?" I ask furiously. My face crinkles in annoyance at his stalker-like attitude.

"Well, I might have asked..." he trails off, whistling as he looks away.

Why can't he leave me alone?

I mean, he is my "mate", but seriously... I need some privacy, some time away from this madness. My blood starts to boil, but I quickly calm down.

"Okay then," I reply with a robotic voice, emotionless, "come right this way." I turn, starting the trek through the maze of hallways and rooms towards our first class. As I pass him, I let the schedule drop from my grasp, allowing it to hit the ground with a thud.

Xavier stops to pick it up, a smile on his face.

There is the pounding of feet as he scrambles to meet me, but I just brush him off, ignoring his energetic words. "Mona," he says ecstatically, "let's go on a date tonight. You want to?"

Ha. As if.

"What about never?" I scoff.

A muscled hand snatches my wrist, whirling me around to face him. "Mona," he firmly states, "you will fall in love with me. No matter how hard you try to make me go away, I will not give up." Each word he speaks is full of authority, of pure determination. His eyes grow dark as they narrow, the full implications of his words hitting me hard. My life is changing... has changed... forever. I will never be alone again.

I stand back in shock as I survey him, taking in his beauty. He looks completely different now, more dangerously handsome than cutely naive. This was just like before, when he said the same thing on the way to school.

Right now, he looks like the wolf.

Suddenly, his intensity drops, and he once again beams a wonderful smile. "So how about a date, Mona?" he asks once more. I look at him finally, taking in his masculine perfection, the social climbs I might make if I am by his side.

"No," I shake my head, though the corner of my mouth tips up, the hint of a grin occurring.

"Please, Mona?" he begs, his lips in a tempting pout. I just look straight ahead, firm in my decision. He smiles even brighter, pestering me even more. Irritation and a strange, unfamiliar emotion shoot through me. Is it... excitement?

Life surely is going to be interesting with this blue-haired man around.

Why Does This Blue-Haired Idiot Attract So Many Girls??

We walk to a rectangular, wooden door with an almost broken handle. A booming voice is faintly audible from the opposite side.

"You ready?" I question, reaching with tender fingers towards the knob. He nods confidently, the exact opposite of my timid form. I wonder, for a minute, how he manages to find all this assurance, knowing that everything is going to be okay. There is no doubt in his features as he waits for the door to swing open. Charm and charisma radiates from him as he prepares to meet the faces of his new classmates.

"Of course," he says, his voice smooth and silky, words flowing like butter from his desirable lips. I take a deep breath, my eyes narrowing slightly, and I pull back on the knob, exposing us both to the sea of sharks.

I shake as I examine their cold, judging eyes, hating the attention I am getting. They scour me once, absorbing me, then immediately turn their gaze to the gorgeous, enticing man behind me. Every student's eyes grow wide as they survey his splendor, his sparkling green eyes and beautiful azure hair.

"Hello sir," Xavier addresses the teacher, bowing slightly. His voice is just as alluring as his face, making some girls sigh with awe and boys seethe with envy. "I am Xavier, a transfer student. Mona has been showing me around," he gestures to my form. Shouts erupt across the classroom.

"You're cute!"

"How did you get that blue hair?"

"I LOVE YOUR EYES!!"

"Where did you get that accent, man? You've gotta teach it to me."

"Why are you letting a loser like Mona show you around?"

The last comment is to be expected, in fact, I thought that there would be more. Xavier seems to be annoyed, his eyes lighting up, his mouth opening to defend me. "Don't," I whisper, touching his hand slightly, "it isn't worth it." Reluctantly he stops, though the fire in his eyes remain.

As I scan the room, I can spy almost every girl in the classroom drooling over him. Their spellbound gazes try to snag Xavier's glance, hoping that he will pick her out of the crowd. One girl in particular, Sidney, is making doe eyes at his form. Ian, her boyfriend of two years, just watches Xavier with curiosity.

Sidney Richards is the queen bee of our moderately large school. With a head of platinum blonde hair that crawls down to her waistline and an incredibly large mouth that spouts out insult and hot gossip constantly, she is the person that leads us all. Only sparing a second glance for the super popular jocks and her "girls", she is an a-list celebrity, only able to admire from afar. She is certainly pretty enough, with a heart-shaped face and huge blue eyes, coupled with a stellar figure and a height of about 5'6". She is an angel around the teachers, yet a vixen around the boys, charming an average of around two a week. However, she always manages to keep her boyfriend, Ian. I honestly have no idea why he puts up with her.

The teacher clears his throat loudly, trying to quell the screams and lust-filled yells. There are a couple of snorts, but eventually the chatter dies down.

"Xavier, take a seat by Mona since she is your guide for today," he orders, and we both head towards the back. Xavier leans his head towards mine, his face bent in concern. "Are you okay? You're scowling," he whispers, his eyes boring into mine.

"I'm fine," I murmur softly, still disconcerted by the way the whole class is staring at us.

He shakes his head, "No you aren't. I can tell." We reach our seats, in the back of the classroom, and sit down quietly. I look at him, my gaze betraying the emotions underneath.

"Don't worry." I try to shake it off. "I can handle it."

His eyes crinkle in protest. "Mona, you don't have to."

"I know," I state, my words a sigh. Carefully I draw my Social Studies binder out of my backpack, giving it to him. "Here is what we have been learning so far."

I can feel Sidney's curious gaze as she twists in her seat. From her perch about three chairs away, she once again drinks in Xavier's enticing appearance, her expression of hunger. She casts a sultry glance his way.

Xavier sees her, taking in her inviting smile, and turns away immediately. Even Ian reels back in surprise as he looks at me and whispers, "that girl... is she one of those special-needs kids? She hasn't stopped staring at me since I got in here."

I burst out in laughter, my smile illuminating the darkened room. Every student's eyes turn towards me, but I barely notice, consumed by enjoyment at his words. The teacher pauses, his eyebrow cocked as he surveys my joyous form. "Anything you would like to tell all of us, Mona?" he asks dangerously.

"No sir," I sputter, the laughter dying quickly. The students soon turn away except for two persons, one glaring at me in fury, the other with an unfamiliar expression I cannot distinguish. "She isn't special needs," I whisper in Xavier's ear, my face still contorted with laughter. He nods, absolutely serious.

Connecting gazes with Sidney, he casts her a smile. "Pay attention," he mouths, pointing to the board. I giggle softly as she pulls her electrifying gaze from me to absorb Xavier's words, then turns with a defeated huff towards the front. Ian, on the other hand, just watches me blankly, staring at me until I start to blush. I hurriedly look at my notebook, doodling cartoon faces and random scribbles.

During the entire period, girls keep throwing glances towards Xavier, and he seems completely comfortable with the attention. He stares straight ahead, devoting his attention to the teacher, absorbing everything the man says. Out of the corner of my eye, I take in his profile. Long lashes frame emerald eyes, leading into a straight nose and light red lips that are twisted into a light smirk as I sneak glances at him. He turns his head, ignoring the girl's lovesick simpers, and smirks even bolder at me. "Like what you see?" he asks slyly, smiling sweetly at my scowl. My blush reoccurs, spreading across my face like wildfire.

"No, actually," I scoff, though the red decorating my features betray the truth. He laughs quietly, amused by my disconcertment. Girls shoot me hateful glares, including Sidney, who had turned around to catch Xavier's attention once more. Obviously no one likes how close I am to this handsome man.

If only they knew how much of a psycho he is.

When the bell finally rings, and we finally file out of the classroom, a throng of amazed people, most from other classes, surrounds him. I roll my eyes as he is immediately buried by his new fan club, girls and boys alike. Xavier catches my glance before he is swallowed by his admirers, mouthing, "I'll be back soon. Wait for me!"

I hide my smile until he is completely submerged, then it forces itself to the surface, shown for the whole world to see.

I am exhausted, physically and mentally, by lunch time.

Xavier has been dogged by so many people that even he is tired now, huffing beside me like a car that has just run out of gas. "This," he says, running a hair through his perfect, blue hair, "is why I haven't gone to school for the last thirty-two years."

I blink, wondering if I had heard him right. "Thirty-two years?" I squeak, my voice barely above a whisper. Even now, as we casually walk down the hallway, people are staring at him, gossiping about the new senior that is sizzling hot.

"Yeah. I was born fifty-five years ago, March 4, 1955, to be exact, and you are not eligible to go to school until you are five. So, that makes about thirty-two years since I last went. I only completed high school, and didn't go to college," he says plainly. My eyes widen with surprise as I absorb his words.

"So you are fifty-five years old," I say dubiously. Somehow, that is hard to believe. He looks like a normal eighteen year old... an incredibly hot one, I must admit.

"Not really," he says softly, looking at the floor as he emits these next words, "a werewolf has no beginning and no end. We are born out of death, and death we shall remain."

I cross my arms, trying to disguise the fact that I am confused. It is hard for me to understand, the meaning behind his statement. "What do you mean... no beginning and no end?" I question, my voice filled with curiosity.

"I'll tell you later," he shrugs, "it will take a little while to explain, and we don't have the time." His carelessness signifies that it is not a huge deal, so I relax a little. Then I stiffen once more as I realize that I am warming up to him. It is like I am constantly waging a war against an undeniable attraction, and the deathly feeling is taking the lead.

However, I will not let it win. I will not fall in love with Xavier.

"Fine," I say as we finally reach the double doors. He steps in front of me, swinging the door open. He shoots me a beautiful smile, holding it so I can enter the lunchroom. I marvel at how much of a gentleman he is, at how respectful and old-fashioned he behaves.

Oh yeah. He was born fifty-five years ago.

The lunchroom houses tables for four, two, and eight. They are scattered within the room, with a buffet on the kitchen side. On the opposite end, there is a stage. A rather lackluster room overall, matching the insipid rest of the school.

We walk to the long line, surrounded by girls as they swarm around the blue-haired idiot. Cries and calls erupt, all directed towards Xavier. I, expressionless, grab a napkin and tray, placing it on the buffet so I can get my daily helping of tasteless mush. Xavier follows my actions, wincing in disgust as he surveys the selection of what the school likes to call "food".

"This is another reason why I haven't gone to school," he mutters as he stacks the slushy mess onto his tray. I look at the tray, avoiding his gaze.

"I deal with it every day," I sigh as I bring the tray to the cashier. Robotically, I punch in my pin number and pay for the food. Every month, the orphanage gives me twenty dollars for my cafeteria account. Lunch, however, is one dollar, leaving me to go without lunch for a couple of days.

Xavier pulls out a tender green bill, handing it to the old and withered cashier. She takes it, her eyelashes fluttering as she shoots Xavier a flirty smile, and examines the thin piece of paper. Suddenly, her eyes widen and she waves the bill at him. "A hundred dollar bill?" she asks, surprised.

He waves her off, "keep the change."

Her eyes are nearly bulging out of her skull. "But lunch is a dollar..." she says, incredulous.

"Oh really?" he asks as he looks at the horror splurging on his tray, "I thought it would be less. This looks absolutely disgusting." Laughs explode around the lunchroom, all attention focused on the beautiful man. The funny thing about it is, Xavier is totally serious when he is talking to the cashier. He means the upmost respect.

Even I can't prevent a laugh from bubbling forth.

"Take it," he says to her, rather disappointingly, "use the money to improve your food so the students will actually eat it." With a last, disdainful glance, he walks to my side. Cheers ensue, the whole student body agreeing with his words. "Come on, Mona," he demands, authority oozing from him. He leads the way to a table for two in the corner of the lunchroom, oblivious to the awed glances sticking to him like glue.

He pulls out the rusty chair, it squeaking as it complied with his will. I stand, waiting for him to sit down, my form awkwardly lingering by his side. He gestures towards the chair, realization coming upon me as I find out that he actually wants me to sit down. Blushingly I obey his command, flattered that a boy would actually do that for me.

Xavier huffs to the other chair. Glancing at me, he asks quietly, "why is everyone looking at us?"

"Because you just voiced their opinion," I whisper back.

"I'm surprised no one else has," he snorts as he surveys the food before him, "this is gross."

I take my spoon, dipping it into the food, raising it to my lips. With a forced swallow, I gag down the bit of food, sighing with relief as it graces my dreadfully empty stomach. No matter how disgusting the food is, I need to choke it down.

Xavier watches me as I eat, a grimace decorating his face. "Why are you eating that?" he asks, pure disgust in his features. I shrug, though the truth is that this is almost all I get to eat every day. If I tell Xavier that, though, he will have a fit.

He tilts his head slightly as he surveys me, watching me scarf down the catastrophe. "You have to eat it, don't you?" he guesses correctly as I savor every piece, each bit making the horrible feeling in my stomach lighten.

I nod my head, taking a swig of my milk with tender fingers. After another silence, I finally finish my lunch, feeling like a pig for gobbling it down so fast. "Can... I have your milk, Xavier?" I question, looking pointedly at his unopened carton.

"Sure. Why not?" he replies, drawing humor from the fact that I actually want his food. The corner of his mouth turns up as he shoves his whole tray towards me, my eyes lighting up as I realize that I just might have enough to eat today. I start in on this new bit of food, focusing on the warmth it will give in my stomach, not the nasty taste it offers.

I feel despicable. I even had to ask the wolfboy for food.

"Thank you," I tilt my head slightly, knowing that I seem like a starving animal. The pull for food, however, is more powerful than any other force, and that is the one driving me right now.

"Does that... orphanage not give you any food?" he probes, a little angrily. I just stare at him, unwilling to tell him the answer. A furious light is in his eyes, anger in his tone. "Mona," he says firmly, "don't eat that." He grabs both trays, standing up and putting them in the disposal. As he troops back over to me, dozens of hungry eyes follow him, annoying me immensely for some strange reason.

I can feel tons of stares on my own back as well. Many whispers erupt around me, probably along the lines of "the loser shouldn't be sitting by that hot guy," or "let's bet to see how long it will be before he ditches her." Subconsciously, I slump a little, hoping their gazes will eventually leave me. But they linger, stirring up my discomfort and their jeers.

Xavier passes me and disappears through the doors, leaving me stranded on our island for two. I suddenly realize that I now feel terribly lonely,

more than I could. This is how I usually feel when I'm eating in the lunchroom alone? Two days ago, before all this stuff happened, feels almost like a distant memory.

After a couple of agonizing minutes, Xavier enters the lunchroom again carrying two trays of steaming hot steak. He walks to my side, placing one tray in front of me and one in front of his seat. My mouth hits my knees as I examine the food. Steak is my favorite type of food—a delicacy that I developed a taste for in childhood—and this one looks especially delicious.

"Thank you so much," I say gushingly, breaking out into a smile. I take the silver knife beside the steak and dig in, wondering just how he managed to get this yummy food.

He just stares at me as I gobble down the delicious meat, a tiny smile on his face. "Don't thank me," he says quietly, "just be happy."

"Oh, I am," I reassure him as I delve my fork deeper into the delicious entree.

"Obviously the way to your heart is through food," Xavier laughingly comments. In a moment of vulnerability, I laugh with him, my voice carrying across the room.

Then I remember that I am not supposed to even smile in Xavier's presence.

However, I have no time to wipe off my grin, for the biggest fish in the sea is swimming our way. In other words, Sidney Richards, two of her girls following behind her as backup. I don't even know their names, nor does most of the school's population. They are just known as Sidney's girls, only good for fake laughs and compliments. Just what Sidney needs.

She troops over to us from her royal throne, flipping her blonde hair back from her face every few seconds, confidently strutting in her five-inch tall golden pumps. With a skirt about five inches above the dress code requirements and a blouse with a bit too many buttons undone, she has successfully secured the stares of every boy in school.

Finally reaching our table, she cast Xavier a smile not unlike the one she used a couple of hours ago. "Hey," she tries to make her voice smooth and sweet, "I'm Sidney, and these are two of my girls." I almost laugh when I notice that even Sidney doesn't say their names.

Xavier takes another bite of his delicious steak, and then looks up into Sidney's most-likely-modified face. "You probably know my name," he says plainly, clearly uninterested.

Sidney looks surprised, but she quickly recovers, reaching to the end of her now mini-skirt and fingering it, trying to draw his attention to her bronzed thighs that are muscular, yet slender. He doesn't notice her efforts, looking to the ceiling, then back at his delectable steak. "Do you want to sit with us?" she offers quickly, "away from this reject?" I wince at the word reject, at the way she doesn't even look at me, as if I am worth nothing. Away in the background, I see three spots left open, one for Sidney and two for her girls.

"There's no spots," he tries to evade a direct answer, but that doesn't stop Sidney. With a snap of her fingers, an a-list jock is immediately dismissed, degraded to a b status. Now there is Ian, two other jocks, and one of her girls sitting at the table.

"For you," she tells him, a seductive expression gracing her features, "there is always a spot."

"I decline," he says abruptly, digging back into his meat. Sidney just stands, her mouth in a perfectly lip-glossed "o".

"B-but-t," she stutters, "no one ever declines!" Her words are forced, cheerfulness evaporating. I see a sliver of doubt enter her, a drop of low esteem slipping into her bloodstream.

"Well," he says after wiping his mouth with a napkin, "I am not no one. I can do whatever the crap I want. And right now, I don't want to sit at your table."

Her eyes widen, her voice strained. The whole lunchroom is staring at us, and I suddenly feel as if we are under a spotlight, unable to escape from it. "So you are just going to sit with this loser?" she finally casts a hate filled glare at my form. Abruptly, I start to shiver as I am turned to ice by her gaze. I can tell, at that moment, that she wants me completely and utterly dead.

Xavier stares at her face, not once wavering. "Please, Cindy—"

"Sidney," she dryly corrects, most likely a first for her.

"Sorry," he apologizes, and then continues, "It's just that Mona will be alone if I leave her to go with you, and I can't allow that." He speaks calmly and gentlemanly, respect now in his tone. I blush at his words, the redness blooming on my slightly pale cheeks.

Sidney glances at me, as if she was really looking at me for the first time. "Mona," she murmurs to herself, as if she was trying to remember my name. Then she perks up and smiles once more at Xavier. "Okay then," she says, "maybe another time." With another snap of her fingers, all three of them turn and start strutting towards the royalty table. However, when Xavier's head is turned, she looks back and shoots me a glance of pure loathing. The shivers begin again; creeping up and down my spines, chilling me to the bone.

I return my gaze to Xavier finally, my fork lingering over the last bite of steak. "Are you not hungry?" he asks curiously. I barely shake my head, the coldness freezing me silent. I eat the last piece, chewing it robotically.

Suddenly, a warm hand encircles mine, bringing me everlasting warmth. Xavier propels my hand towards his meat, stabbing a juicy piece with my fork. "Try this," he softly suggests. Drawing my hand and fork towards my face, he prompts me to eat it, awakening butterflies in my stomach. I am now a giant red tomato, with cheeks as red as a fire engine. "Is it good?" he asks, smiling, gently releasing my arm from his grip. Girls all across the lunchroom stare in envy and disgust at my form, Xavier's fan club probably already planning an ambush.

"Yes," I murmur, distracted by the way his eyes sparkle in the light. His meat is a little different, yet just as good. Embarrassment flickers across my features as I realize that I am staring.

Xavier chuckles, and then shoots me a wink. "I can't wait to introduce you to Wes," he laughs, "he will have you melting into a puddle on the floor."

"Wes?" I ask curiously.

"Only the biggest flirt in the whole world," he smiles, "you'll meet him at the mansion after school."

"Oh really..." I say, not quite grasping his words. Then, I suddenly understand.

"What mansion?! I never heard you talk about going to a mansion!"

"Um, Mona? I told you about it before we got to school," he clarifies, my lack of memory surprising him.

I scoff, my red hair waving slightly, "Oh yeah, I remember... but you weren't serious, were you?"

"Of course I was," he says seriously. I start to laugh, merry pearls of joy that reverberates around the lunchroom.

"There is no way you are taking me there," I reply. I am NOT going to a mansion alone with Xavier. For all I know, he might kill me in the forest and eat me.

Well, I guess that would defeat the purpose of saving me from definite death, but still.

"You wanna bet?" he asks dangerously, his eyes alight. I look at the floor, not wanting to say anything. If I do spit out a word, he might pick me up and carry me out of the lunchroom to the mansion right now, in front of the whole school.

Yep. Silence is best right now. And careful planning, of course.

I'll just *escape* from him...

Meeting The Pack Of Players

The bell rings, signifying the conclusion of another tortuous day. My locker, unfortunately next to "Mr. Popular" himself, winks at me as I walk out of the classroom towards it. Xavier is overwhelmed by his fans, leaving me ample time to collect my baggage. I grab my stuff, waiting for him to dissipate the crowd and make his way towards me. Which he does, with a big smile on his face. "Are you ready?" he questions.

I look away, trying to make my voice sound convincing. "Can I go to the bathroom first?"

He nods, staring at me with his electrifying green eyes. I feel, suddenly, as if he can stare straight through me, seeing what my true intentions are. Keeping my head down, I plow past him into the ferocious crowd.

I slip through the halls, enduring shoving and pushing along the way, and pause by the bathroom. Consisting of only a tiny hall of stalls and two meager sinks, it is a sorry excuse for a bathroom, but it will suit my purposes just fine.

I walk to the end of the bathroom, right at the last stall. A small window, about the size of a half-piece of poster board, perches about four and a half feet above the floor. My escape route. It is at about chin level on me, clearly at a height I can't climb to. Carefully, I reach forward and open it, the glass swinging outwards. Now I am ready.

Placing my backpack on the tile floor, the contents tumbling out of its confinements, I begin to stack my books and binders on top of each other. Then, I put the tower of school supplies in the backpack, the zippered top of it open. I grasp the handles on either side, stepping onto the tiny mountain like I had planned hours earlier.

The two foot tall pile sways and almost collapses underneath me, but I catch the window ledge before it gives way to gravity. Propelling myself upwards, my butt hits the ledge, leaving my backpack swinging below me because of my hold on it. Pulling the handles, I force it to reach my current elevation. I turn, my feet now swinging over the edge, towards the outdoors as I pack the binders and books back in my bag.

The scene before me, a plain view that includes a blue sky and a bunch of dead grass, has never been so beautiful. For now, it symbolizes freedom. I feel elation pounding in my chest, a burden disappearing from my shoulders. Nothing I have ever experienced amounts to this emotion, this feeling of liberty.

The feeling vanishes when I look towards the ground.

I mentally smack myself in the head when I survey the thirty feet between me and the tops of the prickly bushes directly below. There is no way I am going to be able to get out from here. Well, unless I want to break an arm and a leg.

Laughing, I let my whisper escape into the cool breeze, "Looks like my perfect plan is a total failure." I know I should have chosen the back door route, but the bathroom idea was too crazy to resist at the time, and Xavier wouldn't get too suspicious in the process. But how could I have known that this bathroom is actually thirty feet above the ground, and that a patch of thorny bushes grovels below?

I hear some chattering behind me as some figures enter the bathroom. Shutting my eyes, I squeeze my backpack tightly, hoping that they won't notice my back in the window. Unfortunately, I can't see anything from my position; facing outwards. Fear enters me, the thought that they might laugh at my form chilling me to the bone. I shift slightly, thrusting my head into the afternoon air, leaving only my back and butt in the window. From my position, the bushes might as well be a sea of sharks.

The noise suddenly ceases, the chattering halting so suddenly that the air freezes as well. My body stiffens, and I suddenly find it hard to breathe.

There are steps, ones that grow increasingly louder to my unwilling ears. I can tell they are heading my way, sensing the foreboding hiding behind each small movement. Finally, they stop as well, leaving only silence. Dangerous silence. Time seems to pause, even my breath suspended in anxiety.

Light and incredibly thin fingers, hundreds of them, brush across my back as the figure leans close to my ear. The person's hot breath, full of menace, dwindles upon the back of my neck. There is another painful pause, the suspense eating me whole, and then a sound that makes my blood run cold.

"He is mine," a malicious voice whispers. A pair of two soft but strangely strong hands collide with my back, the carefully manicured nails clawing into my skin. The force pushes me forwards, and I start to fly.

Only for a second, though, before gravity takes its course.

The air rushes past me, my backpack serving as a weight to pull me down even faster. I release it, hoping crazily that somehow it will slow me, but that doesn't stop my plummet. I am toppling face down, my view of the deathly bushes absolutely electrifying. Death looms before me once more, a familiar figure I have come to recognize in its previous two visits. I marvel at the fact that Death has come for me three times so far, when the average teenager doesn't even know his face. The ground runs to meet me, and I shut my eyes tightly.

Muscled arms, strong and sinewy, wrap around my form right before the first prickly leaf mars my face. He, for surely these perfect arms must belong to a man, cradles me, embracing my suddenly fiery hot skin. Electricity shocks me in every place that he touches me, a strange, arousing feeling searing through my veins.

I stare into the face of my savior, and grimace. Somehow, I know even before I look that the mysterious man is Xavier.

"Why would you do something stupid like fall out of the bathroom window?" he asks confusedly, his tone a little accusing. Setting me down, away from the thorns, he steps out as well. Streaks of red blood pulsate from his knee down, thorns sticking into his leg. He seems not to notice the demolition of his beautiful calves, continuing on with his "why are you so stupid" talk. "I had to run from the front of the school," he complains, "to you in three seconds flat, and avoid a group of annoying girls along the way! Why were you in the window? I thought you were in the bathroom! And don't they usually keep those windows shut? How could you fall out of a closed window-"

"I was trying to escape, wolfboy. Get it right," I say, without energy or menace. A near-death experience takes a lot out of you.

Xavier looks at me, his eyes wide... and begins to laugh hysterically. I realize now that the fact that I was trying to escape makes me look even stupider than if I had just fallen out of the window. "Mona," he speaks, his voice like melted butter as it slips through his lips, "you can't escape from me."

Anger pumps through my veins, sparks flying. Who is HE to tell me I can't escape? Even though he's probably right...

"Oh and Mona," he says suddenly, "take this." He offers me a small ring, with an emerald on top. It sparkles in the light, as beautiful as Xavier's eyes. I slip it on my finger, though dubious.

"Is this an engagement ring?" I ask suspiciously. He shakes his head.

"If it was, I would propose," he says obviously, making me feel stupid again. Anger courses through me as I think of the endless amount of days I was going to have to endure this werewolf; one that thinks he is all that...

However, all doom and gloom evaporates as I survey the blood running towards his foot. It is worse now, the thorns growing irritated in the skin.

Xavier, "I tell him, squatting down to examine the injury better, "You have to get you a bandage!" I have to admit, it was very nice and heroic of Xavier to save me, and I owe him at least this much concern.

Xavier shrugs, "I'll get it fixed at the mansion. It can wait." His careless attitude is completely opposite from what it should be, reminding me once again that he is not normal.

"No," I say fiercely, "It can't." Opening my backpack, I take a small supply of napkins out of a pocket. Brushing it across the blood, I wipe most of it off so I can get a better view. The thorns protrude from his skin, big ones that would have me in tears. Using my fingers, I carefully pull each one out, trying to ignore the desire pulsing through me. The vulnerability I am displaying to the over-affectionate werewolf.

Xavier shoots me a smile as I take out the last thorn, offering me a hand to help me stand. "Thanks, Mona," he says softly, as if my tiny action means a lot to him. Knowing Xavier, it probably does.

"What about the blood?" I question, looking at his red stained ankles. He shakes his head.

"Don't worry about it. It will heal soon," he assures me, his voice confident. I roll my eyes, and then look to the window. It is dark inside, so I can't see the face, but I am sure the figure is still in there, watching us both. It seemed to be a girl, but I am not sure. All I know is that the person, whatever the gender, wants me dead. The chills are unceasing, biting at me with terrible force.

Xavier turns to the forest behind us, right beyond the meadow. "It's this way," he declares, his tone certain. He whirls back to face me, his arms spread out wide. "Come here," he demands. His eyes are fierce, ordering obedience. Not knowing quite why, I oblige him. He sweeps me into his arms once more, strangely comforting me with his warmth. There is a silence as Xavier grits his teeth, and then he begins to run. Blindingly fast, his legs zoom into the vast underbrush, destination unknown to me. However, at this moment, I don't care. Xavier is the least of my troubles.

The voice still echoes in my head, stirring up fear in my heart. "He is mine."

I watch the scene around me, a blur of green, blue, and brown, with awe. It is so strange, the way everything changes so quickly. It is a collage of the senses, everything mashed together, unable to observe. The only thing that's constant is Xavier, and his huge arms around my form.

Feeling like a baby in a cradle, I rock in his arms, marveling at the way I seem to fit in his embrace. For once, I am thankful for my small size. His hands offer constant heat as they radiate to my skin, warmth and desire blended together. It is an ordeal to him, I can tell, to just hold me like this, for the temptation is huge. For us both.

I look to Xavier's masculine features, at the way his azure hair sparkles in the breeze. When the sun hits it just right, it resembles the rainbow, all the colors shining in each strand. It is the most magnificent hair I have ever seen in my life.

His eyes, too, are incredible. They are also the only things about him that are truly abnormal. They are so amazingly bright, it is just hard to believe that they belong to a human. And, of course, they don't.

He casts a look at my face, rough and ragged, covered by thick glasses and bangs. I feel discomfort in his measuring gaze, though it is full of unbelievable affection. I don't understand why he loves me so much, but I can't help but admire his enthusiasm.

The violent air slapping at us both stops as Xavier comes to a gentle halt. Everything around me becomes clearer, focus regaining. "What is this place?!" I say with absolute awe, practically jumping out of his arms. It is amazing, a feat of nature standing before me.

A gigantic mansion stands before me, resembling a castle really, with turrets and a moat. It is in the center of the forest, trees surrounding the clearing where the mansion lies. It is ferocious and forbidding, reminding me of a haunted mansion. A door stands at the front, unnecessarily large, closed and most likely locked. A bunch of those prickly bushes are located around the mansion walls, most likely to prevent the same thing I tried to attempt today.

"Who are you werewolves defending yourselves from?" I ask in wonder, noting the turrets that most likely house a ton of arrows, guns, and grenades.

Xavier bows his head, his voice soft. "You just don't worry about it, Mona. You don't need to get involved in this," he assures me, though my temper is only sparked by a comment like that. However, after a few seconds of huffing and puffing, I quell my ferociousness.

We start walking to the moat, the bridge across it stable and wooden. "Why do you have a bridge and not a wall?" I query. All of the castles I have seen in books are similar in that aspect.

"Because we don't need one," a mischievous voice answers for Xavier, alerting me to another man's presence.

This man is handsome also, with the same electrifying green eyes that scares yet always manages to seduce me. However, unlike Xavier, he is Chinese, with black hair and a somewhat wider face. He is also taller, tanner, and skinnier. This man is almost like a stick, yet with good muscles for a man his size. He is wearing a ripped t-shirt, with rugged jeans that fit him almost as well as Xavier's does. All in all, another devastatingly handsome man with a whole different type of appeal.

"You have to remember, we are werewolves," he speaks again, his voice teasing, "so we can do stuff like this." In one sudden movement, he takes the bridge and flips it upwards, propelling us both high in the air. All I can see is blurriness again, fury ripping through my system. How dare he flip me into the air? Xavier is by my side, looking at the smirking man dubiously. I wrap my arms around my knees, waiting for the inevitable thump.

I land in a pair of arms for the second time today, except this time they are different. Slender and altogether graceful, these hands are soft and almost like a girl's. However, they are unbelievably strong, the fact that he flipped us both into the air with a huge, wooden bridge awe-inspiring. His face, as he looks down on me, is amused and taunting, completely unlike Xavier's affection.

However, that changes when he perks up his nose. "What is that delicious aroma?" he asks, his voice alluringly smooth and sweet. Xavier walks up behind him, unharmed by the stranger's mischief.

"It's her," he says, pointing to me. I shrink when the man leans his head closer to mine. He breathes in, sighing deeply.

"I haven't had a morsel like this in ages!" he exclaims dreamily, "she smells absolutely delectable." I start to shiver as I notice that he almost regards me as food, not an actual person.

Xavier rips me away from him, wrapping his arms around my body. "She is my mate, Yi. Don't touch her," he growls.

He surveys me, whistling loudly. "Xavier, this doesn't exactly seem like your type of girl. I thought you were going to mate with someone maybe more model-like... and she is a human. Ray is going to be furious," he almost sings that last part; as if he is actually happy that Xavier is going to spike this person's anger.

"Butt off," he snaps, "I can choose whoever I want to be my mate."

"Liar," he laughs, "you probably got mated to her because of her smell. It is amazing... I haven't experienced a smell like that in a long time. I don't blame you, Xavier." He leans in, his voice so soft that I almost can't hear it. "Even though the ugly chick's your mate, you could still eat her. I bet she would be delicious, and Ray wouldn't care," he whispers. I jump away from Xavier, punching Yi in the face. My movement is so fast that even he can't react, my fist hitting home. Yi rubs his jaw, his face of laughter. "I'm just kidding," he chokes, "mates don't eat each other, and werewolves

rarely eat humans in the first place. Nice punch, by the way."

Xavier just stares at Yi, fire alight in his eyes. "Don't joke about that sort of stuff, Yi. It's scaring her," he says. I step closer to them both, my temper twice the size of Xavier's.

"Do not make assumptions," I poke him in the chest, and then I turn to Yi, "you are an idiot. Go bother someone else." I pretend to act unaffected by his remark, but in truth I am furious. I know I am ugly... but I don't like hearing a handsome werewolf say it. "Come on, Xavier, let's go," I take charge, pulling away the growling wolf.

I look back... to see Yi's devilish smile. "You just got a whole lot more attractive," he smirks, invoking redness to my cheeks. I turn back to Xavier, embarrassed.

His face is twisted with laughter now, his anger died down. "I was going to punch him for you," he says in-between chuckles, "but you beat me to it. And you were fast, too! I mean, Yi is pretty weak, but he usually has better reflexes." Weak? He smiles at me, his white teeth glistening. "Don't listen to Yi," he whispers, "you aren't ugly at all."

I laugh, though inwardly shaking. "Thank you, Xavier." He reaches to grab my hand, but I pull it away. Even though I like Xavier more than Yi, this doesn't change anything. I am still not in love with Xavier.

We enter the mansion, the doors opening as if prodded by an invisible hand. The inside is just as beautifully creepy as the exterior; with two huge flights of stairs in the back of the lobby that is parted by a colossal sculpture of a wolf. The floor is tiled, the ceiling over fifty feet above us. The whole room is very spacious, probably doubling as a ballroom. "Where do those steps lead?" I ask, clutching his arm subconsciously, "they are so big!"

"To the other rooms," he says plainly, "that is the only way to get to them."

"Wow," I gaze at the beautiful chandelier hanging from the middle of the ceiling, noticing the mural painted above me. It is of wolves in the forest, chasing a bunch of humans. But the strange thing about them is that the human's eyes are red, bright like the werewolves' green eyes but a different color. They are really scary and intimidating, sending recognition into my chest. I... have seen those eyes before.

Pain flashes through me, realization searing. I yell, but that does not dissolve the hurt. The terror.

"Mona!" a voice rips through the air to my ears. I grab the man's hand, pressing it against my heart.

"Help me," I moan, "my heart is hurting." It is throbbing, pounding against my chest.

"What's wrong?!" a beautiful voice says anxiously, one I don't recognize. I raise my hands to my ears, trying to block out the noise, but the screams don't cease. The terrible screams...

All I see is darkness now, slipping into the endless void.

"Mona," the same voice from before, the one that doesn't belong to Xavier or Yi, wakes me. My eyes flutter open, consciousness returned.

"What happened?" I ask, the blurry images coming into focus. Hovering right above me is an unbelievably handsome man, with bright green eyes. My eyes grow wide as I survey him. With each strand like a clear crystal, sparkling like rainbows in the light, his hair reminds me of Xavier's but without a definite color. His short buzz cut of this spectacular hair gives way to pale, perfect skin and lightly reddened lips. His eyelashes are thin and shiny black, long and enticing. His face is heart-shaped, and he almost looks like a girl.

"You lost consciousness," he informs me, his gaze disconcerting. It is slightly pleasant, but still strange. I still have not gotten used to all these pretty guys looking at me.

I sit up, my back against the headboard. I look around the room, at the splendor surrounding me. It is absolutely gorgeous, a bedroom with surprisingly modern furnishes.

"Well, thanks," I say, getting up from the bed, "I am fine now." My hair is matted, falling past my shoulders. The man grabs my arm, his expression of concern.

"Are you sure?" he questions, peering into my eyes.

"Of course," I nod, though I am anything but. My head hurts, a throbbing pain that nearly swallows me whole. It is diminishing slowly, yet not quite slow enough. I truly have no idea what just happened. My mind seems to be fuzzy, only the pain and the strange screams echoing in my head over and over...

Xavier rushes into the room, his expression of pure alarm. "Mona!" he cries, coming to meet me. He demolishes me into a huge, bone-crushing hug. It is comforting... more than I can ever admit. "I was so worried..." he whispers, his breath dancing along my cheek. I smile, tilting my head downwards so he can't see it.

The rainbow man stands up, watching me with a warm smile that makes my heart go fuzzy. "So she really is your mate," he says, without any doubt, "I'm glad. This will stop our alpha from being such a player."

Xavier blushes slightly, my eyebrows rising. "Xavier was a player?" I rip away from him to ask the man. It is hard to believe, for the way he shows me such devotion is not like a player at all.

"Was," the handsome man winks, "but now that he is mated, all he can think of is you."

"You are a player too!" Xavier protests, his voice ignored by us both.

"So mating makes you instantly fall in love with each other?" I ask dubiously. He nods matter-of-factly. "Then we didn't mate," I say confidently.

"What?" they both stare at me, Xavier frowning as I back away from his grasp.

"I am not in love with Xavier," I firmly state.

The man looks at me, and chuckles. "Yes you are," he says, "I can see it in your eyes. You just won't accept it because you still don't understand it. Your body is probably trying to reject these foreign feelings."

I stare at him for a second, and then I begin to laugh.

"Think whatever you want," he grins, "my name's Jake, by the way. Wes said that he wants to meet you, so he will be coming soon..."

A figure bursts into the doorway, his breathing heavy. "Where is she?" the guy asks, and then his eyes find mine. Grinning eagerly, he crosses to be by my side. "My name is Wes. And your name, my beautiful lady...?"

"Mona," I can't help but grin, instantly relaxed by his playful attitude. Also, his entire appearance is enchanting, invoking awed silence. His hair is a bright blonde, almost pure gold, and he has those green eyes that seem to be the common thing between all these werewolves. His skin is as tan as Yi's, with nice lips and a thin but strong body. His face reminds me of Xavier's, with a likeness to a lovable puppy.

"She's my mate," Xavier carefully informs Wes, and he rolls his eyes.

"Oh really? I haven't figured that out yet." After snapping at Xavier, he turns to me. "Your smell is so wonderful... have you met Yi yet? Because he will love you."

"Why?" I ask. He certainly doesn't seem to love me.

"Because he likes stealing other men's girlfriends... as do I. And especially one who possesses an intoxicating fragrance like you," he smirks, casting a white-toothed, glistening smile that shines brightly. I blush, the red rushing to my cheeks. I snap my hand away, a scowl decorating my features.

"I'm not anyone's girlfriend!"

"Ooh, you're feisty." Wes only smiles brighter, his enthusiasm unstoppable. "I like it."

Xavier grabs my arm. "You're jealous aren't you?" I laugh, letting him start to drag me towards the door. He blushes slightly, a cute expression on his face.

"No, why would I be?" he asks. Wes and Jake cheer behind us, obviously amused that Xavier is experiencing that kind of emotion.

Just before we exit the room though, a huge form fills the doorway. "Hey," he nods at Xavier, and then turns his gaze to me. "I'm Ray," he introduces himself, without a smile.

"I'm Mona," I note his similarity to Xavier, their likeness almost startling. Ray is muscled, even more so than Xavier, and sinewy. He is tall with brown hair, his face an almost perfect copy of Xavier. However, a thin scar stretches from his forehead to his cheek, marring his otherwise beautiful face. If Xavier was the Prince of Light, Ray would certainly be the alluring Prince of Darkness.

"Now I guess you've met all of us, Mona," Wes says loudly, "this is our pack. We used to call it the 'pack of players', but now that Xavier is settled, we can't exactly say that anymore."

"No girls?" I question, only to see four faces shaking their heads no.

"We like to be free of all women," Jake grinned, "love 'em and leave 'em, I always say."

"You people are terrible," I laugh, instantly feeling at home with these handsome men. After a second, I nearly jump in alarm at the realization that I can barely recognize myself. The old Mona would have run away by now. The old Mona would have never fallen for these wily werewolves' tricks. It must be those strange feelings Jake was talking about.

Ray just stares at me, a forbidding expression on his face. "She needs to leave for a minute while we have our meeting," he says, his voice rough and completely unlike Xavier's.

"Come on," Wes protests, "she's not doing any harm! Let her stay!"

"No," his voice is firm, insisting, "she isn't part of the pack." His words are forbidding and fierce, striking me cold. I turn, walking out of the door. Xavier sticks his head out after me, issuing a warning.

"Don't go outside of the grounds," he says, "it isn't safe." Then, Yi comes up and brushes past me into the room. Right before they shut the door, I see their faces, turned serious by something Ray said.

He's not exactly a ray of sunshine.

How could he be a player? Maybe he's the strong and silent type all the girls like to go for. He certainly is handsome enough... I mean, they all are. Especially Xavier, having an authority hanging over his head like a crown. Everyone in the pack seems to respect him.

Looking up, I wonder how they all live in such a big place. It is so old-fashioned, obviously not built by these handsome teens... oh, of course. They are probably fifty to a hundred years old. However, most of them don't even look nineteen, though Jake might pass for being in his twenties.

After gazing at the beautiful artifacts for about ten minutes, I decide to head outdoors. Xavier said I couldn't leave the grounds, but he never said I couldn't take a walk in the grounds. After searching for a while, I find an exit, going through it to find that I am now located in the mansion's garden. It is beautiful, alerting my senses with sweetness and beautiful colors. I circle it, but soon dismiss it to be too uninteresting. Just like the mansion; old fashioned and dreary.

The stars wink at me as I survey the area once more. A small path to the side, strewn with pine needles and leaves, catches my attention. Slowly I begin to walk it, not knowing quite where I am going.

The moat is nowhere to be found, leading me to believe that I am not outside of the mansion's boundaries. However, when I spy the dark, forbidding trees that remind me of the forest Xavier and I traveled through, I am not so sure.

Quickly I dismiss my doubt. Of course I am still in the borders, for I haven't passed the moat yet. Surely...

Everything is quiet now, the only whispers being the ones of the rushing wind. My hair brushes behind me, blown by its frightful gales. I squint, wondering how a wind this fierce could have just started up out of the blue. It is strong, but I hold my stance against the invisible monster.

However, my troubles only increase as a white apparition appears before me, coming out from behind the trees. The fear, the pain... it begins to pound again as I gaze in surprise upon the curious creature. It has no shape, a white ghost with the same red eyes as the men on the mural I had seen earlier. Suddenly, memories start flooding back to me, ones I can't stand to remember.

My scream rips into the night as the creature starts flying my way, the familiar eyes delving into my soul. I definitely know those eyes. But where? When? Who?

The haunting eyes that are causing me to have a serious migraine pause, the white blob still. Then, they squint slightly, and the ghost-like form charges towards me. Escape is impossible. I am frozen, still with shock and remembrance.

My parent's murderers...

Why Am I Always The Damsel In Distress?

The ghostly figure zooms towards me, its deathly intent clearly evident. However, I don't notice its speed at all, my mind suspended in a hazy fog of memories that are coming together, returning at an alarming speed. The screams I had heard earlier starts again, reverberating throughout my thoughts, distracting me from the present. I clearly hear two voices, one high pitched and the other a little lower but still womanly. The one that clearly belonged to an older woman strikes pain in my chest, recognition forcing itself to the surface. That beautiful voice, contorted with pain and surprise...

Mom. My eyes widen as everything comes back; the pain, the sorrow, the hurt.

The tears start to flow as the ghost hastens to meet his destination. I can remember every detail now; the way those creatures had delved into him... when his eyes turned a frightening red...

It finally reaches me, barely more than a whisper of air, charging towards my chest. However, the ghost bounces off, my body suddenly surrounded with an eerie glow. What is this? It is green and bright, like the emerald in my ring, almost like one of those auras I have read about in fantasy books.

I back up against a huge oak tree, fear mounting in my heart. Am I going to live against this deathly thing? How can I fight against something I don't even understand?

I watch the deathly creature, at its cloudy form and its bright red eyes. They are like lasers, ripping into me, seizing my terror and amplifying it. My heart beats faster as the horrifying eyes squint, determination in its depths. Foreboding races through my blood, symbolizing what is to come.

I wrap my arms around my knees, burying my face into my legs as the ghost once again zooms my way. This, I suppose, is my punishment for disobeying Xavier's orders. But how was I supposed to know there is a way out of the boundaries without crossing the moat?!

Peeking once more at the apparition, I almost shriek as I survey its closeness. It seems to be observing the things around me, as if it is looking for something. I shudder as it crosses its murderous gaze across my body, hunched up into a tiny ball. It looks at the tree behind me, a huge one that might even be four foot in diameter, and smirks with its beady eyes. With a screech that cuts through the air and makes my blood run cold, the white blur of energy delves into the oak tree, making me wonder exactly what is going on.

I stand up, turning to face the tree as it suddenly whirs with energy. Bright, fire-like sparks explode from the trunk, blood seeming to run down it. It rapidly grows in size, from four feet in diameter to around five feet, and who knows how much taller. Before, it seemed to be rather lifeless, an old tree that had reached its peak, but somehow, it now looks youthful. Scariest.

This tree is taller than the others by far, stretching to reach the clouds. I am fervently wishing for the werewolves to see it, but they are probably consumed with whatever they are talking about. It sounded important when I tried to eavesdrop, though I didn't quite understand their topic.

It is Ray's fault, I think feverishly, for casting me out of their meeting room. He probably knew I would find some trouble to involve myself in. But I can't truly blame it on him. It is my fault for taking those first steps towards the dangerous road. It is my fault for not sticking to the beautiful garden.

And now, I am going to pay.

The tree totters, swaying in that rough wind. My dress presses against me, forced back by the terrible gales. The force of the wind increases, nearly pushing me to the ground as the tree reaches full height and strength. It ripples with energy, the bright red crackling around it like lightning. The wind seems to circle around this giant monster, almost like a tornado with its speed and focus.

But then, there is a crack that stops my heart.

The tree suddenly snaps, the red energy possessing it still. The breaking of the suddenly colossal tree surprises me; with its newfound strength, it seemed to be invincible. It almost looks to be a deliberate breaking, the now severed trunk cut cleanly and smoothly. How is it doing that? What is going on?

I hardly notice the tree as the rest of it tumbles towards me, my thought muddled with confusion. It must be the ghost. The ghost is controlling the tree!

Wait... I glance upwards, at the blur of speed as it travels to squish me. "Oh no," I whisper, my voice shriveled and weak. I try to scream, but I can't. I am frozen solid with pain, fear, and hate.

I can't move.

I can't think.

I really am going to die, aren't I? No more silly games of hide and seek. Death has found me, sinking his talons into my skin. Glaring at me with his giant red eyes that haunt my memories.

But what, truly, do I have to live for?

I think of a certain man, with emeralds for eyes and azure hair that sparkles in the bright sunlight. He would miss me for sure.

My cheeks burn as a tear runs past my eyelashes, down my chin, onto my ratty clothes. I wonder why I am crying, when I had tried to commit suicide only two days ago. But so much has changed since then. There is so much more...

Right before the tree hits the ground, squelching me in the process, there is a thump. Glancing upwards, I wonder why I am not dead yet. Why the pain is only inside of me, blinding my thinking. There are no scratches on my arms and legs, only dirt and leaves, making me wonder if this is only a dream. There is no way this can happen in real life. I am just going crazy, imagining such nonsense.

But then why does my head hurt so much?

I stagger, scanning the area for the tree with the evil red sparks. Everything is going blurry, the screams blocking everything. My mother's thin voice, repeating itself over and over and over...

"Are you okay?" a familiar voice erupts through the void, ripping its way towards my understanding. I blink, my eyes focusing. The masculine voice seems to harness my thoughts and drag it to reality, everything becoming clearer.

It is then that I notice that the tree is lying to the side of me, held by a man who has saved my life three times in the past two days. His muscled arms bulge as he lays the colossal tree on the ground, his beautiful eyes widening at the red sparks exploding from it. The eyes narrow, his fist drawing back and slamming into the trunk of the tree. There is a boom, shaking me to my knees, like a tiny earthquake. I look up once more, to see the tree almost in splinters. The red is gone, and so is the ghost that vanished into it. How did he do that in one punch?

The handsome man runs my way, wrapping his firm arms around me concernedly. "Are you okay?" he repeats the question, taking one now gentle finger and stroking some strands of my ruby red hair. I lean against him for a second, dwelling in his warmth and comfort, trying to throw out the endless pain. There is silence, and then the hurt leaves me, only leaving cold memories that stain my heart.

"How did you do that?" I waste no time, grabbing one of his hands, marveling at the lack of cuts and splinters, "you made a little earthquake!"

He laughs, "it's called an Earthquake Punch. It is something werewolves have to train for years and years to attain, and one of the six Talents.

Now answer my question."

"Well, I'm not hurt, but..." I squeeze his hand tightly, almost delirious with confusion, "what was that ghost thing?"

His eyes widen, bafflement dancing across his features. "You... saw it?"

"Yeah. It was so scary, with its bright red eyes..." I shudder, causing him to pull me into a hug. I am too tired to care, although stiffening slightly at his movement.

"Everything's okay, Mona," he murmurs as I bury my face into his chest. I need his warmth, the security he offers. For it seems that I won't find survival anywhere else. After a while, he slowly breaks apart, leading me with him back the way we both came.

His form straightens as we walk, I turning away from him in embarrassment. He must think I'm pitiful, always needing to be saved. I used to think of myself as being independent and able to support myself, but this one day has convinced me otherwise.

The ground beneath us crunches, the leaves producing a snap as they crack. Whispers of the past wind, once a terrible gale, still brush our hair and shoulders, dancing along our skin. I now feel cold and almost emotionless, the pain having eliminated all other feelings. And now that the pain is gone, there is nothing.

When we finally reach the garden, four miraculous figures come to meet us, each handsome in their own unique way. Wes stares at me, his gaze of concern. "What happened, Xavier?" he questions the man beside me, drinking in his face of weariness.

"A Shifter," he narrows his eyes, "was on our property." The stunning men all rear back in surprise, pure disgust lacing through their features.

"Here?" Jake erupts, his voice furious. Ray shakes his head, Yi looking at the perfectly manicured lawn near his feet. I breathe a quick sigh of relief; I hadn't exited the grounds. Now Xavier can't get mad at me.

"Why didn't you just stay in the garden?" he turns to me, his expression of anger, "if I hadn't look out of the window and seen that gigantic tree, you would have died!"

Obviously I thought too soon. Xavier can get mad at me for anything.

My eyes narrow, my determination showing through the terror. "What was that white thing?!" I demand, "Tell me now!"

Ray's eyes widen, his expression suddenly of excitement. "Xavier," he begins, "if that girl's a Seer, then we might be able to get ourselves a Spier! Imagine what we would be able to do..."

"No," he says fiercely, "I won't allow it. Ever." His face is hard and resolute, his hair sparkling in the beating sun. I look up at him, at his lightly tanned skin, straight nose, and absolutely gorgeous eyes, and frown.

"Tell me," I nearly growl, invoking an irritated glance from wolfboy himself.

"Okay, we will," he huffs, "come on." He drags me towards the mansion, the others following behind.

We enter the mansion doors, where I once again am faced with those evil, all knowing eyes. I shut my own in response, not wanting to see their brightness, the terrifying memories they cause. Xavier glances upwards with me, but doesn't shy away like I do.

"Are those what you saw?" he asks. I only nod, trying not to gaze into their fiery depths. His face seems to grow more certain as he walks, though darker than usual. His hand is like a steel bar across my back, not loving and comforting like it usually is... and I hate to admit that I miss it.

We enter the small room once more, with Xavier lifting me up easily and placing my form on the bed. The rest of the pack shuffles inwards, Ray swinging the door shut with a loud clang.

Immediately the interrogation starts. "How can you see a Shifter?" Yi asks in amazement.

"Are you a Spier?" Jake stupidly questions, causing a slap from Ray.

"Wow, Xavier, picking a Seer as your mate. Aren't you sly," Wes comments with a slight smirk.

"Shut up, everybody!" Xavier roars, causing even Wes to fall silent, "let's answer Mona's questions first." He peers into my eyes, disarming me with one glance. "Go ahead, Mona," he whispers, somehow making the words seem intimate and exciting, "we will tell you everything you want to know."

I choke on a breath at his close proximity, pulling away slightly. I tilt my head, wondering what exactly I want to know. What I need to know.

Might as well start with the basics. "What is that white thing?" I inquire, my voice still shaking from fear of the monster.

"It is called a Shifter," Wes speaks up, words flowing like melted butter from his lips, "and they are the sworn enemies of werewolves. They are creatures of chaos, death, and misery, with eyes that mirror true hell. Invisible to the human and werewolf eye, the only way to detect a Shifter in its true form is to smell it. We are the only species that has a powerful enough sense of smell."

"However," Xavier jumps in, "there are some humans able to see these Shifters. We call them Seers. Usually this sight is caused by a near death accident that a Shifter is involved in. That's you, Mona."

I think back to those burning memories, full of bitterness, fear, and hate. I can remember it now... the white cloud with those terrible eyes, floating in front of me right before wreaking havoc upon us all.

"A Seer can be awakened to become a Spier," Ray says, his voice tinged with excitement, "one of the six Talents!"

"What is a Spier?" I ask, gazing at the way Xavier's face turns hard at Ray's words. I grow even more interested, noting his discomfort.

"A Spier is able to conjure a spirit spear, and kill a Shifter in its true form. One can be aligned with every pack, and would complete our own. With you, we would have the six Talents," He gestures to the four werewolves surrounding him, "Yi is a budding Stealth Talent, which means he can turn fully invisible when he finally develops his skill. Jake is a Sabertooth Talent, which means he has long, retractable claws that are somewhat like a Sabertooth Tiger's teeth. Xavier is an Earthquake Punch Talent, which pretty much explains itself, and Wes is a Charm Talent. He can charm his opponent within a couple of seconds, and almost hypnotize them into doing his will. And I... I am a Beast Talent."

"What's that?" I wonder, staring into Ray's almost perfect face, stained with a darkness I can't quite explain. He is a mirror image of Xavier, but yet they are they so different. How can this be?

"When I morph, I can truly be a beast," he says softly, his menacing eyes scouring my skin. Under his gaze, I feel tingles of terror shiver through my spine.

"Anyways," Wes says, slinging a graceful arm around my thin shoulders, "what else would you like us to explain?"

"How do you become a Spier?" I wonder, "do you have to be a werewolf? It seems cool..." Spirit spears? The chance to abolish my parent's murderers, the ones that deprived me of a happy childhood? Everything seems too crazy, too wild to believe. But somehow, I know that it all is true every time I gaze into their emerald eyes.

"No," Xavier states fiercely, "you are not going to be one. Don't tell her, Ray."

Ray looks at Xavier with a mixture of confusion and annoyance. "She deserves to know," he replies, "she made the choice when she decided to run into the forest in the very beginning." His brown hair glimmers as he makes his way towards me, his emerald eyes unblinking. "You do not have to be a werewolf, yet you will gain immortality. You will be with your loved one forever-"

"I said NO!" Xavier growls, pushing Ray to the wall, digging his fingers into his throat, "she is not going to be awakened, so shut up, Ray!" Tension mounts in the room as everyone grows silent, my head still spinning from the madness I have launched myself into.

"Why can't I know?" I question, my voice stammering, tinged with fear at Xavier's anger, "why is it so bad?"

"You only have a fifty percent chance or lower of surviving to be a Spier when you are awakened," Jake answers quietly. Xavier shoots a scowl at Jake, roughly releasing Ray from his grasp. Ray takes a step away from Xavier, and smiles.

"Think about it, Mona." With these last words, he disappears out of the room, slinking away so fast that even Xavier has no time to slug him with one of his potent fists.

"Ray..." Xavier moans, putting a hand against his forehead. He looks up and faces Jake, Yi, and Wes. "He doesn't like me very much, does he?"

They all look at each other, and then simultaneously nod. "But we're behind you all the way!" Wes pumps his fist in the air, "right, guys?"

"Yeah," Jake agrees, but Yi stays silent, like he has been almost the entire time. A piece of his coal black hair falls into his face, his green eyes expressionless.

"It's not my business," Yi says, not looking into Xavier's slightly irritated face. Wes's face is bent in annoyance also, my expression of pure confusion. He turns to leave, muttering, "I'm going to practice." Without another word, he vanishes, leaving uncertainty behind him.

"Oh, he's just like this because he's the youngest and he hasn't developed his Talent yet," Wes tries to wave it off, "he's probably jealous of you because you have everything he doesn't; the best Talent, looks, and position in the pack."

"But we don't need jealousy," Xavier laments, his voice rough and full of anguish, "we need loyalty."

"Now, now Xavier," Jake smiles, patting him on the back slightly, "we're a family. It is good for families to have little disagreements every once and a while. It helps us grow closer."

Xavier looks at them both, his eyes fierce. I gaze at him, drinking in his startling blue hair and enticing eyes, his lips as he forms his next words. It is all—his face, his body, his every movement—perfect.

There must be something wrong with me.

"I wouldn't exactly call this a little disagreement," he murmurs, then whirls to face me. My heart begins to beat faster, and I suddenly find it hard to breathe. How can one look affect me this way? "I'm going to take her to the orphanage," he suddenly spurts, taking my arm and dragging me along with him. I can feel his harshness, so different from the gentle touches I am used to. His movements are stiff and brisk, each step robotic. Even his grip on my arm is strange, so tight that it almost cuts off my circulation.

We pass through the old fashioned corridors into the beautiful lobby. I gaze at the spectacular artwork, yet being careful not to look above. For if I do, I might burst into tears. Xavier doesn't seem to notice my sudden insecurity, his expression unchanging.

He pulls me to the bridge, forcing me to cross it with him. I think of earlier, when Xavier was smiling and laughing with me as we first reached this place. It seems so distant now, like the whisper of a memory that is on the brink of fading away.

We walk for a little while, his grasp tightening. It feels like it is going to explode; my hand, my whole body, and my heart. I am scared of this stranger, this man full of uncertainty and worry. The care free version of Xavier, the guy that is so naive, is the one I... just might be falling for.

Suddenly a flashing pain enters me, his grip suddenly bone breaking in strength. "Let go of me!" I scream, my voice filled with pain and anguish. Crumpling to the ground, I cradle my hand with the other, letting the life flow back into it.

Xavier turns, startled, and I just stare.

He runs to me, bending down so his handsome face is at eye level. "Did I hurt you?" he asks, his face flushed. I gaze at him, tears brimming at the corner of my eyes. Slowly I let them fall, running down my face in rivers.

"I'm so sorry..." he murmurs, sweeping me into a hug, his touch now like before. After a minute, he pulls away, and I notice that his face mirrors my own, tears staining his cheeks also. Strangely, I laugh. I can finally see him.

This is the man I know.

"You are better now!" I smile through my tears, "I don't mind the hurt, as long as you are okay."

What am I saying? I must be going crazy.

Xavier looks at the floor, his unnaturally long eyelashes fluttering against his cheek. "I'm so sorry, Mona," he apologizes, a hint of sadness in his tone, "it is just that I'm worried about how this is all going to turn out. I want you to be safe more than anything." He finally lifts his head at these words, his face contorted in a scowl, "and Ray cares nothing for your safety. He is a heartless werewolf, Mona, more than anyone else."

"Then why did you take him in?"

"Because he is a Beast Talent," Xavier shakes his head, "and because he is my twin brother. I can't turn away family."

I reel back from his words. They are very identical, but their personalities are so different that it is somehow difficult to believe. I suppress a heavy yawn, and Xavier chuckles quietly.

"Let's get you home." Picking me up in his tender embrace, he begins to zoom through the forest, everything a blur. I let my eyes close, feeling more comfort than I have in a long time. Why does Xavier always do this to me?

After a short while, we reach the ugly orphanage—a collage of graffiti, brick, scattered paint, and rough landscaping—and halt. I scan it quietly, taking in the two stories of misery, the windows that are commanded to be shut always, the old door that barely swings on its hinge.

"Thank you Xavier," I smile, though suddenly feeling fear. Ms. Penn is going to kill me for being out so late. My walk becomes a soldier's, knowing that each step leads me to certain death, or sometimes torture.

Xavier vanishes, making me feel more alone than ever. I never thought I would miss his desire to follow me absolutely everywhere, but now, a pit of nervousness builds in my stomach. What is Ms. Penn going to do to me?

With shaking fingers, I slide the door open, only to fall prey to the vicious beast. There Ms. Penn stands, her face contorted in anger, her hair frazzled and messy. "Where have you been?!" she roars, grabbing me in the arm so tightly that I wince. My head shakes as she drags me over to the kitchen. With long, switch-like fingertips, she slashes me, slapping my skin with all her might. Pain erupts, vivid, dastardly hurt that spreads throughout my entire body like wildfire. She smirks as the blood starts to appear, staining my tomato red cheek. "People shouldn't have to worry about you," she snarls, "you are too useless and ugly for them to waste their time over."

I bend my head, hoping to avoid another terrible slap, my tears racing to join the blood. "I'm sorry," I apologize, my words almost a cry.

"Well, sorry is not enough," she snaps, "you will have to clean the entire orphanage tomorrow after school, instead of just your room. And that includes their rooms, the lunchroom, and the bathrooms." I flinch at the word bathroom; they are so dirty that the orphanage usually has to bring in a professional cleaning team to get it done.

"Please, Ms. Penn," I beg, my voice anguished, "I won't have any time for homework if I clean the entire orphanage! That is a task for maybe two to four days!"

She smiles in return. "Mona, if you don't get it done by tomorrow at ten o' clock, then I won't give you any breakfast or dinner for the next week." I gasp, my breath caught in my throat. Turning towards the stairs, I run up them to my dorm, rushing to the room I like to call mine. Throwing myself onto the bed, I let them all loose, my tears now like a rushing river, my cheek throbbing with unbearable pain.

"You are going to get the sheets wet if you continue like that," a melodic voice whispers, startling me in my silence, "would you like to let me in?" I glance up at the window, spying the werewolf I thought had ditched me a while ago. He is sitting on the tree branch closest to my window, beckoning for me to open it. I crawl on the dull mattress to the wall, where the window is located, and flip the lock. With a little pain from the hand Xavier had hurt, I forced it open, wondering how Xavier can fit into such a tiny space.

Suddenly, a creamy white mass flings itself through the window, landing on the same bed I am in. He peers at me with his emerald eyes, the wolf part of Xavier, and morphs into the handsome man that is coupled with the beautiful beast.

His eyes widen at my cheek, stained ruby red with blood, pain, and tears. "What happened?" he asks, somehow compelling me to betray the truth.

"Ms. Penn, uh, slapped me," I finish in a whisper, choked gasps escaping me as a fresh wave of pain enters my body. I can still feel them, the nails as they dug into my cheek. My hand throbs also, but it nothing against this blinding terror, coupled with the agony. If I don't finish cleaning the entire orphanage tomorrow, which I won't, then she will deprive me of food for the next week! And I only have about three or four dollars in my account at school."

"That's all?" he asks suspiciously, and I gaze into his emerald eyes without a word. He nods, taking my hand in his, staring at the bruise that was starting to form. "I'll help you out of this, Mona," he determines, swirling his soothing fingers around the purple splotch, "very soon." With those words, he leans closer to my face, escalating my heartbeat, making me almost tremble. Why is he getting so close? I... haven't accepted him yet.

He cups my face with his strong hands, brushing his lips across my cheek. I look in wonder as the pain recedes, retreating back to where it came from. As he lets go, I put my own hand to my cheek, feeling a slight wetness where the blood used to be over the puckered skin. "This works better when I'm in wolf form," he says apologetically, "but I didn't want you to think I was going to eat your cheek off."

"What did you do?" I question, my voice filled with awe.

"Werewolves' saliva has light healing properties; it can soothe and mend small scratches," he explains. So this wetness...

"You spat on me?!" I exclaim in a loud whisper, shoving his arm away. He laughs as he wipes the saliva off my cheek, rubbing it on his shirt. For a minute, it seems utterly natural, us both laughing and smiling as we sit in a room with only one bed, an incredibly handsome man like him paired with a girl like me. None of the usual awkwardness surfaces—both of us like little children—I actually participating in his games.

I push him off the bed, and he thumps on the floor. His hair ruffled and messy, his white teeth shining, he seems now more human than ever. He stands up, a piece of white fluff sticking to his hair, and grins.

"Is this the real you, Mona?" he asks, using his all-knowing gaze to look into my soul. I stiffen a little at his words, a little perplexed.

"What do you mean? I've always been the real me."

"No," he argues, "you haven't. From the first minute I met you, you had shut me out. You had built a wall around you, an impregnable one that nobody could surpass. But now it is broken, isn't it, Mona? Don't you feel better this way?"

In a moment of reluctance, I lay down on the hard bed. Somehow, the orphanage's beds are harder than the floor, and has given me many sleepless nights. Patting the place beside me, I beckon for Xavier to join me. There is shuffling, and then there is his breath as it mingles with mine, another presence evident.

I point to the stars out of the window, the millions of tiny dots scattered in the deep night. "Once, when I was tiny, I asked my parents what stars really were. I had just finished watching *The Lion King*, and the part about the ancestors were really confusing me. They told me that the stars weren't really lions like the movie suggested, but people. Every star up there is a person that cared about me. When they died, they would join the stars and watch over me. They told me I would never be alone, for I would always have the stars as my companion."

"And you believed that?" he sputters in laughter.

"Shut up, Xavier. I was 4!" I reach and pinch his arm, then continue on. "...Ever since then, I have always wondered which star would be Mom, and which one would be Dad. I think that Mom would be a beautiful and bright star because of her boisterous personality, and that Dad would be a little bit more subdued. But most of all, I know that if they are up there, they would definitely be close together, almost touching. Every night, I look up into the sky and try to find them, but I haven't yet. I know it is silly to have faith in something like this, but it is the only way for me to feel like I am not alone."

There is silence as we both scan the deep black, hoping to see the two lights that I know I will instantly recognize. "Mona... could you tell me what happened to them?" he questions timidly, unintentionally releasing the pain and sorrow from within. I wince as they are all forced to the front of my memory; my mom, dad, and the haunting red eyes.

"I guess I do owe you an answer at least," I resignedly say, "you have saved my life many times."

"Just tell me if you want to," he urges, "only if you feel comfortable."

"I'm fine," I reassure him, though tears still brim on the edge of my eyes. There is silence as I form my words, and then I speak. "It was on a cold Friday morning when we were driving to the lake. We had rented a house there and were going to stay for a couple of weeks. It was a short drive, about thirty minutes, to reach the lake, so we just took Dad's truck. We were very excited, laughing and smiling, my mother sitting with me in the backseat. Everything was perfect, like a fairytale.

It was about fifteen minutes into the journey that the weirdness started.

First, the chills. Shivers suddenly started to race up and down my back, shocking me. Coldness seemed to seep into my skin, and even though I was tightly bundled in a huge jacket, that did nothing to stop it.

Then there was the fear. I had no idea why, but I was deathly frightened. Of what, I had no clue.

And lastly, the darkness. Everything seemed to go black at this moment, yet I could still see. It was strange, as if it wasn't an actual blackness, but only one inside my head. I thought I was going crazy.

Suddenly, a creepy white thing appeared... the same one as the creature you killed earlier. It had a body like white mist and truly horrific eyes that could inflict terror just on its own. I screamed, trying to alert Mom, but she couldn't see it. She couldn't see the disastrous monster before me. Right then, the thing seemed to look at me with its awful gaze, delving into my soul. Then it turned, and focused on the man driving the car. Dad.

It devoured him. I could see it. The evil white ghost had charged into Dad's chest, and he had suddenly gone rigid. Mom noticed his behavior, and called Dad's name, but he didn't turn, or lift his hands from the steering wheel. But he always pressed the gas. Never, even in his last moments of life, did he release the gas.

Mom reached forward and touched Dad's shoulder, and he finally turned. It was truly horrific, frightening us both. His face was expressionless, but his beautiful chocolate eyes had turned to a deep, fiery ruby. Mom and I both started to panic, and she began to reach for the doors, to try to open them so we could both escape. But this stranger with the same face as father had locked them, imprisoning us both inside.

We began to approach a cliff, the bottom of it piddled with rocks and bushes, upon which we had to pass to reach the lake. Dad pressed the gas even harder, ignoring the 25 mph speed limit. We were going almost 70 mph now, signaling certain devastation. When we reached the turn right at the cliff's beginning, Dad released the steering wheel. He leaned his head back, the spirit dwindling within him. I watched in fear as we

drove off the edge of the cliff, suspended in the air for a few seconds before falling to our deaths.

I... don't know how I lived. Mom had jumped at me, shielding me with her body, but it was a ten to fifteen foot drop, full of bounces and rolls. Everyone called my survival a miracle, and that my life was saved by God," I whisper, "but w-why would God want to save me?" I burst into tears, the memories fresh and scything, hate brewing. Xavier watches me, his tears matching my own.

"It's okay, Mona," he murmurs as I cry, holding me tightly, "you have me now. I'm here for you." I let the comfort surround me, feeling almost surprised at the fact that I wasn't pushing him away. But now, I needed him more than anyone.

"I hate them, Xavier!" I cry, my voice of anguish, "I hate the Shifters." Everything becomes blurry, my voice more and more distant.

My eyes close, the droplets of sadness dripping down my cheeks, and I surrender myself into Xavier's warm embrace, hoping he will soothe my wounded heart.

Since When Was Being Kidnapped A Good Thing?

The afternoon air is crisp and cold, dancing along a tiny girl's bare shoulders as she rolls down the windows. She shivers slightly as the air turns into a rushing wind, slapping at her cheeks. Angered by its sudden force, she rolls up the window quickly, lunging at her beautiful mother for comfort.

"Now, now, sweet child, calm down," the goddess says, the words melting like butter through her lips. Her hair was a deep ruby red, her eyes as green as a meadow on a bright summer day. Her daughter has the same features, sharing almost no likeness with her dad. However, the girl is blessed with her father's enchanting, hearty laugh and quiet personality.

The girl is sniffing in the woman's embrace, reveling in the warmth the lady gives. Now she is not crying because of the ferocious wind, but because of the foreboding laced through the air, the foreboding only she can sense. It brings with it great cold, its deathly claws sinking into the girl's tiny body.

The foreboding morphs in an instant to a bone-crushing fear, amplifying the chills that are resounding throughout her body, making her heart ache. It is like spikes of ice are being driven through her chest, even the air freezing from cold and raw terror.

Everything around the little girl suddenly turns black, although she can still see the green of her mother's eyes, the back of her father's head as he maneuvers them down the winding road. It seems to be in the girl's mind, although her vision is still perfect. The girl starts screaming now, the whole world going dark before her eyes. Her mother's arms do nothing to calm her, for she has lost all traces of sanity.

Or maybe not.

Suddenly, all these strange symptoms begin to come together as out of the darkness, a creature emerges. With a body like a cloud, and truly horrendous fiery eyes, it is a thing like no other. A spirit. A ghoul.

She screams, "MONSTER!" but her mother does not see. The expression of horror on the girl's face is not gracing her mother's fair complexion. She is just looking at her daughter in bafflement, not at the true cause of it all. Why can't she detect the supernatural beast?

Then, the living fear stares at the girl, terrorizing her with a single look. The eyes burn like lasers through her skin, reaching deep into her soul.

Through those eyes, she sees hell.

Then it vanishes, and the world slightly brightens. But the cold is still there. The fear is vibrant, thriving in the tiny truck. Where did it go? She can sense its presence, its disgusting scent hanging below her nostrils.

Suddenly, her father's body becomes as stiff as a board, and she knows.

It is then that the little girl realizes that nothing is ever going to be the same again.

My eyes fly open, not willing to experience the nightmare once more. The cold claws of fear are gripping at my chest, just like it had years and years ago, the memories striking fury in my chest. It is endless, preserved in my scarred mind, raining upon me like millions of death blows. Poison, making me rot from the inside. Why am I suffering like this? What have I done to deserve such a terrible demolition of my chances at a normal life?

I stare out the window, watching the orange and blinding yellow ripple across the sky as the majestic golden globe rises, wondering just where the stars go when faced with such magnificent light. They just seem to fade into the background as the main attraction emerges, as if they don't matter. As if the sun is more important than the twinkling jewels in the horizon.

There is a rustle beside me on the hard bed, alerting my senses. I turn, my mind still foggy with confusion...

An extremely handsome man lays beside me, bent in slumber. His eyelashes are long and enviable, peace befalling his flawless features. His face is unobstructed by silly facial expressions, in its purest form.

I blink, confused on why exactly this man is here. Do I know him? Why is he in my bed?

And why is his hand wrapped around my waist?

In a flash, different memories begin to fill my thoughts like a flood, everything from the night before rushing back to me. My embarrassing moment of vulnerability. My uncharacteristic kindness. The dastardly werewolf that took advantage of my stupidity.

With all my might, I push his form off the mattress, smiling in satisfaction when he collides with the floor.

"What did I do?" Xavier moans, his sparkling emerald eyes squinting in pain. His blue hair catches the sunlight, making it shimmer like a rainbow. I glance, awestruck, at the pure opulence before me, then quickly look away. I can't be distracted by his deathly charm.

"What did you do to me? Why are you in my bed?!" I roar, causing him to jump up and zoom to my side. He slaps a giant hand over my mouth, his movement so fast that it is blurry.

"What are you thinking?" he scolds in a scathing whisper, "do you want me to get discovered? Do you want to get in even more trouble? Idiot." His eyes are fierce, demanding respect and authority.

I rip his hands away from my mouth, anger like fiery hot sparks pumping through my blood. "Answer my question, wolfboy," I snarl.

He shrugs, obviously amused by my accusation. "Remember last night? When you told me to get on the bed beside you?" his voice is teasing, like chiding a child, "When you fell asleep crying into my arms?"

"Shut up," I almost choke, "I don't remember."

"Yes, you do," he murmurs with a chuckle, "I can see it in your face. You are a terrible liar, you know."

He is right. If I think back, I can still feel the tingle of warmth that had encompassed me, friendship in the air. I was an absolute wreck last night, and ashamed of it.

"But you didn't have to stay in my bed!" I protest angrily, my words ripping through the air towards his ears. He laughs genially, confusing me greatly.

"You should think of me for one freaking minute," he demands, his voice persuasive and angered, "I was the one that endured your stupidity. I was the one that had to lay beside my mate for seven to eight hours, trying to resist you. You know when mates usually bond?"

Bond? What? "When?" I ask.

"The minute they are mated," he points out, "desire is incredibly strong between two mates until bonding occurs. Then, after that, they are somewhat subdued. My pull towards you is so great... it takes every ounce of my strength to hold back." He looks pained as he speaks, not looking at my face.

I wish he would have clarified what he meant by bond. I'm not sure I understand.

I feel a twinge of sorrow as I emit these next words. "Well, I'm not a savage wolf, so you will probably have to wait much longer," I snap, rather bitterly.

"You could have just said thanks," he looks at the ground. "It's not a big deal, anyway. It's only a kiss. I... I just couldn't do it to you. Not in your sleep."

A kiss? On the lips? No way! Never! A blush appears on my cheeks.

"What are you thinking about?" He asks, winking at me. I scowl in indignation.

"I have no idea what was up yesterday," I think with pain towards last night, bafflement in my features, "why I was acting that way."

"Remember?" he prods, "the Shifter?"

In a flash, everything returns as his words trigger remembrance. The ghost from my dream, the pack of players. The fact that I am a... Seer.

And that I can take revenge on the murderers of my parents.

"Oh yeah," I murmur, thinking of the fiery eyes that haunt my mind, encompassing all of my thoughts.

Xavier halts, his form perfectly still. "Someone's coming," he expresses in a frustrated whisper, "because of your big mouth." I open my mouth to protest, but he just shakes his head. There is a blur of motion, the sound of a hand turning the knob, and...

Ms. Penn sends the door flying open, a crash resounding as it collides with the wall. "Why are you disturbing the other orphans' sleep? You selfish, ungrateful girl," she snaps, walking close to my form. She sticks an accusing finger in my face, her claws too close for comfort. "Who were you talking to?" she demands. I shake my head, and she snorts. "I know you were talking to somebody."

She scans the window, peering in hope that she will find some sort of incriminating evidence. "I know I heard you say something," she murmurs menacingly, "just where is the thing?" Ms. Penn turns, and the answer to her question wags his tail. She gasps, noting the size of the wolf, the creamy, flawless fur he is blessed with.

But even she is not distracted for long. Holding her nose, she begins to cough erratically, trying to squeeze words through her fit. "Why... do... you h-have.... a WOLF in the bedroom?! I'm... a-allergic to... dogs!" she chokes.

"He jumped through the window!" I protest, but it is no use.

"You should have the window shut at all times!" The coughs growing worse, Ms. Penn grabs me by the arm, tugging me down the stairs. Xavier, in his beautiful wolf form, follows me with his head bent towards the floor. You better feel guilty, wolfboy, I think angrily, it's all your fault.

I have always known, ever since the very first day I came here, that dogs are not allowed. It was the first phrase uttered when I arrived at the misshapen orphanage. I can still remember Ms. Penn all those years ago, with light brown hair instead of a faded gray, telling me I can't bring my gorgeous little German Shepard puppy into the orphanage. He was my best friend, with silky smooth chocolate fur, who I had named Spotty because of the huge splotch of caramel color around his eyes. Because of Ms. Penn, Spotty ran away from the orphanage on that fated day, never to return. And what hurt most was the fact that nobody with me cared enough to chase after him, Ms. Penn even holding me so I couldn't go myself.

Ms. Penn, gripping my already injured hand tightly, drags me outside, Xavier following behind. "I don't want to see your face," she roars, "until after school. No early cleaning for you." She shoves me, and I fall towards the ground, the air blurring around my form. I land on a furry back, and slightly smile. Sometimes it is nice to have a personal savior.

She gapes at the scene, the majesty of the wolf under me. "What about breakfast?" I ask quietly, trying to stand back up, but failing. My ankle hurts terribly, caused by Ms. Penn's violent push.

"Get that... wonder dog to get you some," she huffs, glaring at the source of her coughs. Xavier stares at her, unblinking, and utters a low, terrorizing growl that rips through the air and shakes her to the bone. She shivers, although the temperature is around eighty degrees, and retreats with a scowl back into her haven.

"Well, looks like I got kicked out," I point out jokingly, rubbing my foot with my dreadfully sore hand. Xavier, mute in his wolf form, nudges me gently. "I can't go," I complain, "my foot hurts too much."

He begins to morph, but I stop him by touching his ear. "Not here! Look at all the open windows! Anyone could see you!" He stops, thinking, then lays down on the untamed grass and whines.

"What do you want me to do?" I question, but no answer comes. Using my hands and knees, I crawl to him, hoping for some sort of indication that would lead me to realization. All he does in response is nod, even this movement regal.

Understanding finally dawns on me, and I pile upon his shaggy back, wincing in pain as my ankle brushes across his leg. He is so big that my petite self fits upon him perfectly, like a horse and its rider. However, what makes this so strange is the connection. When I lower my head to his back, my feet hanging off his heavily muscled berth, I can hear his heart thumping. I have to think to myself; this is Xavier's heart. Frozen in time, this is one of the few that will beat forever. Somehow, at this moment, I feel an unfamiliar tug at my heart, a sizzle of energy. Is this the desire Xavier was talking about earlier? For I am experiencing it now; fighting desperately against this alien emotion pounding through me.

I tighten my grip around his neck, and then carefully say, "okay." He looks up, at the beautiful blue sky, and starts to run into the deep, dark forest. "Not so fast!" I caution as his legs begin to blur, and he slows slightly. The horizon above us vanishes as trees as tall as the clouds start to multiply, and we are soon surrounded by them. I shudder a little as flashes of my memory surfaces; the hazy white figure with those gruesome, absolutely appalling eyes, charging at me in a scene much like this one...

We come to gentle halt, and I accidentally tumble off him, falling on my side. His body melts into itself, morphing into the handsome man that somehow manages to encompass almost all of my thoughts. With one masculine hand, he reaches to me and offers one hand. I take it and pull myself upright, all my weight resting on my uninjured foot. "You can't," he says suddenly, sweeping me into his arms. I am a little confused on what I can't do, but I decide not to ask for any clarifications. "Stay here," he commands as he sits me down on a rock, "I will get a first aid kit and some... clothes." He looks at my shirt pointedly, scratched and dirty. A little rip is on the sleeve, overall making my appearance rather disheveled. Yeah. I need some clothes before school starts, or everyone will figure out that I'm practically a hobo.

"Okay," I murmur carelessly, although in truth worried about being alone in such a huge forest. Xavier smiles, sensing my discomfort.

"As long as you have that ring, you are pretty much safe," he nods towards the sparkling emerald on my finger.

"What does it do?" It is so conspicuous that I had forgotten about it since yesterday, but now that I look at it, it does look awfully like an engagement ring...

"It's like a shield," he explains, "when you are wearing an emerald, Shifters can't possess you. I don't need one because I am a werewolf."

I say nothing in response. He offers me one more lingering glance, and then he vanishes into the forest among the towering trees, leaving me totally alone.

After waiting for a few dwindling seconds, I laugh. It is the first time in almost three days that I have been totally alone. And the thing is, a day ago, I was begging and begging for a moment like this.

But now, true loneliness enters my chest. I suppose I have become accustomed to his stalker-like attitude, his quirky laugh, his exceedingly alluring looks. Although I hate to say it, Xavier has grown on me.

Looking around at my surroundings, I smile as I spot a stream a couple meters away. The water almost crystal clear and not surrounded by pointy rocks, it will suit my purposes well. With a determined look, I grab a long, thick stick and use it as a cane. The beautiful oasis of slightly heated miracle water winks at me as I reach it, stumbling with my stick. Scanning the area once more, I become satisfied that no one is watching. Not that anyone would want to watch anyways.

I slip off my rugged jeans that are too big for me, pulling my shirt over my head. I place it in a small pile near the stream, and enter the water, my

immediately calmed by the water enveloping me. It relaxes my muscles, my feet soothed.

I put my head underneath the surface, trying to disengage some of the dirt and leaves from my unruly hair. Grabbing a tuft of it in my cleansed hands, I examine it, trying to remember what my mother's hair felt like. But the remembrance slips from my grasp, all feeling leaving my fingers.

The only thing that I am certain of, the only firm memory in my mind, is that my mother was an absolutely wonderful singer. Every night, she would sing me a short and sweet lullaby, the name unknown to me. If I concentrate deeply, I can still hear her voice, the sweetness in each of the notes she uttered.

The water swirls around me and I close my eyes, crossing my arms on the ground and putting my head upon it. I let my body dangle in the slow current of the river, soaking in its warmth. The showers at the orphanage are nothing compared to this. How does such a simple stream do this to me? I am so calm that I doubt even a luxury spa can relax me any more. My thoughts begin to grow hazy, my mind drunken with pleasure.

The voice of my dead mother sings to me over and over, murmuring the same intoxicating words that would get me to sleep every time. Opening my mouth, I start to sing along with her, not quite thinking straight. My volume grows as confidence brews. I try desperately to capture the beauty's gorgeous tone, the melody floating between her lips. What is this feeling, ripping through me like a tidal wave? It is like Mother's spirit is entering me, giving me the voice that mirrors hers.

"Very pretty," a low, silky smooth voice emits, almost a song in itself. It awakens me from my daze, and the mysterious, beautiful utterance vanishes from my throat, as if it truly doesn't belong there.

I gasp and look in alarm towards the manly figure that I know all too well. "Xavier!" I exclaim in surprise, "I didn't know that you were going to be this quick!" Red blossoms onto my cheeks, embarrassment flooding through me.

He winks at me, standing on the ground over the stream. "It's called super-speed, sweetheart," he says sultrily, spiking that terrible desire in my heart.

"Oh," I cough a little, wondering just how I'm going to get out of this situation.

"I brought you a hairbrush, some clothes, food, and your backpack."

"How did you get my backpack?" I question confusedly.

"I snuck through the window and got it. Ms. Penn unfortunately left the window open when she forced you into exile, letting the same tragedy happen all over again," he snorts.

"Where are the clothes?" I demand, and he pulls them from his jacket.

"What do you want me to do with them?"

"Put them down, go away, and turn around," I carefully instruct, my tone firm.

"But why do I have to do all that?" he complains as he places the clothes next to my old ones. "That's so-" he cuts off as he spies my old clothes, his eyes widening. Realization finally dawns on him, and he awkwardly straightens, trying not to glance at me. "Sorry," he apologizes, struck a little. For some reason, it surprises me that he is so affected, blushing a deep, tomato red. I always thought that I could never make a boy be like that.

As he zooms away, I begin to laugh. "It would be nice if you would just get it sometimes, Xavier. Work on that," I murmur as I slip out of the water, using my old shirt to dry off. Interestedly I pick up the clothes he brought, wondering what he decided to get me. The shirt is a casual top, with a little bit of lace, and is sleeveless.

The jeans are nice also, a little bit more fitted than my other ones. He brought some shoes too, golden ones that match the top. With pleasure, I sigh as the unfamiliar clothes brush against my skin. "You can come now!" I call, and Xavier zooms to my side. His blue hair is tousled, some strands sticking straight up. His face is a little exerted, but that is to be expected from someone that just ran several miles.

"Here is your food!" he exclaims, whipping out a brown paper bag. My stomach suddenly growling, I take it out of his hands, reveling in the warmth radiating from it.

"This looks good," I emit as I survey the contents; a biscuit, bacon, and eggs. Xavier leads me over to a big rock, and I sit on it, my ankle hurting when I place weight on it.

"You didn't walk on your right foot, did you?" he probes suspiciously.

"I used a cane."

"Don't you think you are a little young for that?" he laughs, merry pearls of joy ripping through the thick air.

"Nah," I shake my head as he sits on the ground, taking my foot in his hand. He takes the first-aid kit beside him, drawing out a long bandage to wrap around the injury.

"Why did you get in the stream?" he asks as he works.

"Do I have to have a reason?" I snap jokingly, wondering why Xavier always manages to put me in a good mood.

"You know, I would love it if you actually obeyed me sometimes."

"Where's the fun in that?" I ask honestly, my voice jesting.

He peers at me, his eyes of laughter. "You would get rewarded... with a kiss," he smiles, and for a minute, that seems like a pretty sweet prize.

"Ew!" I yell, though my blush betrays the truth, "why would I want a kiss from you?"

"I'm the hottest guy at your school," he smirks, "why wouldn't you want a kiss from me?"

"Who said you were the hottest guy at our school?" I accuse.

"Just about everybody... duh." He struggles over the modern term, making me laugh.

"Well, why would I want a kiss from an old werewolf then?"

"Because I'm HOT!" he answers, "and I'm not old! We went over this." He pauses, almost caressing my foot as he puts the final touches on my bandage. "Hot isn't good enough," he winks, "I should be sizzling hot. Don't you think, Mona?"

"Arrogant, much?" I ask, not really listening to him anymore.

"Don't sidestep the question," he orders, grabbing my hand, "all that matters is you, Mona. Tell me honestly." I can tell he is joking, but his words still strike a chord in my chest. We are suspended in time, the fated words forming in my lips, yet my mouth too cowardly to say them. I stare into his eyes, sparkling with cheer, examining his altogether beautiful features.

I pull away quickly, looking away. "What time is it?" I ask, trying to avoid his penetrating gaze.

Xavier looks to his wristwatch. "7:40," he says, and I sigh in relief. For a minute, I thought we had lost track of time. "I can get us there in two minutes," he says plainly, "with a shortcut."

"Cool," I murmur, then dig in with my fork into my meal. There is a slight rumble of satisfaction as the delicious eggs grace my stomach. I linger over each bite, delighting myself in the wonderful taste. Xavier sits, watching me with a strange expression. "What are you looking at?" I murmur, my voice irritated.

He chuckles. "Nothing," he murmurs, "it is just that I have never seen anyone so happy when eating food."

"Well, I don't get much of it," I mutter under my breath, my words clearly heard by the stunning man before me. He snorts in agreement.

"Obviously she wants you to starve to death."

I don't reply, consumed with swallowing the last bite of biscuit. Now I move on the bacon, my favorite part. It is slightly crunchy, with just the right amount of salt.

Wonderful.

"I never knew you could sing, and so prettily," he says finally, after a long period of silence, "you don't seem like the type."

"Is that supposed to be an insult?" I question, offended by his remark. I swallow the last of the bacon, smiling in contentment.

"Only you," he sighs, "would take that as an insult. I suppose I should get used to it."

"Of course," I grin, my crooked teeth winking in the gasps of sunlight bursting through the treetops, "it's not like I am going to change."

"Sure. Whatever," he says, standing up and brushing the leaves off his pants. "We got to go. It's 7:55 and school starts at... 8:00, right?" I nod in response. He beckons, and I walk to him, my heart thumping furiously in my chest. He grabs me, his hands wrapped around my waist and knees, and begins to run through the wild underbrush, path unknown.

I wonder how he can go so fast. Everything around me is a blur, and it is impossible to see where we are going. He probably has "super vision" too... werewolves just get it all, don't they?

By the time we reach the school, I have a barrage of questions to ask him. "Where are the other supernatural creatures?" I probe, my voice questioning.

He grins. "A Twilight fan?"

"No. But I've heard about dragons and fairies and stuff like that," I truthfully say. His smile widens.

"We aren't one hundred percent sure, but we haven't seen any other supernatural creatures. So far it is just us, and the Shifters. Well, there are some cases of werewolves where they morph into a dog instead of a wolf. Crossbreeds," he shakes his head.

"Why wolves?"

"I truthfully have no idea. Maybe the fact that we are dogs signifies that we are servants to the humans. Or maybe it's because dogs are just that awesome," he smirks as he drags me into the bone-crushing throng of students.

"I like that first one," I laugh in return, both of us quickly enveloped by rushing classmates, Xavier nearly buried with his fans. He just seems to attract attention wherever he goes.

Going to my locker, I turn the dial to get my stuff, and after thinking a little, open Xavier's too so his fans won't block my locker in attempts to flirt with him. I search for him, for that blue mop of perfectly tamed hair that I would recognize anywhere...

There he is!

I troop to his group, trying to wedge my way through the planets in an effort to reach the blinding sun. Xavier spots me, and smiles. "Move," he demands and the girls part like the Red Sea, leaving a regal pathway to the man himself. "You liked it better when I didn't go to your school, right?" he questions knowingly. I laugh, as if that was the silliest question I have ever heard, smiling up at him. I admit... I might have done that to tick the girls off.

"I didn't really know you before you decided to come to my school," I whisper, leaning in close to his ear so they can't hear the snap in my remark. All they probably notice, though, is how close I am to him, how I managed to break past the barrier he has created around himself.

I might have done that to tick the girls off too.

Xavier seems pleased at my slightly flirtatious manner, responding so well that it makes the girls cringe. They seethe as our conversation continues all the way to the classroom, no one else managing to get a word in. "Thanks for saving me," he whispers as we reach Social Studies and the crowd disperses. We stand in the doorway, I secretly immersing myself in his company, in the radiation of light that always oozed from a popular person.

But our comfortable silence is not maintained for long, a familiar blond appearing by Xavier's side. "Hey Xavier," Sidney greets, her pretty blue eyes like an ocean. She waits for a response but there is nothing. As usual, she completely ignores me. However, that is to be expected, especially since she is a popular girl. I'm like z-list. Or no-list.

"Hey," he finally emits after a long, strained silence. Sidney is absolutely determined to make him talk, and I think he knows that. Her cute oval face breaks into a smile at his word.

"So," she begins, her bright red lips contrasting greatly against her lightly tanned skin, "I'm having a party on Monday. Be there." Her voice has sort of the same effect as his when he is acting as the leader, her authority clearly realized. Avoiding the answer Xavier will definitely give, she glides away to Ian, her poor little boyfriend.

"Wow," I murmur, "that was scary."

"Yes it was," he agrees.

We enter the classroom completely, and begin to talk randomly about the teacher. Xavier is one of those good guys; one of the ones that can't find anything bad to say about anybody. However, even he was able to cough up a few negative comments. I burst into laughter when he finally determines that he really is a bad teacher after almost five minutes of contemplation.

The bell rings and we race to our seats, the teacher just now arriving. I look to Sidney, spotting her death glare once more as Xavier asks me what the homework was. I shake my head. My homework was completely forgotten.

Another zero, I suppose.

However, Xavier seems to have a different idea. He grabs the textbook we were studying, both of our worksheets, and places them side by side. He looks carefully to see that no one is around, and then his hand moves so fast it blurs. I roll my eyes as he gives me my completed sheet; with similar handwriting to my own.

"Wow," I whisper, "how did you get my handwriting so well?"

He leans in close to my ear, his voice piercing me. "I'm a genius. You can thank me later." He winks.

He grows silent as the teacher shoots us a deathly look, full of menace and command. He kind of reminds me of Ms. Penn but a slightly milder version.

The rest of the period zooms by until he gives us free study time. In other words, I-don't-want-to-teach-right-now-so-I-am-going-to-leave-you-brats-alone time. He plops on his Mac, probably surfing an online dating site. By the looks of him, he probably has to put a fake picture on his profile.

As soon as it starts and the teacher is officially out of the way, Sidney stands up with a few of her loyal cronies. She trumps our way, the rest of the class kind of circulating around the fight that is just waiting to happen.

Strangely, she passes Xavier and goes straight to me. Smiling, the queen bee addresses me for the very first time. "Mona," her sparkling eyes flutter, "right?" I nod, just a little dazzled by her close proximity, the fact that she is talking to me. She leans in close to my ear, and I subconsciously allow her to do so, still in a little daze. She gives off the same attention grabbing aura as Xavier does, and that sort of intimidates me.

Then she really speaks. "Get away from Xavier," she demands under dreadfully fake laughter, "you're an eyesore."

"What if I don't want to?" I ask her, my words clear for the world to hear. Her eyes widen slightly as the whole class begins to gravitate towards our conversation. It is sure to make headline news; Queen Bee Threatens Small Fry.

"I'm not asking you. I'm telling you." She also forgets the fake laughter and peppy smiles, rising to meet my challenge. "Just stay away."

"No," I smile, chuckling inwardly at the fact that I'm trying to stay away. But obviously Xavier is the one that won't leave me alone. They never accuse the boy, don't they...

"I will crush you, ugly girl," she drops the volume, saying it softly. And of course it reaches the ears of the one man she was trying to keep it from.

"Ugly?" he asks, astounded. I look at him in fright, knowing he's going to say something stupid next. "But she's beautiful!" he says loudly, making me to bend my head in embarrassment. There is a shocked silence, and then the room is consumed with laughter. A blush appears on my cheeks, anger in my blood.

"What did she do to you?" a random guy calls out, "cast a spell on you?"

I was wrong. The headlines will definitely be; Ugly Girl Bewitches Woman's Most Wanted. And you know what comes next... the burning at the stake. Probably Sidney will be the first one to light the match.

Sidney grows tomato red with anger. "She's beautiful? Then what am I?" she asks him frenziedly.

"You're..." he trails off, thinking deeply, leaving Sidney with her mouth agape. The bell rings in the confusion, and Xavier whisks me out of the classroom, out of the prying eyes of the people that just witnessed the scene.

"Why did you say that, Xavier? Now Sidney is going to kill me!" The blush still lingers on my cheeks, so bright that it looks like red paint is splashed on each of them.

"I did something stupid, didn't I?"

"Yeah, well, it is a little too late to realize that now, don't you think?" I ask, bite in every word. He looks to the ground, and then brightens considerably.

"I have a surprise for you after school, if that makes you feel better," he grins, making me yawn in return.

"In case you want to know, that doesn't make me feel better," I say sarcastically, and he frowns.

"What's with that sort of attitude?" he gazes at me, "I already said I'm sorry. If you want, I'll give you some flowers or something."

"NO, not flowers," I shake my head, imagining Xavier walking in the lunchroom with a bouquet the size of my whole body. "You know what you can give me? Lunch money."

"Nah," he waves that idea off, spiking anger in my chest.

"You want to get me flowers, but you don't care if I don't eat?"

"Just trust me, okay?" he asks, slightly irritated, and I shut up.

The whole day after this passes quickly, though full of taunts and rumors. According to the last one I overheard, I am a witch who got jealous of Sidney (this part made me grin. Sidney always implements herself into everything) so I cast a spell on Xavier so he would fall in love with me instead. And this was all said with complete trust and assurance. They're probably stupid enough to truly believe it. I guess, though, that is one of the only reasons for our "situation" that they can think of. They couldn't imagine him actually liking me for real.

Which, in a way, is a little true. The reason he likes me is only because we are mates, after all.

After another surprisingly exciting day of school comes to a close, Xavier almost immediately sweeps me into his arms. "Not with people watching!" I swat at him, and he ashamedly puts his arms down. However, his excitement cannot be quelled, and he grabs my arm. With astounding force that he really doesn't need to use, he pulls me into the forest surrounding the school, near the same place where I almost fell to my death. "Where are we going?" I ask as he once again cradles me in his strong arms. I inhale his scent, reveling in the warmth he offers.

"The orphanage," he assures me. I sigh in relief. With Xavier's super speed, I'll gain a few extra minutes of cleaning time while the orphans are walking home. Maybe this was his surprise. Each minute counts, especially when you are trying to clean the whole building by nightfall.

We finally reach the ugly orphanage, and he sets me down softly on a big rock. I stand up quickly, rushing to the door. "You can go now, Xavier!" I call, "you don't want to be seen..."

But he only laughs, as if that is the funniest thing he has ever heard. I start to think that maybe I'm missing something.

I rush up the steps to the door, hesitate before the knob, and knock. I don't want to annoy Ms. Penn any more than I already have.

The door slowly opens, and an enticing man with white, shimmery hair appears before me. "Jake?" I ask, confused, "Why are you here?"

Ms. Penn comes into view, smiling brightly. "I can't believe it!" she nearly moans in ecstasy, "you're really leaving... I'm so happy I have to celebrate!" She disappears, probably off to bake a cake or something.

Xavier brushes past me to stand by Jake's side. "We're going to kidnap you," Jake informs me with a smile.

"Who said I wanted to live in the same house as him?" I stare pointedly at the annoying man before me.

"Did we ask for your opinion?" he laughs genially, and they both charge towards me.

Fear swallows me whole, the life sucked out of my face as I wait for them to come. What a surprise...

A Life Without Steak

"This is your room," Xavier leads me towards a narrow door, and opens it for me. I look in wonder at the curved ceilings, the gorgeous bed that is three times as big as me...

I narrow my eyes at him, suspicious. "You're not sleeping in this room too, are you?"

Yi happens to hear my statement as he walks by, and grins. "No," he answers for the blushing blue-haired idiot beside me, "but it is right next door." I turn on him, smiling at the redness now spreading through his features.

"There is one other room available," Xavier plainly explains, "but it's connected to Wes's room."

"Might not be the best idea to take that other room," Yi laughs, "you might wake up to find your innocence stolen."

"Yi!" Xavier elbows him, and Yi starts to laugh even harder. Once I examine him, I realize that he really looks the youngest out of all of them. I wonder if that has anything to do with his underdeveloped Talent.

"Hmmm..." I trail off, wandering into the splendor that I can only call heaven. I pretend to be discontent, though actually reveling in happiness. It is all so beautiful... ten times better than my previous room. Guilt floods through at the thought that I owe something to that stalker werewolf.

"I know you like it," a temptingly low voice murmurs into my ear. I jump to realize that Jake is by my side.

"Who says I do?" I haughtily reply, looking away from Jake's entrancing form. He smirks, voice teasing.

"Xavier's not here anymore. You don't need to act like a spoiled brat," he nods towards the empty doorway. I gaze at Jake's all-knowing sneer with bitter contempt, then melt onto the silky comforter of my bed. Closing my eyes, I give my mind a chance to let this all sink in... for my head might explode if any more changes occur.

"Why do you act this way towards Xavier?" he questions, sitting beside me. My eyes flutter open, and I let my gaze drink in Jake's head of sparkling white hair, his bright emerald eyes.

"He just annoys me," I shrug slightly, leaning against the headrest. Jake grins, his eyes alight.

"Well, you're stuck with him now," he laughs, "since we kidnapped you."

I groan with irritation. "I thought it was called adoption."

"You know that's not true; though I am old enough to be your grandfather many times over," he points out, his face of mischief, "you really are our prisoner."

"What?"

"Think about it," he smiles, "you are surrounded by five incredibly handsome werewolves that could overpower you in under a second, and they all want you to stay in this house. To top it off, you're my new daughter."

I frown, my uneasiness blooming under the soft white lights. "You idiot," I laugh, turning on my side, away from the monster, "Xavier wouldn't make me do anything I didn't want to do."

"But what about the rest of us?" Jake's eyes suddenly turn eerie, his voice jesting. "We don't exactly have the same policy."

I don't even shudder as he leans towards me on the plush bed, glaring at me with his now ferocious green eyes. "Xavier will protect me," I say confidently, trying once again to turn away, but I am caught by his strong arm. "Leave me alone," I command, my heart finally starting to beat faster with nervousness at our physical contact.

"You have complete faith in Xavier, even though you don't love him?" The searing question rips through my defenses, introducing more questions that I am not truly prepared to answer. I shove them to the edge of my mind, forcing the matter at hand to surface.

"He has never let me down before," I shrug, leading Jake to shake his head.

"You just won't accept it," he says, his tone matter-of-factly.

"Go away, Daddy." I twist so I am lying face down on the comfy bed, dwelling in my thoughts. The word Daddy, even though I say it in jest, feels strange on my tongue, almost retreating back inside my mouth. I have not said that word in many, many years.

There are footsteps, then complete and utter silence. I am alone.

Comfort enters me, twisting its way into my heart as I lay on the plush comforter, soothing my soul. It is true that I am a prisoner here, but I can't help but realize that I am now basking in luxury that far out-shadows my situation at the orphanage. A 3D TV stretches against the left wall, one of the biggest I've ever seen, right beside a stack of movies that reaches four feet tall. The bed I'm in is king-size, big enough to swallow about five of me in its gigantic berth. Everything is absolutely luxurious, drenching my eyes with pure splendor. Where do they get all this money?

I crawl further into the bed's center, pulling back the comforter. I slip under it with ease, gazing at the huge size of the mattress. It is pure heaven, almost like the water from this morning, easing my pain.

Looking to the side, I spot a remote that is nearly as big as my arm. With delight, I grab the board of buttons, examining the temperature controls, the wonder knobs that induce prime massages.

This really isn't necessary.

Maybe they are using all this to bribe me into submission. I shouldn't be touching this pleasurable remote, or delving through the flurry of sheets into the colossal mattress.

Closing my eyes, I try not to focus on the ripples of opulence surrounding me. I imagine myself as a fierce warrior battling a bunch of familiar werewolves for freedom. Even the thought brings a smile to my face.

But I have to be honest to myself; is that fantasy really possible? Could I battle those gifted werewolves and have even the smallest chance of winning? Could I take on even one?

I give up on all hope for resistance, and sink into the cushiony depths of heaven.

My eyes fly open as screams and yells erupt elsewhere. Slipping to my feet, I pad to the doorway, trying to find the source of all the noise. However, another thought comes to my attention before I step outside my new room.

The ground scratches my toes as I retreat in search of some clothing not ruffled by sleep. I have no suitcase, my old clothes too pitiful for the guys to kidnap along with me. Ruffling in the drawers, I find nothing except dust and old screws. "Where are they?" I mutter to myself after pulling the final drawer open, "those all-knowing werewolves had to put some shirts somewhere."

A gust of horrific wind blasts the window open, the glass pounding against the stone walls. Leaves swept by the gales soon follow, flying into my room by the dozen. Racing to the problem, I swing it shut, the sound resounding within the mansion.

I gaze into the horizon through the transparent surface, marveling at the turmoil before my eyes. Wind swirls around, framed by a barrage of dark

gray clouds that hang in the baby blue skies. Leaves fall like confetti towards the dark, muddy ground, energy in their movements. If I squint, the faint outlines of heavy rainfall are visible in the far distance, heading our way with incredible speed.

Looks like I'm staying in tonight.

Sighing, I bend to pick up the new additions to an almost-flawless room. Many of them are scattered among the drawers, one dwindling on the conspicuous handle of a thin, white door. Once I think about it, that does look a lot like a closet.

That's it! With feelings of triumph racing through my blood, I race to the door, yanking it open with a ferocious amount of raw energy. What comes to meet the eyes, though, is much more wonderful than a closet.

A spectacular bathroom lies before me, with granite countertops and top-notch accessories. A huge shower is to my right, big enough for maybe two or three people instead of just one. A big hair dryer and straightener is on the counter, along with nail polish, toothpaste, and even a brand new hairbrush. I almost scream, consumed with delight at the amazing amenities now at my disposal. At the orphanage, I had to share a shower with all the other girls, and I was always forced to be last shift. The knob was always stuck on cold, probably because Ms. Penn was so cheap. If I think hard, I can almost feel the icy river flood down my back as it had only a couple of days ago. It now seems so far away, as if it was a couple of weeks ago instead.

I walk over to another door, flinging it open to reveal the treasure I am seeking. A hoard of clothes lined from wall to wall jumps out at me, a true vision of incredulity lingering before my eyes. So many clothes...

With joy, I grab a random pair of jeans and a t-shirt, shaking off my earlier clothes as if I am shedding my skin. Racing into the hallway, I pound off in search of the mischievous wolves that are producing quite a racket.

The hallway ends, morphing into a giant room covered in bean bags. A giant, blank wall stretches over twenty feet horizontally, and is about the same height. From the high ceiling, a projector perches in its nest at the back of the room, shooting high definition images through the air to the blank space.

To the side, there is a marvelous food station, vending machines stocked with every sort of candy and drink imaginable. A popcorn station is right next to that, and a platter of delectable hotdogs.

But the star of the show is the plate of juicy steak, surrounded by a ring of eternal glory.

My mouth waters at the sight. How is this amount of food even possible?

"Hey Mona," a similarly mouthwatering voice speaks near my ear, causing me to jump.

"Xavier?"

"Um, yeah, that's me," he laughs, emerging into my line of vision. His blue hair shines like a rainbow in the dim lights, the eyes shining on their own. With a body just as beautiful, he seems almost ethereal, too good to be true.

The rest of the deathly attractive pack turns their heads at our conversation. Instantly Wes jumps to his feet, racing to my side. "We were waiting for you," he smiles enchantingly. His contagious attitude spreads like a virus to my emotions, causing a grin to bubble to the surface. However, I quickly quell it after a few moments of existence, noting the hurt look on Xavier's face. I feel a twinge of pity for the man.

Wes grabs my arm with sudden force, wrenching me from Xavier's side. "I will be escorting her to the steak," he announces, shooting a jesting look towards Xavier. He nearly roars in response, zooming to my side faster than a lightning bolt.

"No. I will," Xavier growls, grabbing my other arm.

"She likes me better," Wes smirks, holding me close. I can smell his minty breath, his sweet cologne that intoxicates me with every breath.

"Well, she's my mate!" Xavier points out, pulling me strongly. My bones are about to break, suspended between them like a twig surrounded by tree trunks.

In a sudden burst of energy, I rip away from them both, edging towards the table of delicacies. "I will be escorting myself, thank you," I state firmly, then turn away. An assortment of light chuckles and baritone laughs follow, the other werewolves probably finding amusement in my bitter words.

I reach the yummy steak, taking the whole plate into my arms. Plopping down on a stray beanbag, I start to dig in, chewing to my heart's content. It is very similar to the awe-inspiring steak I had the day before, and absolutely scrumptious.

"This exquisite steak can only be found at our mansion," Wes grins, materializing by my side, "the meat is produced by yours truly." He bows, and I give him a round of applause.

"This really is delicious," I say excitedly, to Xavier's dismay.

"We all prepare it!" he growls, "the cows aren't just yours!" With a hilarious expression, he punches Wes in the arm.

"What gives it its spectacular taste is that our cows are like no other," Yi smiles, rising from his perch on a particularly big bean bag. Walking over to me, he leads me to one of the huge windows, beckoning for me to look out. Scattered on the emerald green grass are pure black animals that are truly...

"Monstrous," I conclude my thought out loud, staring into the sea of absolutely giant bulls. Horns protrude from their heads like sharpened spears, their glossy fur unmarred. Finally, their eyes are the same color as the grass, green as could be.

"They certainly are, aren't they?" Yi murmurs, watching my utter fascination with pleasure. "I, actually, like to think of them as a fantastic crossbreed between a buffalo and a bull. Oh, and a twinge of werewolf."

"What?!" I exclaim, "So it isn't pure steak?"

"Don't you think it tastes better than steak?" he questions carelessly, "It is a concoction Wes came up with around fifty years ago. We all had a liking for steak, Wes in particular, so he made it his goal to produce the finest breed the world has ever known. He found a beautiful buffalo and a prime cow, and went on a trip to find many more animals. However, when he reached home, he discovered that the buffalo and the cow had a few calves, some of which were boys, and one a girl. They were very delicious, and so he allowed them to multiply. His goal was to get two perfect bull/buffalos. However, too many of them were handicapped or spotted. Finally, after a long period of agonizing, he offered them a very small bit of werewolf blood, which strengthened them and colored their eyes. And so, that is how our amazing bull-buffalos and awesome steak came into existence."

"Werewolf... blood?" I ask, choking a little on my steak.

"Not much... barely more than a drop," he quickly reassures me, patting my back. His tanned skin distracts me, its color like light bronze.

"How can YOU eat that?"

"We don't," he shrugs, "when Wes added the werewolf blood, we all couldn't eat it. That would be like... cannibalism."

"Then why did Xavier eat it that one day in the lunchroom?" I walk over to him, peering into Xavier's emerald eyes.

"That was deer meat," he laughs genially. I just peer at them, shock registering on my features.

"You guys can't eat steak anymore?" I ask. A life without steak... pure torture.

Wes waves his hand at me nonchalantly, "I ate so much then that I got sick of it. Don't worry about me."

I bite it once more, savoring each little bit of delicious steak. I walk back over to the bean bags, plopping into one. "What are you all watching?" I question curiously. The screen is frozen with the picture of a girl right next to a boy with long hair.

Jake smiles, "we heard you were a Twilight fan."

I shoot a glare at the criminal as he lowers his gaze.

"We skipped to the part where Bella meets the handsome werewolf. We figured that that was the most important part anyways," Jake continues.

There is a beep as he presses a button, and the still picture comes to life. I examine them both, the werewolf as he looks at Bella with obvious love in his eyes, similar to someone I happen to know...

"Is Bella his mate?" I ask loudly, causing Yi to put a finger to his lips. Wes is already consumed with the film, probably imagining himself as the werewolf. Honestly, I think Wes would be better suited for a role like that.

"No," Xavier chuckles, "she's not. But he loves her."

I look at Xavier's profile, so enveloped in compassion as he views the rays of unrequited love emanating from the desperate man. His eyes glisten, hair falling into them. He is so statuesque and perfect; reminding me of those roman paintings I have studied in school. Like one of the Greek gods.

"Did you... love somebody before you became mated to me?" I ask, looking at the miniscule droplets of sadness bubbling on the corner of his eyes. He turns, eyes fierce.

"I loved nobody. It was endless torture," he answers, "girl after girl... but never a connection."

"It's stupid to love someone who isn't your mate," Jake interludes, "for you can only break that person's heart."

Silence reigns as another character enters the scene. A cold, darkly handsome man appears by Bella's side, conversing with her in low tones.

"Is that Edward?"

"True characteristics of a Twilight fan," Jake laughs, "and yes, he is."

I stare at his cold face, his measuring eyes. No matter how handsome, he still sparks fear and anger in my stomach. Xavier smiles.

"Vampires aren't real," he comforts me, rubbing a hand on my back. It is soothing, the way his fingers move in slow circles on my skin, somehow knowing precisely where I need it.

"But why are werewolves real then?" I probe agitatedly, "why they are real and not the vampires?"

The movie pauses once more, silence creeping like fog onto the inhabitants. A figure appears in the doorway, assessing us coldly.

"We are created for a purpose, and doomed to eternity until our task is completed," Ray says, his voice rippling through the air towards my ears. "It is in the legend."

"Legend?" I question.

"It is more like a prophecy," he amends quickly.

"What does it say?"

"Well," Jake cuts in, his voice like a knife, "it talks about a pack, led by a Spier that has the abilities of both a werewolf and a Spier. With these combined supernatural powers, the Spier has a super talent that will enable his or her pack to defeat the wolf with the red eyes and destroy the red stone. After that, the Shifters will cease, and so will the werewolves. Basically, werewolves exist to battle the Shifters."

"We have a copy of it in the library. I recommend you read it for a better understanding than what Jake just gave you," Ray says coldly, then turns away and walks down the hallway.

"Wow," Yi jokes, "looks like someone's grumpy."

"Well, my explanation was kind of horrible," Jake says.

"Don't worry, I'll read it," I reassure him quickly. What Jake said makes almost no sense. The wolf with the red eyes? The red stone? My curiosity is spiked now, and there is no turning back...

Xavier perks up his nose suddenly, alarm in his next words. "Guys, there's another attack," he shoots up, horror in his eyes. The other occupants sniff, my heart rate escalating in fright.

"I want to go!" I yell as they start to rush towards the exit, running after them. I want to have an adventure, not to be left alone in this giant mansion like a little kid.

"It's too dangerous," Xavier calls.

"If you don't let me go," I snarl, "then you will regret it."

There is complete silence as they stare at my face, devoid of all emotions except fury.

"I think she's serious," Yi examines me.

"Yeah."

"Take her!"

Ray races to join the pack, alert in his movements. "What are we waiting for?" he furiously asks, "we have to go!"

"Come on," Xavier sighs, morphing into a wolf before my eyes. I climb onto his back, my breathing close to his ear. My heart pounds erratically, my eyes shut tightly as he starts to run through the wild underbrush towards our unknown destination.

I feel myself drowning in the comfort Xavier offers, especially his soft, glistening fur that rivals any luxurious rug in the world. It is a better experience than my bed, for this fur is alive, the legs pounding beneath me as he carts me towards the scene of this mysterious attack. It strangely feels like I am touching his bare skin, the fur a creamy color that matches it perfectly. Heat radiates from his skin to my hands, causing a blush to strangely rise to my cheeks.

The scenery around us changes from trees and dirt into manicured lawns and mediocre houses. My heart pounds even harder as people emerge, reasons unknown. I can barely get a glimpse at each of them before the next house comes into view, our speed increasing. Can they see us? Why are we traveling into the heart of society, where discovery is possible?

We zoom down roads into the big city a couple of miles away from the orphanage. Buildings climb towards the clouds, cars multiplying beside us. However, we seem to avoid them, maneuvering around each vehicle at a blinding speed. I watch in amazement as all five werewolves delve into the sea of skyscrapers, flashy cars, streetlights, and everything in between. In other words, the city.

Everything goes darker as activity dies, the ghetto area inching closer to us by the second. People smoking and drinking appear more often, many hanging out with lots of friends that are doing the same. The prosperous city facade rips away as we reach the outskirts, the true colors shining through.

We finally come to a sudden halt in front of a gas station, the windows old and cracked. Screams and yells erupt from inside, the lights flashing. And of course the drunken, dazed public is ignoring the crisis, walking by with expressionless faces.

I slide off Xavier as he morphs back into a man. He produces from his pocket a black mask, slipping it over his eyes. The other werewolves morph also, following Xavier into the action after applying their own facial accessory.

I choke down the urge to laugh. As if anyone wouldn't recognize them one behind a paltry mask that doesn't hide their unique hair color or bright eyes.

Xavier looks at me and mouths, "stay here." He touches my shoulder then walks away with the others like he really expects me to obey him.

I run after them, hiding behind a broken-down truck as they enter through the glass doors. Reaching up, I step onto the back of it and grab the broken window ledge, trying to look in. I gasp as a truly horrifying sight meets my eyes.

Flurries of people are huddled into a clump of raw fear. Right behind the counter, a young, rather handsome teen with caramel skin rigidly stands at the cash register, holding money in his hand.

But what scares me the most is that a rather odd youth, slim and geeky looking, is holding a gun right next to the cashier. His whole form betrays that he is scared and shaking, and his clothes are ripped and torn. However, it is his manner that alerts me to the truth.

His back looks exactly like my dad's did when he was possessed by the Shifter.

The cashier shovels more cash into a large bag, although I know that is not what the Shifter wants. It wants death. Destruction. Pain, hurt, and loss.

I can spy it through the way he is holding the gun. He cannot hold back much longer. The Shifter will have its way.

Where's Xavier and the rest of them? What are they doing?

The tension snaps, and the gun booms. I wince, looking away quickly. I don't want to see blood, especially of the innocent.

Screams follow, and frenzied movement resumes inside the gas station. I look back to see the crowd standing in utter shock, staring at the empty space where the terrorizer used to be. A hole is freshly created through the bag of money, narrowly missing the cashier. Obviously he was the target. I breathe a sigh of relief along with the cashier as I step down from the truck.

"Had enough peeping?" a decadent, alluring voice whispers into my ear, a hand firmly grabbing me by the waist. The air rushes by as the scene around me blurs, I becoming rather confused.

Xavier deposits me in a rough, dark area, three walls surrounding me. The other werewolves stop also, Ray carrying the attacker. "It wasn't peeping," I hotheadedly respond to Xavier as he crosses over to the boy, "just watching."

"Did you see us?" Yi asks inquisitively. I shake my head, and they all grin.

"Our speed is just as good as always," Jake laughs, "we haven't gotten any slower these past twenty years like Yi said we were."

"What?"

"When we reach our top speed, us and everything moving with us becomes unable to see by the human eye."

I fall silent, watching the boy go into convulsions. He thrashes, agony inflicting upon him like a barbed whip. Xavier stands over him, examining him coldly. The boy turns his face my way, and I get a glance at his pair of eyes. His eyes...

Fiery red.

"Cover your eyes," Xavier commands me, "this will be rather... um... dirty." Wes grabs my arms, his movement solemn.

"What are you going to do to him?!" I nearly scream in alarm. I have never seen Xavier so... bloodthirsty.

"A Shifter cannot be vanquished without the killing of its host," Jake says slowly.

Sadness overwhelms me like a tidal wave, encompassing my mind until nothing else is left. Not now. They can't.

No.

"Let me see him!" I scream, my voice uncannily high.

"It's not safe, Mona. It will be over soon," Xavier tries to sooth me, but there is nothing left in my mind. I have to touch him.

They will NOT kill a human in front of me.

"If you don't let me," I yank against my bondage, "then I will hate you for the rest of my life." I make each word bite into his skin, rip into his heart.

He freezes, his foot on the teen's chest. Resignedly, he backs up, fear amount.

"Hold him to the wall," he orders, and the four race to do his bidding. The boy yaps, his eyes filled with fire, his actions meant to hurt. He is hefted against the brick, blood slipping out of a gash on his cheek down with his sweat onto his shirt. I shrug off pure disgust, and edge closer.

A light drizzle begins, the darkness I had perceived earlier dawning upon us all. I reach him, standing only a few inches away from the boy fated to death. Sorrow rips through my heart, and I reach out with one tender finger...

As I make contact with his chest, I am suddenly enveloped in voices. Strange sounds occupy my thoughts, my mind. There is one overwhelming boom resounding, so loud and cold that it makes me shiver. KILL, it demands repeatedly, like the beating of a drum. My senses are overloaded with this one command.

However, a small voice, rippling with fear, pain, and hurt, begs to become dominant. It screams for help, like a wail in the fleeting night. It is horrible, invoking my deepest compassion. The boy is still there, even though the Shifter has taken over. He is still fighting, still waging an internal war for his mind back. Hope floods through me, and with it, determination.

"Take him with us." I take my hand off him, realizing suddenly that I had dropped to the ground. My head pounds with the scalding fear, the overbearing order that blocks out most else.

"What?!" Ray asks furiously, "we can't!"

"What happened, Mona?" Xavier asks gently, coming by me. He rubs my back again, and this time it does nothing to ease the pain.

My breath comes in short gasps as I stare at the ground, at the water now dancing towards the drain, flooding past my feet. In one sudden movement, I force myself to meet their gaze, their questions.

"That boy is still alive," I murmur, looking at my hand. It still tingles from when I touched him, shock resounding throughout my body. "We can save him."

I know I can. If I am able to reach out a little bit more, I can purge him of the internal devil. Cleanse him, and most likely others.

Xavier grabs me in his arms as I slump, the blackness overcoming me like a blanket until all is lost.

The Trophy Men

"Get up!" I throw my pillow at the mop of blue hair that never ceases to irk me. If I could, I would hit his face, but he has that and the rest of his body buried under a mountain of covers.

A groan emerges from the lifeless bundle, then silence.

"Don't make me have to say it twice," I narrow my eyes, crossing over to his side. I stare at the glittering blue that always manages to distract me, blinking annoyingly when it almost blinds me with its light.

He turns slightly, and I can now see his forehead and abnormally long eyelashes. Jealousy sears through me as I gaze at the portion of his face revealed. Isn't the girl supposed to be the pretty one?

On a whim, I reach towards him and punch the bundle as hard as I can. There are wretched moans as the man emerges like a butterfly from a cocoon, holding his arm in indignation.

"You could have just used a pillow," he scoffs, though still spellbound under sleep. He leans his back against the headboard, watching me. I feel almost uncomfortable under his endless, measuring stare.

"Time to get up," I state, shooting him a frightful glare when he makes no move.

"And why, exactly, is it time to get up?" he probes. I suddenly feel doubtful.

"Are we not going to school today?" I ask shakily.

He laughs heartily, sparking elation in even my heart. "No, Mona," he corrects dreamily, "today is Saturday."

I melt into a puddle on the hardwood floor.

"Are you serious?" I squeak, backing away from his form. He reaches out quickly to grab my arm, stopping me in my tracks.

"I'll forgive you," he says, his words slurred, "for a kiss." His strong hand forces me closer, elevating my heart rate until it's about to burst.

"Xavier!" I exclaim. He still seems to be half-asleep, yet smiling all the while.

Fright mounts as he gives a final yank, my lips inches from his. I have to stop him, but how?

With no other alternative, I punch him in the chest as hard as I can, his grip temporarily loosening. Using that opening, I tug away, running into the hallway as fast as I can.

Touching my heart, I wish for it to slow down... so I can breathe.

It is all a mystery. Why is Xavier making my chest pound so hard? Even a glimpse or a simple touch is spiking my heart. But it isn't love, I'm sure.

It can't be.

I try to block these suspicious thoughts from my mind, taking off down the narrow hallway like a bullet. It seems to continue on endlessly, door after door appearing until my burst of speed sputters and dies. Now I am hot and sweaty for a different reason.

It must be that "fake" love that sparks between two mates. The savage desire coursing through my blood is rampant, affecting my thinking. I can't give in to it, for then I will find myself under Xavier's intoxicating spell. It is the first time in my life that I am actually afraid of... loving someone.

Well, these past few days have introduced many firsts, so I suppose I should get used to it.

I finally wind up in a dark room. I straggle along the walls, hoping to find a switch of some kind. After a little searching, I finally bump into a strange, inanimate object.

Light blinds me as it floods through the room, the lamp shining like the sun.

I take in the granite countertops, the stainless steel appliances, the gigantic refrigerator, and luxurious oven with awe. It is so big, almost as huge as their movie room, and spacious. I rush to a small door with anticipation, and fling it open to reveal a stockroom of every ingredient I could ever need or want. It is big also, with a cooled section dedicated especially to meat. I knew their kitchen would be magnificent, but this exceeds all expectations.

Wandering over to an open cookbook, I gaze onto the lists of delectable food choices. My stomach grumbles annoyingly, and I at once decide to indulge in this fantasy world and make breakfast.

"Hey Mona," Wes pops his head through the doorway, his golden hair shining in the light, "what are you doing?"

I pause at the refrigerator, turning my head at the sound of his voice. I smile a little, grabbing a few eggs and shutting the door afterwards. Wes weaves his way towards me, his movements fluid and smooth.

"Breakfast?" he asks in wonder, "you are actually making breakfast for us?"

"So what if I am?" I bend my head in embarrassment, knocking one egg against the bowl to crack it.

Wes ignores this remark, smiling at me brightly. He reminds me of Xavier in his puppy-like behavior, yet I have a feeling that Wes would treat anyone this way, while Xavier doesn't care about other girls. Is this difference caused by the mating?

"I'm making-" I start after guilty feelings enter at my cruelty, but he interrupts me eagerly.

"Don't tell me! I love both surprises and homemade breakfast," he smiles, his teeth glistening, "Xavier will especially love anything you make. By the way, when I passed his room all the way here, he was laughing hysterically. So I was wondering..."

Yolk explodes onto the bowl, shell dribbling in shards down the side.

"Mona?" Wes stares at my clenched fist in confusion.

My hand trembles as I turn away to the sink to wash off the slime now adorning my palm. The water burns as it slips down my fingers, some splashing upon my face. But no matter how hard I try, I cannot wash away the blush from my cheeks.

I turn back to Wes, smiling awkwardly. "I'm okay. It was an accident," I attempt to reassure him.

"Are you su-"

"Yes. I'm," I take the beater and punch the glob in the bowl, "Perfectly. Fine."

"No you aren't." His voice is firm and resolute.

Bitter words stay captive behind my lips, beating against its confinements. We both look at the crumbled shell mixed in with the yolk in silence, I desperately trying to hide the redness in my features.

"I'll just... come back later then," Wes bows slightly, and then exits the room, his footsteps pounding through the hallway.

I pick up the clear bowl, tramping over to the sink, and pour it down the drain, watching the egg disappear once and for all. Irritation grows within me, boiling inside my chest. Calming is impossible. He tricked me.

Xavier...

What am I going to do with you?

"Oh, you're back," I smile as Wes leads the way into the kitchen, followed by a slew of werewolves. Yi has the bed head, his ruffled black hair sticking straight up. His eyes are bloodshot, as if he just had a bad night's sleep.

"Are you better now?" Wes asks concernedly.

"Yes." I gesture to the dining room right next to the kitchen. "Just go sit in there and I will bring out the food soon."

"You're amazing, Mona," Wes laughs, coming close and wrapping an arm around my waist. I stiffen a little, amazed at the way it seems completely different when Xavier touches me. Xavier tends to send sparks of flame through my body, while Wes freezes me like an icicle. With another happy-go-lucky grin, he sneaks forward and kisses my cheek.

I smack him on the arm, slightly angered but still playful. "What are you thinking, trying to steal a kiss from me?" I ask in a teasing tone. But inwardly, I am wondering why, exactly, I feel nothing when Wes's truly delicious lips brush against my skin.

"It is like a greeting with Wes. He kisses everybody," Jake shrugs, "all his girls. I suggest you get used to it."

"And I suppose you do the same thing?" I raise one eyebrow.

"We all do," Ray says, and then turns to Jake. "You haven't told her about the club yet, have you?"

Jake shakes his head, "I thought we were going to have to quit because Xavier finally got mated. I was going to close it for this week."

"What club?" I ask, even more curious because Ray is talking.

"Um, well..." Jake starts, and then trails off.

"We'll tell you over breakfast," Wes finishes for him, "don't worry about it right now."

Yi just stares at his shoes, not talking. What's wrong with him? It is as if he is afraid to look at me.

Wes looks over his shoulder into the hallway, and his eyes widen. "Hurry guys, into the dining room," he pushes them out of the kitchen with great force. As he exits, he shoots me a wink.

I take the French toast I had prepared and laid two on each plate. After scattering powdered sugar on it, as well as adding a tiny bowl of syrup and butter, it soon looks professional. After a healthy dab of whipped cream and a small strawberry, they are meals fit for a king. My cooking skills really haven't deteriorated.

"That looks really good," a voice murmurs beside my ear. I smile slightly, not looking up, drunk in my own pleasurable thoughts.

"Thanks."

"Where did you learn to cook?"

"I used to help at the orphanage. The cook would always give me extra scraps if I washed the dishes, and eventually she let me cook most of the food for her while she was the one to get paid. But I didn't mind, because the cook was nice to me... and it was better than playing with the other kids." I stop in my tracks, staring at the granite sadly.

"What happened? Ms. Penn found out?"

"Of course," I laugh shakily, "Ms. Penn knows everything. At first she wanted me to continue cooking so she wouldn't have to pay the cook, but then, once she realized I was happy to do it, she fired the cook and hired another one. She banished me from the kitchen for just being happy."

"I'm sorry," the voice sparks electricity in my blood, arousing desire within me. Wait... it is as if I am waking from a dream, the fog lifted, and then I look up at his face.

"Xavier," I back away from the devilishly handsome figure.

"You didn't know it was me?" he asks innocently, "I made no attempt to disguise myself."

"That's not the point," I say, anger boiling in my blood, "you were completely awake the whole time, even when you tried to kiss me? You laughed at me?"

Xavier covers his mouth to stifle another chuckle. "Oh, I thought you were actually mad-"

"What do you mean, 'actually mad'?" I snap, feeling rather immature under Xavier's laughing gaze.

"I thought you were mad about something important," he clarifies laughingly. I punch him in the arm, and he staggers back a little. I start to see red, almost forgetting why I am mad at him.

"You're so mean, Xavier! Why would you laugh about one little mistake..." I punch him again, fury emanating from me.

"I laughed because of how cute you were," he smiles, stopping me in my tracks, "I just had to try and kiss you." My clenched fist hovers right beside his arm, all force evaporated.

"You get so angry and embarrassed over little things... I think it's adorable," Xavier winks, whirling me towards him with his hand and plopping his lips on my cheek. Immediately passion and lust arise, flowing between us both. I look to the ground, breaking away from his grasp. My breathing is heavy, face flushed. How can his kisses affect me so much?

"Are you serious?" my voice is tiny, squeaky.

Xavier nods, reaching forward with one finger and tilting my face upwards. He laughs in amusement. "You're blushing," he observes, a smirk slowly creeping onto his features.

I yank his hand away, anger sparked once more. "I'm not!" I protest uselessly, picking up a few of the plates hurriedly.

"Whatever you say," he says, voice dripping with amused sarcasm. I have never heard him use sarcasm before.

He follows me into the dining room, where everyone is seated and perfectly still. I narrow my eyes at the mischievous werewolves, knowing exactly why they are so quiet. "You heard it all, didn't you?" I ask, expressionless.

All of them, excluding Ray and Yi, break out into a sly smile. "Having a lover's spat?" Jake teases, elbowing Xavier who just sat down next to him.

"Just shut up," I place one plate in front of Xavier, then hesitate before giving Jake his share, "or I won't give you breakfast."

"Okay, okay," Jake concedes defeat, though still grinning. I place the other plates in front of Ray and Wes, then retreat to grab Yi's.

Shouts immediately erupt from the dining room. "This is fantastic!"

"I love French toast!"

"I love you Mona!"

"That's my mate you're talking about..."

I inwardly laugh, entering the room once more with my plate and Yi's plate. Yi is staring at the table, almost completely lifeless. I put the plate in front of him, and then gently touch his shoulder. "Yi?" I ask.

He tilts his head sharply to meet my gaze, anger in his features. "Don't touch me," he snaps, jumping to his feet. Immediately he turns away from

me, facing the others. "I'm going to eat in the courtyard today," he states robotically, then picks up his plate and brushes past me.

"What's with him?" I ask worriedly, sitting down in his old spot. They just shake their heads.

"He was staring at you as if he had seen a ghost yesterday..." Wes points out, "and has been sort of weird ever since."

I take the first bite of my home-made breakfast, reveling at the sweetness I am finally able to indulge in. No matter how annoying Xavier may be, I still feel lucky that things have turned out this way.

"Let's not talk about Yi," Wes dismisses after a long, awkward silence, "tell her about the club, Jake."

"Yeah," I agree, "what club?"

"We own a nightclub in the city called Moonlight. It is one of the most exclusive clubs you will find anywhere in the state," Jake says, "and it is also how we make our money."

"It is also where we get our woman of the week," Ray interrupts, smiling.

"Ray... just shut up," Xavier cuts in. Ray lazily ambles from the table to the door, exiting to go who-knows-where.

"I'm done," he throws over his shoulder, and I look at his perfectly clean plate. How can he eat so fast?

"Anyways," Jake continues, "we only open on Saturday nights, and charge an astronomical entrance fee. All the rich and famous locals go there."

"Woman of the week?" I probe, to Wes's obvious dismay.

"Don't think bad of me..." he stresses.

"We enter the nightclub every two weeks and... auction ourselves off, if that makes any sense," Jake tries to explain. My eyes widen.

"A bachelor auction!" I exclaim, "is it just you guys or do you auction off more men?"

"Nah, only werewolves will do," Wes laughs, "we don't need any more bachelors than the five, no, four ones right here."

"Women pay serious bucks for boyfriends," Jake says, "especially if they are wanted by their other rich friends."

So that's how they have so much money...

I stand up while I listen, taking their perfectly clean plates to the kitchen. "So the money's not for charity or something?" I call from the sink.

"We say it is," Xavier says.

"And, you know, we do give some of it away. Maybe half," Jake grins. I laugh, although still a little bewildered. "We auction off boyfriend for the week, which includes three dates, our phone number, three requests, and a bouquet of roses. We all sell for big cash, though Xavier is king," Jake adds rather enviously.

"How much?" I ask curiously. I can understand rich women paying a lot of money for these handsome flirts.

"Around ten thousand to twenty thousand," Jake laughs, "although one time Xavier did sell for fifty thousand. Two women were feeling rather competitive."

"Fifty thousand!" I couldn't imagine that number in my wildest daydreams. I haven't even seen a fifty dollar bill in years.

"You don't understand," Wes starts in, "to get us for one week is the ultimate trophy. Our women get supreme bragging rights for the entire time they have us. Our looks are above ordinary, especially Xavier's crazy hair, and we are famous among the Moonlight attendance. We are like what you would call 'trophy wives', but are temporary and also men, of course."

"The trophy men..." I snicker quietly.

"I don't know what we are going to do without Xavier... it'll be an outrage among the women," Jake shakes his head regretfully, "let's hope none of us get mated as well."

I scan the area for any hint of Ray, and then I lean in slowly. "Why do women even bid on Ray? He's practically a monster, and so rude too!" I whisper, my voice lingering on the wind before reaching their ears. Wes bursts out into laughter, Xavier soon joining in. Jake is the only one managing to stay calm, answering my question smoothly.

"You haven't seen him around the ladies... and he is practically a mirror image of Xavier, minus the hair and a few other details. Many women think of him as Xavier's slightly less desirable double."

"So he sells for a lot..."

"Well, pretty much. It usually goes in this order, from least amount of money to most; Yi, Me, Ray, Wes, and Xavier. We all sell really close together though, except for that one fifty thousand."

"Wow," I say, "this is amazing. Do you guys ever get attached to your women?"

"Never," Wes says darkly, serious for the first time ever, "it's not allowed."

"But I'm sure they get attached to you," I grin, crossing my arms, "maybe a few stalkers?" I pointedly stare at the blushing Xavier.

"That's the fun part," Wes smiles, "no one knows anything about us. They only know us by our first names. . In return for being their boyfriend for a week, we make them sign a contract of strict confidentiality. They are not allowed to ask us questions about our past, family, or even where we live. They are also required to only use our number during the week we are their boyfriends. After that week, if they use our number they will be fined \$500 or more. For many, it is like a dream with a rough awakening at the end."

"Harsh," I shake slightly. They truly are the pack of players. Xavier looks at me, and I suddenly think of a question. "Are you going to still auction yourself off?" I ask him, trying to remain indifferent.

Xavier smiles. "Of course not, Mona. I'm all yours."

I look away to hide my growing blush. Why is it that I always get red around him?

"You should have met Xavier before he got mated to you," Wes laughs, "he was a bigger player than I am now." I find that rather hard to imagine. Xavier... a player? Never.

"Twenty thousand dollars less every week," Jake almost moans, "it's very sad."

"Don't worry buddy," Wes pats him on the back, "I'll be your moneymaker from now on. Xavier, we got to find another job for you."

"Why wouldn't women want him?" I interrupt.

There is silence, then uncontrollable laughter. "I don't think you understand, Mona," Wes gasps, sputtering with chuckles, "they do want him. But wouldn't that be unfair to you if he becomes some other girl's boyfriend?"

"Hey Xavier," Jake smiles, "you should be partying right now. Mona just indirectly admitted she was attracted to you."

"Shut up!" I say angrily, and they eventually quiet down. Silence reigns in the room, each of us unsure of what to say. It seems to suit them; this glamorous lifestyle they hold. Their looks guarantee nothing less.

"Where is the person you guys almost killed?" I suddenly start up, remembering past events.

"In the guest bedroom," Wes says dismissively. I look at him in bafflement, and he laughs. "It's not like we have a dungeon to throw him in," he points out.

"I don't understand why you didn't just let us kill him-" Jake begins.

"No!" I stand up, banging my hands on the table, "I think I can force the shifter out of him."

They all stare at me, Xavier becoming rather distressed. "No, Mona, please," he starts, and then stops abruptly.

"I could access his mind, and I was able to hear the two voices. If I can somehow... further this ability, then I know I can save him!" I say determinedly, "then you will never have to kill another human again!"

"You can't think of them as humans, Mona," Jake sighs, "once they're possessed, their soul is as good as gone. We aren't murderers."

"But he was there!" I exclaim, and then my hand is fiercely grabbed by Xavier.

"We need to continue this conversation elsewhere," he whispers into my ear, standing up.

"Let go!" I struggle as he forces me out of the room. I am whisked away, super speed taking over, air rushing past me like a tornado.

We end up back in the garden, Xavier standing right in front of me, still holding my hands. Skies as clear as can be hang above us, a slew of colors in the flowers below. Everything is so beautiful, although now a piece of yellow tape stretches from tree to tree of the entrance to the path I had traveled before. It says DANGER.

Wow. They must really think I'm stupid.

"Please, Mona, forget about the man," he begs, "we'll take care of him. Worry about... I don't know... just don't worry about anything. You don't have to get into this."

"But I do! I can't just let you guys kill him while knowing I can save his life!"

"How, exactly?" Xavier says slowly, "How can you save his life?"

Time stops as I look to the floor, examining my shoes. "I don't know much about being a Spier, but from what I heard, it seems as if I could really help you guys!"

"No!" he says agitatedly, "you're helping us just fine by being right here."

"But even if I wasn't able to help you, rescuing that man... wouldn't that be worth the risk?" In my head, it is perfectly simple. I can't live with the fact that I could have saved a person and didn't. Why can't he get it?

"Nothing is worth you," he says with pain, squeezing my hands tightly.

"Xavier..." I sigh, "Please understand."

"I understand perfectly," he says angrily, his voice dangerously low, "and I'm not letting you blow your life away for a lost cause."

"You don't believe I can do it?" my voice is sharp, shrill.

He pauses, drawing a little picture in the dirt with his foot. "Mona, it's not like I think you can't, but it does seem rather-"

"I get it, Xavier. You don't want me to do it. You don't believe I can," my voice is low, defeated. I start walking towards the door, desperately trying to veil the determination bursting within.

"No, it's not that! It's just that there is a big chance you will die," he yells after me, "I... don't want that. Please, Mona..."

I reach the wooden door, turning the knob to swing it open. Without casting one glance behind my shoulder, I slip inside, closing it after me. It feels, strangely, as if I have shut him out forever.

I quickly banish that thought. Xavier will always be around for me, no matter what the situation is.

I hope.

Wandering through the hallways, I suddenly discover the faint outline of a man lingering against the stone wall. He turns, as if he is waiting for someone, slumping until he is sitting on the floor. There are a few moments of complete and utter stillness, and then he regally rises to his feet. The lights suddenly give out, dying against the overwhelming darkness, as he flicks a switch. He pauses, and then starts walking. Not knowing quite why, I follow him, almost hypnotized by the footsteps as they ring through my head.

At the end of the hallways, a faint light lingers, growing brighter with each fear-stuffed step. My heart seems to pound even more erratically as we walk, my steps mirroring his. As the light shines brighter on the man, the outline begins to be illuminated, and I know instantly who it is. He enters the room, deliberately leaving the door wide open, and I step inside.

"Ray," I say softly as the man stands before me.

"This is the library. Sorry about the lights, by the way, I was afraid one of those idiots would follow us," Ray wastes no time, getting directly to the point. He gestures to the piles and piles of books, stacking from the floor to the ceiling, the rows and rows of even more. It is a huge room, the books on either side, lounge chairs and a spectacular fireplace in the middle. Over our heads a truly stunning chandelier hangs, colossal with a ton of sparkling crystals, and a giant TV is mounted directly above the fireplace. It is on, the display of a computer showing up instead of TV shows. "That's our computer," he explains, "We just use a TV monitor."

"Wow," I gasp, awestruck, "this is absolutely amazing!" It is another dream of mine; a fantasy I never thought would be accomplished. It is the biggest collection of books I have ever seen. With joy I rush to the first aisle, marveling at their assembling of many encyclopedias, the informative books I have missed so much.

Back when I was a child, Dad used to have the most stunning library in the whole city. It wasn't nearly as big as this one is, but was stacked with an incredible amount of books. When I had turned five, I vowed to Dad that I would read every single book in his library. But of course... my promise couldn't be kept.

"We have the prophecy here," a beautiful voice murmurs near my ear, and I straighten slightly.

"Where is it?" I question.

"Right this way," he leads me into the aisles, skimming over each book like a searchlight. It is endless, the rows of books, my feet growing tired as our trek continues. They don't have the prophecy in a better place other than these aisles? From what I have heard, they seem to esteem it very highly.

When he finally stops, I pause too over a particularly thick book labeled Werewolves, Spiers, and Shifters: Complete Edition. On the front is a picture of a menacing werewolf poised over devouring a human and a human battling a truly horrible looking Shifter with a strange looking spear. I slip it from the rest, hiding it behind me.

"It's okay, we don't mind if you read it," he says, expressionless, without looking up from his task. He seems to be examining the spines of each book, looking for a certain title that belongs to the book he needs. I cross over to his side, noting now the true similarities between Ray and Xavier; their nearly identical looks except for the scar and the hair. All this time he hasn't acted like a sourpuss, which is a plus, and also a side of him that is pleasantly new to me.

He smiles as he extracts the book we need, a dusty one that isn't thick at all. The side reads Summer Kitchen: 100 Delicious Recipes and the cover is completely blank. I narrow my eyes at the slim cookbook, wondering if this is a joke.

"Trying to find some recipes?" I ask, crossing my arms. We aren't getting any closer to finding the prophecy this way, and although it looks useful, it isn't anything like what we really need.

His grin grows wider as he rubs his hand on the spine once, twice...

"What are you doing?" I ask, my anticipation subconsciously spiking as he does it again and again. He doesn't answer me, taking his strong hands and rubbing it endlessly. After I know he isn't going to answer me, I quiet down and just watch the slow, rhythmic movement, hoping for the best.

When he reaches the twentieth rub, he suddenly stops, and without looking at it, hands it to me. I take it, raising it to my gaze, and gasp as the spine now reads *The Prophecy* and the cover is adorned with a single green emerald.

Spellbound, I open to the first page, but it is empty. The second page is blank too, and as I leaf through the rest of the book, I find it is blank as well. I look to Ray, who smiles knowingly.

"Look closely," he commands, his words strong as steel. I oblige him, glancing at the first page deeply. To my surprise, when I stare at it hard enough, words begin to appear, as if writing itself on the page.

"There will come a person equal to a werewolf and a Spier, who also possesses an ability like no other, leading a complete pack, bound together by loyalty and friendship. They will defeat the red-eyed wolf, not without losing one of their own on the journey, and another will come to take his place. Through discord and strife they will travel, friendships and relationships forgotten, but they will succeed, destroying the red stone and vanquishing Shifters once and for all. Then the werewolves will vanish into the mist, their purpose served, for one cannot exist without the other."

"Is that all?" I ask, staring at the paragraph of craziness with disappointment, "I was hoping it would talk about a Spier being able to heal the people possessed by Shifters."

"This is the reason why we exist," Ray says softly, "we live for a purpose, and once that is completed, we die... and all you're saying is is that all? Seriously, Mona."

"I'm sorry Ray... I'm just a little disappointed that my question wasn't answered," I stare at the paragraph over and over, hoping for anything, but nothing is found. This has absolutely nothing to do with me.

"You know..." Ray lingers over my shoulder, and I get a whiff of his sweet-smelling cologne. "There have been very few cases of Spiers getting that ability. However, they profess it to be a very limited power, only able to use maybe once in a hundred years. I guess that time means nothing to them though, being immortal," he notes slyly.

"Immortal?!" I exclaim.

"If you survive, of course," he says darkly. We pause, suspended in silence. Being immortal... would that be a good thing? "You would be able to live with Xavier forever as a human instead of being converted to a werewolf," he adds softly, "which means that you can have children. Crossbreeds, of course, but still..."

"Children? Oh no, we won't..."

"That's what you think," he smiles evilly, plopping down in one of the chairs. I carry the book with me, sitting in the one opposite him.

"Why can't two werewolves have children?" I wonder.

"Because our population would grow too large, obviously. We are all immortal, so every conversion must be approved by the council. Crossbreeds, however, are more loosely monitored because they are not immortal, with an average lifespan of around two hundred years," he lazily kicks his feet onto the coffee table.

"Why did you show me the prophecy?" I finally ask, looking clearly into his eyes, "why are you telling me all this?" Xavier would never tell me what he is saying now.

"Because you asked," he smiles, "and even though curiosity kills the cat, it is better to let the cat know instead of keeping it wondering forever."

We sit in silence, I watching the huge computer screen, Ray absorbed in reading.

"I want to become one," I finally think aloud, Ray's head snapping up from the magazine, "a Spier... but Xavier doesn't want me to."

"It's not exactly Xavier's choice, don't you think?" he scoffs, looking at the chandelier above us. A pause ensues, tension stretched between us, and then he speaks again. "We can do it tonight. Xavier and the others are going to be at Moonlight, and the full moon is coming out today."

"You sure got it planned out, don't you?" I narrow my eyes, and he grins.

"I knew, from the moment I set eyes on you, that you would want to help," he shrugs, "and I prepared accordingly."

I think about the pitiful boy locked up in the bedroom right now, his soul swallowed by the Shifter. My father, how he looked before he drove us to death. The men on the mural, with eyes like fire. I can't just stay here and pretend like I can't do anything. I have to at least try.

And if I die trying, so be it. I don't have too much to live for anyway.

"I will," my voice, barely above a whisper, emits. Ray grins, and stretches out one handsome hand. I feel, suddenly, as if I am making a pact with the devil.

A thunderclap rings through the air as my hand grasps his, rain slipping down the windows, then falling to its death.

Betrayal

~ Xavier ~

"You really think I should?" I ask, peering into Jake's deadly serious eyes.

"Well, we don't want your fans to boycott the club just because you aren't there anymore," he replies plainly, "this way, you can deal with them yourself."

"Fine," I huff, "but you better not auction me off in secret while I'm there. I know you... you'll do anything for a bit of extra cash." Jake is our moneyman, business-like with a wild side. I have absolutely no idea why the girls like him. Obviously they can tell that the green wads of paper in their hands appeal more to him than they do.

"Don't worry, I'm not inhuman enough to do that... but that's a great thought though. Imagine! We'd make 100,000 bucks off you for your last auction. They'd all be bidding like crazy," Jake dreamily says, brushing a hand through his short, crystal white hair.

Without another word, I storm out of the kitchen, wanting to avoid one of Jake's devious schemes. It's not like I could pull another "boyfriend of the week" package anyway. Everything has changed since I met Mona.

I can barely remember the Xavier from a couple days ago who could enchant any girl at all, all the while thinking that it was just a game. I was a true player then, toying with people's feelings, making them believe I cared. My behavior was a lot lazier, my existence almost meaningless. I was a lot meaner too, cutting off all contact with my bewitched clients when I gained another one.

How can mating change me so much?

Even if I want to morph back into my old self, the part of me that wouldn't give Mona a second glance, I can't. Every touch that she gives sets my heart on fire, making my skin tingle. I can almost feel her emotions, like a throb in my chest. Every part of me longs to be by her side, to smell that truly intoxicating fragrance that has been there since the beginning.

Even the others have admitted her smell is above ordinary, although I'm sure it is heightened around me. With this added enchantment, Mona is so irresistible that her looks aren't necessary. Just one word, one step closer so her smell is magnified, attracts me greatly. Her appearance doesn't matter now, so unlike the hundreds I have dated in my lifespan.

Not that her appearance is as horrible as she thinks it is. What really makes her seem so ugly is when she is sucked of self-confidence, convinced she is hideous. But if she straightens her back, tilts up her head, wears a little bit more fashionable clothing and smiles, then she isn't ugly at all. Maybe that's just a lovesick guy's opinion, but to me, it's absolutely true.

I walk down the hallway, passing by Mona's room and almost stopping. Mona doesn't even seem grateful that I am being patient for her. She can tell I'm her true mate for life, and I know she is attracted to me. How couldn't she? The mating practically forces you to fall under the other's spell, Mona fighting valiantly but failing. I can see it in her eyes, the way she wants me. So why is she objecting every step of the way? Am I really that bad?

I suppose I am so detestable that she cannot allow me even a single kiss. Mona can really bring down a guy's ego.

I slip into my room, walking to the closet and swinging it open. A plethora of stylish suits all hang, available whenever I want to be fancy. The girls like it better if I wear a suit, and it will be best to wear one anyway when we go. Unless they suddenly decide to throw eggs at me or something. I don't know if something like that could ever get out.

Picking a dark gray one that accentuates the color of my hair and eyes, I tug it over my skin. It takes less than a minute to put on with my speed, my hands blurring.

A stupid idea comes to mind, and I walk to the door connecting my room and Mona's. "Hey Mona?" I call, "you okay?"

There is a silence, a long one that stretches seemingly forever. "I'm... fine," a whisper barely louder than a sharp intake of breath emits.

"Will you come with us to Moonlight?" I invite, imagining the scenario. They would throw everything they got at Mona, shifting their hate from me to her. Especially since her appearance is lacking a little. However, I really want her by my side, to be close to the sweet smell that attacks my senses.

"I think I'll pass," her shaky voice replies, and I go sit on my bed. I slide my feet on it, my head on the pillow, and stare at the ceiling. The slow ticks of the clock as the second hand moves ring through my head, a beat I can't get out of my mind.

"Xavier!" Wes calls, "it's time to go already!" I shoot out of bed, slinging the door open. Suddenly wary, I troop back in, checking my hair in the mirror. A stray piece is sticking up, my hairbrush quickly attacking it. Now it is perfect.

Being flawless is essential when I am going to a place like this.

Wes, Jake, and a very depressed-looking Yi stand by our Mercedes, waiting anxiously for me. "Where's Ray?" I wonder aloud. It's not an auction week, so Ray is not required to come, but he usually goes anyways. He seems to enjoy time at the club, turning into a devastatingly handsome devil whenever he walks through those glass doors. We all do, for we know the more flirtatious we seem, the more bucks those ladies will cough up.

"He's in his room," Jake lazily answers, "probably obsessing over the stock market again." Ray is a huge stock market guy. He is a master of figuring out which will skyrocket and which will plummet.

"Mona doesn't want to go?" Wes questions innocently.

"No, she wants to go get pelted by wine glasses and whatever else they can get their hands on," I reply sarcastically. Of course she would not want to go. She's not exactly a social butterfly. I was just stupid enough to ask her.

All four of us shuffle inside the luxurious and incredibly spacious Mercedes, Jake in the front seat with Wes beside him, then Yi and I in the back. I, at times like this, always feel like a celebrity, knowing that we are going to a place where people think us to be famous. I am so used to anonymity throughout the week, except on our dates, that it always feels like a splash of frighteningly cold water when we take the first steps out of our Mercedes into a sea of wealthy fans.

The car gives a low, healthy growl, and then starts the smooth ride over to the club. For some reason, I have a feeling that I am like a pig being led to the slaughter. I probably won't get out of the club tonight without a few scrapes, bruises, and red tomato splotches. If someone's feeling particularly spiteful, I imagine they might pour their highly expensive drink on my head.

I'm looking forward to ending my highly successful career, though. Repeat customers, Meryl especially, have been kind of... possessive, lately. I have tried explaining to them that "Boyfriend of the Week" does not mean "Boyfriend of the Month" for a select few, but the meaning doesn't exactly get across to them. They almost enjoy calling me and paying the \$500 fine.

I lean my head against the tinted windows, looking into the baby blue skies. Clouds that are a deep, devastating gray are spotted across the

horizon, symbolizing the dawn of a horrific thunderstorm. I have always thought of clouds as a bruise, marring the otherwise perfect sky.

The sun is setting, rays of orange and red starting to shoot through the air. With the way this car is moving, it will be nightfall before we reach the club. I hate traveling by car; wolf form is so much easier. However, it burns so many calories, and we don't have any meat to eat when we get there... making us want to take a delicious human snack to ease our hunger. Which is definitely not good, especially with rich, snotty, and especially beautiful women practically throwing themselves at us.

Yes, traveling by car is certainly safer, but painful all the same.

Mona's smell is dangerously small, the weakest it has been in days. I find myself sniffing for it, trying to search for the quickly-vanishing scent that enchants me so deeply. Maybe it wasn't a good idea to leave her. I should have dragged her with us, forcing her to at least sit in the car. I don't like leaving Mona with Ray also... even though he's probably not going to do anything, anyways. Ray can be a hermit sometimes, staying in his room for hours doing who-knows-what.

The lush landscape around us, filled with tall trees, prickly bushes, and many colorful flowers, fades into a concrete road, trimmed grass, and stubby buildings as we reach the edge of our territory. We own practically the entire forest, earning both privacy and a great place to hunt. Rumors swirl around the surrounding area, some of which we start ourselves, scaring most people into fearing the forest more than death itself. We're lucky Mona never heard those rumors, for then we would have a lot of explaining to do.

The huge city looms before us after we reach the edges of the suburbs and inch along the interstate. Cars multiply, many old and beaten, trudging home from work. Suddenly, the T-word begins to develop. The word I hate more than anything.

Traffic.

Bumper to bumper, never ending torture erupts in the blink of an eye, the overcrowded roads stretching endlessly. Our destination seems to grow farther and farther away as we sit, unmoving.

Ages seem to pass as Jake slowly maneuvers us through the throng of cars and trucks. Why does everyone have to use this road?! Why can't we just use our wolf form?

Once again, I must say that I hate cars. Mona's frightful story from a few days ago only reiterates this point.

Exactly as I predicted, the sky is a majestic, sapphire blue that is quickly morphing into a deep black by the time we reach the towering building, climbing almost fifteen stories in height. At the top is the famed Moonlight nightclub, where you get a perfect view of the beautiful moon every Saturday.

We slide out of the car with grace, our movements fluid and enchanting, and the valet driver takes our car to the parking lot. It is time for us to bring the life to the party.

The only thing is that right now, I feel dead. Without Mona's aroma and my usual confidence, everything seems dark.

And Ray... I don't even know what to think about him.

I wave away all doubt as I reach the fifteenth floor from the stairway, trying to focus at the matter at hand. The feisty wolves are right beyond the glass doors already, waiting for me. Jake shoots me a sympathetic look as I reach forward to grasp the handle.

"You're dead," are the last words I hear before doom strikes.

A plethora of lovely ladies crowd around me instantly, something I have grown to handle. Many new faces are around, made-up into oblivion. I instantly smile, trying desperately to veil the sudden discomfort underneath. I used to be right at home under these admiring gazes, but now they scare me as if I am a deer caught in the headlights.

A red-sequined dress clinging to a truly magnificent body slides my way, home to a nasty minx with deep chocolate eyes and voluptuous, plump red lips. "I've been waiting for you," she says coaxingly, parting the women like they were the Red Sea, and then pulling me into a heartfelt embrace.

"I told you not to hug me when I'm not yours! You know the rules," I tell Meryl angrily, and she laughs.

"But Xavier... when I see you surrounded by those truly pitiful girls, I just have to save you," she purrs like a kitten, pulling at my arm. I frown. "Is tonight auction night? For I am going to make you mine again," she adds.

"About that..." I trail off as she tugs ferociously on my hand, pulling me into the shadows. Her body is pressed against mine as we are suddenly in a corner, annoying me more than alluring me like she hoped.

"How 'bout I buy you for life?" she offers a simpering grin, "I could offer a couple million."

"You ask me that every time I come to Moonlight," I complain. She stares at me intently, as if she is seeing me in a whole different light.

"Are you okay, Xavier?" she asks worriedly, putting a soft hand to my forehead. "You just seem... different. More tired than usual."

"Actually, I am tired," I admit, surprised that Meryl can be so perceptive. "I have an announcement to make." I shrug away from her, heading back to my rich, adoring fans with increasing terror. Doom is upon me.

"Everybody, gather round!" I quickly call, causing the crowd to thicken. Meryl forces herself to the front, watching me suspiciously. Wes gives me a thumbs up as I speak. "I am retiring from the bachelor auctions today," I emit the dreaded words, causing anger to ripple within the group. Shouts erupt through the room, every person staring at me with sad, and somewhat furious eyes. Meryl is starting to cry, tears flooding like crystals down her porcelain cheeks.

"Why, Xavier?" she asks, flinging herself onto me. With carefully hidden disgust, I pluck her off of me and put her back with the rest of them.

"Because..." I look to the sky, tinted with dark purple hues. There, hidden in the shadows of the night, is a perfect full moon, shining like the sun. It is so beautiful, making me try to remember the last time we had such a spectacular moon. Why would Ray want to miss out on a wonderful night like this?

Suddenly, the pieces come together in my head, making a whole. Fear fills my thoughts, blocking all else.

Tonight is the perfect night for an Awakening.

Everything is forgotten as I scrunch my nose slightly, wanting the slightest bit of a scent. Just to let me know how she is doing.

"Xavier?" the clamoring of voices, seemingly faraway even though they are truly very close, reaches my ear. I ignore them completely, finally snatching the bit of fragrance I have desired so.

Tinged with fear and distraught, the one scent eliminates my doubts once and for all. Mona has disobeyed me. Ray has betrayed me. She has, or will be Awakened.

Anger pollutes my blood, fury in my features. "I have to go," I nearly snarl, trying to race away from them before I morph. Wes and Yi see the beast in my eyes with fright, trying to hold the girls back. However, one girl breaks from the crowd, running in her red sequins over to me as I push the elevator button. I tap my shoe impatiently. Elevators are another thing I hate.

"Xavier?!" Meryl calls, clinging to me like glue. I impatiently try to push her away.

"Not now, Meryl." I can't hold back much longer. The anger is changing me, working through my system, eliminating all.

"Tell me what's going on," she demands, staring at me angrily.

"You want to know?" I ask sarcastically, completely lost now to the devil boiling inside. "Fine then."

Knowing how crazy I am, I morph into a werewolf directly in front of her, knowing exactly what is going to happen next.

There is a blood curdling scream as I race into the stairwell. Elevators are crap. They never get you where you want to be on time.

I zoom, my figure a blur, down the stairs, out the door, and into the street. My legs are pounding so hard that I can barely breathe. It is only a matter of seconds before I'm out of the city, and into our territory. I am traveling unbelievably fast, faster than I ever thought I could run.

Just a few more seconds, the scent growing irresistibly stronger and repugnant from the terror, and I am in the bushes right before a small hill. Two figures are standing at the top, one short, and the other majestically tall. The moon is huge behind them, clear as can be, casting pure white light upon them.

"What I just gave you was an injection of Spier blood," Ray informs the short girl as she stands awkwardly beside him. Traces of red in her hair can be plainly seen, her frown faintly evident.

"Ray, I don't feel so good," her relaxing voice, tinged with pain and anguish, speaks as she falls onto the ground. Ray immediately bends to be by her side, concern in his movements.

"There will be two hours of this, and then it will be all better. Don't worry, I'm here for you," he practically begs, taking her hand and holding it close. I feel a spike of jealousy at the way he is pulling it so near to his heart.

When the first scream rips through the night, Mona writhing on the green grass, I jump up from my hiding place, anger forgotten. "Mona!" I yell, racing over to her. I almost trip over the rocks and stones, introducing a quality most unlike me. I am never clumsy.

Ray stares at me, horrified, as I check her pulse. She is screaming almost constantly now, bent in horrific pain. "Is this normal, Ray?!" I demand, my voice uncannily high. All my anger begins to focus on the man that coerced her into agreeing to do this.

She stops yelling as quickly as she started, now convulsing as if she is having a seizure. Her face betrays pain, tears running down her face in rivers. My tears soon join hers, making a puddle in the ground.

"We will know soon," Ray speaks finally, and I look up as if noticing him for the first time. Pure hate is in my features, and combined with a deadly inward beast to match. He is a walking corpse.

I pull back my fist and punch him in the stomach with a mild version of my Earthquake Punch, causing him to stagger back. Soon he will probably be coughing up blood... one of the aftereffects of my hate-filled hits.

"I hate you!" I say angrily, tears flowing profusely. I feel like a mess. Everything is falling apart. I know her movements are normal for a Seer being converted, but I am still afraid. She can still die.

I stagger back by her side as another scream rips through the air, wanting desperately to snatch her into my arms. Whispers of agony are in the air, enough so I can sense it, just beyond my abilities to change the hurt. The tears are coating her face now like a mask, running down her neck, her cheeks soaked.

I wrinkle my nose as her smell turns black, repelling even. Ray staggers back a little also, noticing the skunk-like stench she now carries.

Suddenly, her eyes glaze over, and she is completely still. My blood runs cold.

"You know you have killed her," I look steely into his large green eyes, "she's going to be gone forever." I turn away and hold my head close to her heart. Only the faintest whisper of a heartbeat remains.

The soft forest air turns cold, causing goose bumps to rise on my skin. What can I do? I have never felt so helpless.

My mate soon will be dead.

I could tell from the minute that I met Mona that she was special, so the reality of her imminent death hits me a lot harder than it originally would. She has a past with Shifters. Although she tried to hide it, she also possessed a caring heart and desired to help others however she could. In a small corner of my mind, I thought Mona would never fail. That there was no chance of her dying through an Awakening. I'm sure Ray believed this about her as well.

And here she is, before me, taking her last breaths.

I know it is truly too late for anything now, but I cannot help myself from trying to think of a way to save her. I try to think of any healing properties, such as plants or medicine, that we possessed at the mansion.

"Is there anything we can do?" I ask Ray desperately. I grab Mona's hand as I ask him, and alarm enters me when I realize her fingers are as cold as ice. It feels as if I am touching a corpse.

"We can wait." Ray looks away, obviously torn by the sight before him and the possibility of having Mona arise as a Spier, no matter how little the chances.

"Don't lie to me, Ray. Her Awakening is failing! It is obvious to us both."

"It's not over yet," he protests shakily. It is easy to tell that he is starting to think otherwise.

"I'm not kidding Ray. Tell me what I can do. We need to save her." My voice turns deadly, and Ray grows pale. A few minutes pass, filled with silence and anxiety.

"Xavier, I'm so... I'm so sorry."

True despair takes over, leaving nothing to tame my insanity.

I must do something. I have to do something... it can't end like this.

I take my pocket knife and slice my finger slightly. I can't bring myself to cut her, so I just hold it over her mouth, which is slightly open. When the first drop of my blood touches her lips, she shivers, almost gagging.

Ray just stares at her and then me, dumbfounded. "You idiot!" He biting whispers, his words like poison.

"Is she going to live, Ray?" I ask bitterly, "have you ever heard of something like this before?"

I can't think. I can't breathe. I can't live without her. Somehow, I must keep her with me.

His words rip through the silence, condemning her. "Never."

It is only my tears now, racing down my skin like liquid fire, burning where it touches. Mona is still unmoving, her eyes closed. Her skin is like an assortment of bruises, fading in and out. Her hair is thickening, growing straighter past her back at an alarming speed. Somehow, she is growing taller, her legs lengthening. Why is this happening? Werewolf blood is what enhances the person's looks, not the Spier blood.

Does this mean that this crazy scheme is working?

We watch her in silence as she starts mild convulsions again, all the while her appearance changing rapidly. How can she have both symptoms? She can't convert into both a werewolf and a Spier. That will surely destroy her.

I lean back in the grass next to her, touching her fingers. Mona's fingernails are sprouting from short stubs into a perfect size, and then stopping abruptly. I haven't cut my fingernails in thirty-seven years.

I can't bear much more of this. It is eating at me, tearing me apart. The ground is wet behind my head... not that I care. It is probably just my tears, dancing across my face like an unnecessary amount of sweat. Ray just stands there, frozen. He is clueless, I can tell. No words amount to how angry I am at him.

I am reduced to nothing because of her, and indirectly, Ray himself.

She is finally still, after about twenty more agonizing minutes of these convulsions and morphing. Her chest is moving, breathing. It is a little bit different from the first time, for this time she is only sleeping. It is a wonder she has made it this far. My mate is strong.

I wait endlessly for anything from her... for a response, a touch, or even a glance.

Still there is nothing.

It has been around an hour and a half of pure and utter torture for us both, and the clock ticks towards the eventual two. It might take longer because of the effect of the werewolf blood. I don't know anything, and that is what's killing me.

The minutes tick by as I bend my head into the grass, utterly defeated. I was stupid to think I could change anything with a few drops of werewolf blood. The result... is still unknown, and leaning precariously towards the outcome I desperately do not want. I probably guaranteed her death, adding some blood like that... why am I so stupid? Why couldn't these doubts have occurred BEFORE I applied the blood?

"Xavier," Ray's voice, soft and smooth, lingers over me. I barely notice as a soft, delicate hand deposits itself on my head, smoothing my azure hair.

And then suddenly I realize whose hand that actually is.

I lift my head, catching Mona's hand as it falls towards the ground. Squeezing it tightly, I use my hearing to listen to her heartbeats, starting back weakly, and then turning stronger with surprising force. Her eyes are still unopened, but a little smile is on the corner of her mouth. It is then that I give myself away to peace and the assurance she is so graciously giving me. Everything will be just fine.

No matter what happens, Mona will be with me.

Death Just Seems To Love Me

~ Mona ~

Scalding hot, unfamiliar blood is racing through my veins.

This is not the first time I have wished for death, but this time, the desire is much, much stronger. Every breath I take allows icy cold air to enter my lungs, freezing my insides and battling the heat that is enveloping me. I experience the extreme burning, then the excruciating cold. I am bathed in excruciating agony, every second pure torture.

Thinking is impossible, hurt being the only emotion consuming my mind.

My tears are like little ice pellets, dripping down my cheeks as I writhe about. Once again, an all-too-familiar sense of doom impends upon me, entering through the fire and ice. I am a lost cause. Death is here waiting once again. Why does he seem to want me so badly?

Then, a splash of a soothing substance hits my tongue, slipping down my throat like melted chocolate. All tranquility it brings vanquishes, exploding in my stomach like fireworks, only accenting my suffering. What sort of medicine is this? It only makes things worse.

Just let it take me.

Let me succumb to the darkness.

But a warm, deliciously strong body refuses to release its hold on my skin, two strong hands latching onto my consciousness like suction cups. I desperately try to sink into the dark depths, temporarily forgetting everything. What do I really have to return to? Not true love, a family, or even friendship. An infatuated werewolf doesn't count, by the way, although a sharp feeling stabs my stomach at the thought.

Do I really want to leave him? Is deserting him what I really want?

The forbidden question is now entertained by my delirious mind, and I am unable to avoid it. Do I love him?

My heart pumping, I begin to regain my vigor after only thinking about him. His perfect, statuesque face dances in my memory, his sparkling emerald eyes peering in my thoughts. Everything about him ripples with strength and masculinity. A blush almost forces itself to my cheeks when I realize I am relishing the image.

I quickly stuff my attraction and desire back into the corner of my mind, avoiding the disarming question at hand. I have only been with Xavier for a couple of days, yet he is affecting me so much... but it must be the effect of mating. I can't be in love, when only a short time before I had never even talked to a guy. Even though he is so enchantingly handsome, distracting me even in this state, I couldn't have let myself fade away to this alien emotion. I couldn't have already given in, after barely waging a fight.

For some strange reason, I feel myself begin to lighten. The heat and heart-wrenching cold recedes, and an almost pleasurable experience snakes into my chest. My limbs feel weak and elastic-like, almost like they have just been stretched, my face likewise. It is like the relief you experience after a workout, weariness coupled with a raw satisfaction. The hands wrapped around me release, and I can feel a gaze searing my skin. Worry is emanating off the person, surrounding me like a blanket. At least somebody cares about me.

Not quite thinking straight, my hand reaches up to calm the creature, man or beast, to lift the burden they are carrying. As I touch a head of hair, my hand nearly shrieks in delight at the pure luxury I am fingering. It is the smoothest hair I have ever felt, long and slightly wispy. Instantly, I realize who this person has to be.

Maybe it won't be so bad to live a little bit longer. I hate to admit it, but he has already morphed into someone I will want live for.

I wake to the sweet sound of birds chirping in the breeze.

My eyes slowly adjust to the blinding light streaming through the window, my breathing deep and relaxed. Consciousness returns to me, and with it, remembrance. Last night, I almost died. Maybe I'm actually dead now, and don't realize it.

Is this heaven?

I shrug off the velvety covers, slipping my feet from the mattress to the cold, hard floor. My surroundings are exactly like the room the pack had given me, with a beautiful view of the forestry and wildlife. Maybe I am a ghost, forbidden to enter the afterlife because I attempted to gain immortality.

Padding to the doorway, I gaze at the hallway, a mirror image of the one at the place I am hesitant to call "home". Haziness fills my vision, and I stumble along the walls in a random direction. I needed to find somebody. Anybody.

To tell me where the crap I am.

Unintelligible whispers are floating about, voices pounding. My head is reeling with strange sounds and thoughts, screams and laughter. My feet, however, continue on its unknown path, curiosity in each step. For some reason, I feel very different, and as I look down at my feet, questions fill me. Why are they so far away? Why are they a little bit bigger than I remembered?

Walking nearer to my random destination, I begin to hear low murmurs, the same voices inside my head growing stronger. Once I focus, I can begin to detect words, a conversation flowing.

But most of all is the smells.

I can smell the dust, the air, and the ghastly smell of my clothes with sharpness and clarity. But even stronger is the aroma of three mysterious objects, each more breathtaking than the last. One is like peppermint and the other like a delicious, ripe banana. But the last is the one that is most wonderful; a strange combination of flavors I can't distinguish, yet intoxicating all the same. In an instant, I feel a strange bond to this smell, making it unlike the others. In a hurry, my feet begin to run with excitement, fleeing towards the source.

Everything begins to savagely envelop my senses, a barrage of sound, smell, and breathtakingly rich sight. The light blinds me as I almost gallop into the sunlight, entering the garden. Red, blue and yellow mix to create a spectrum of colors, shown on the brilliant flowers. I barely realize that this is the garden.

Three figures are sitting in the warm grass, gazing into the baby blue sky.

I walk up to the last figure, smiling warmly. I never thought I could feel this happy before. "Xavier," I emit, my voice barely above a whisper. Strangely, it is as if I am singing, my words having a musical quality I used to envy in Xavier's voice.

The magnificent man turns to me, his face devoid of emotion except for a small tear running down his face. His eyes slowly turn to look at me, and the others follow his gaze. Beautiful emerald eyes, streaked with such sorrow, morph immediately into pure amazement as he surveys me. They crawl over me, starting from my head to my toes, scanning me for reasons unknown. Then he finally speaks.

"Mona, is that you?" he gasps, "You changed even more since I left you thirty minutes ago!" Xavier grasps his head unbelievably. "I can't even recognize you anymore, except by the smell."

"What happened?" I ask curiously, fingering a strand of my red hair in my slender hands. It did seem to be much longer, stretching past my chest instead of cutting off at the shoulders. My nails aren't stumpy either, at a perfect, French-manicure length. Even my face feels different, more sharp and angular.

"You didn't look in the mirror?" the crystal-haired man beside him grins, "That's a shame."

"I'm so sorry, Mona," A figure whirls into the garden, hurriedness in his steps. Ray slides up to me, past Xavier in the grass, "I didn't think of the risks involved when I tried to convert you. I should've told you..."

"Why are you still here?" Xavier immediately snarls at the almost identical werewolf, "You were supposed to leave by morning." Tension ripples between them, ice in the air.

"I couldn't leave without apologizing to Mona," he says angrily, "the guilt would ruin me."

"That's the point, idiot," Xavier snaps, "I don't want to look at you ever again, anyway."

I have had enough. "Ray did nothing wrong," I fire at him, "I knew the risks. I made the choice. Ray shouldn't have to leave the pack because of me. I'm here, aren't I?" My words float in the breeze towards Xavier's unwilling ears. Indignation pierces me, emanating so everyone can see it.

"But... I almost thought you wouldn't be," Xavier stands up regally, and then reaches out with one finger and strokes my cheek. Passion erupts under his touch, boiling beneath my skin. I nearly choke at the sudden wave of desire that almost overwhelms me. Why does his touch affect me so?

The werewolf sweeps me into a hug, which somehow seems gentler. His crushing embrace doesn't hurt like it sometimes does; only comforting me. Sparks of warmth erupt, and suddenly I feel safer than ever before. Is this what a true hug is supposed to feel like...?

I subconsciously close my eyes, swept away by his evident devotion. Usually I would feel angry at his easily displayed longing, but now, I don't really care.

I almost lost him.

"Ooh," a teasing voice erupts from behind us, "we get to watch a love scene." Hurriedly I jump away from him, suddenly aware of how my face had been moving closer to his. My lips are aching to be touched, stinging with disappointment at the chance that was lost. Even my body is fighting me, begging me to give in to my lust. But I must be stronger.

Jake laughs at my embarrassment, being able to see right through my guise. "Look," he continues jeering, "she's blushing." I cover my face with my hands, hoping that Xavier didn't catch my tomato red cheeks. Wes is chuckling also, Ray rather hesitant to join in. He looks bedridden, bedraggled with sadness and... annoyance? He doesn't seem to feel very guilty, disguising this strange fact under humility. I can almost spot a tidbit of triumph and pride searing through him as he looks at me, biting to be let through.

I can tell Xavier is melting as he turns his gaze towards the accused, softening as he looks at the almost identical copy of his face. I am trying desperately to stare holes into Xavier's head, willing him strongly to accept the wily werewolf slumping beside me.

Finally, almost regretfully, he nods. Ray lights up like a light bulb, racing back into the mansion like a little rabbit, a blur of energy. I smile up at Xavier with approval.

"So, Mona," Wes begins, smiling flirtatiously, "what can you do? How do you feel as a Spier?"

I only stare at him for a few moments, completely devoid of recognition. "Remember?" he probes, looking at me with concern.

"I'm not... dead?" I question softly, looking once more at my hands. They definitely seem real.

But I can't be alive. Not after what I had been through the night before.

"Of course not!" he laughs, "You're as alive as I am."

Maybe my suffering was only a dream. Maybe I didn't truly experience the torture. "What do you mean?"

"What abilities do you have?" Wes is relentless, buzzing with energy, "Can you run super-fast?"

I guess I am alive.

Xavier notices my sudden awkwardness and glides to my side. His fingers reach for my hand, but I quickly snap it away before he is able to clutch it. Wes grins.

"Just run somewhere. Anywhere close by," he gestures to the wide outdoors, "and think about getting there quickly." His instruction is clear as crystal, yet quite embarrassing. I don't want to run in front of these super-werewolves. I'll look stupid.

Xavier gives me a slight nudge, and I give it, starting off on a slow chug to a nearby tree. Dirt kicks into my face from my slow jog, and I begin to wish for a hat.

"Pick it up!" Jake calls, laughing as I start to zoom with my strangely not-stumpy legs towards the goal. My breathing is heavy and labored as I run towards the bark, and it seems to get further away with each stride.

Another second and Xavier is by my side, laughing quietly. "You don't have super speed," he informs me, "that's for sure. You did run about forty miles per hour though, which is pretty fast."

FORTY?!

Struck silent with wonder, I let him lead me back to the others. "Cool!" Jake smiles, "you've improved, though you are not quite 'super'."

"Strength?" Wes suggests slyly, and I have to grin.

"There is no way I am going to arm wrestle one of you. You guys will drive my hand through the table and into the ground. There is no way."

"What about that tree?" Jake points at the gigantic trunk a couple feet away, "try to break it!" I stare at him, dubious. Me, break that monster?

I walk towards it, and encircle it with my slender arms. With force I didn't know I had, I squeezed it tightly, causing cracks to run through it. But I can't do more, no matter how hard I tug.

"Not super strength, either," Wes notes, pulling me from the plump tree, "what do you think, Mona?" His beautiful green eyes are sparkling, so similar to the ring on my finger.

"Well, I can smell," I shrug, "and see far away." Definitely that is a plus, although I am rather confused. Why are they testing me for Werewolf abilities, when Ray converted me into a Spier? He told me that the only thing a Spier can do is conjure spirit spears and live forever. I would have to build my own strength.

The wind brushes past me as Xavier surprisingly nods. "That's one," he smiles, "and her appearance has definitely changed, so that makes two."

I examine my slender fingers, and perfect toes. "My appearance changed?" I finally ask, trying to make the pieces come together. "Why? I thought that only happens to werewolves."

"Well, see," Xavier tries to explain, "I sort of... intervened at your Awakening." He looks down at the soft green grass, almost seeming ashamed. "It was failing."

"Failing? I was going to die?" Alarm sears through me at his words.

"You were this close," he holds two fingers barely more than a hairsbreadth apart, "to dying." His face grows slightly red, sadness washing over him like a flood. The air feels even colder than when Ray and Xavier were standing across from each other, chilling me to the bone.

"Then what?" I ask.

"I used a drop of my blood," he says slowly, "and tried to convert you into a werewolf." Doom impends upon me, anger rippling through the thick atmosphere.

"WHAT?!" I nearly shriek, "I don't want to be a werewolf!" It is strange to think this, especially at my young age, but I want children. Becoming a werewolf would make me unable to have one of my own.

"Why?" Jake asks, "There's not much difference." He shrugs, laying belly up in the dirt, staring at the spotted skies.

Wes seems to guess at my concern, his eyes widening slightly, then shoots me a wink. "I'll keep your secret safe," he mouths, grinning like crazy. He seems to find it amusing that a cold person like me would want kids.

"Anyway," Xavier continues, "you slept for almost 20 hours. It's almost nightfall." I stare at the hints of pink and orange shooting across the sky, the sun beginning to drop towards the earth.

"How do you conjure a spirit spear?" I ask, getting right to the point. Xavier shakes his head.

"You have to learn that on your own. As a Spier, it is important to meditate to immerse yourself in your spirit, and then it will be easier to call upon a spirit spear. If you are to be part of our pack, you will have to develop this talent," Xavier informs me.

"But I thought I was already part of your group!" I protest, almost feeling excluded.

"Not part of the six," Xavier clarifies, "but with us all the same."

I huff, angered. Usually I would be happy to hear those words, but for some reason, it only irks me now. "I'm going to go rest," I say dismissively, retreating back into the mansion. This is almost too much for me to take in. Xavier moves to follow me, but I hold up a hand and he ceases moving.

As soon as I am away from the watchful eyes of Wes, Jake, and Xavier, I hurriedly examine my body with my eager eyes. I am suddenly excited to see how my form has changed. With quick steps, I race into my room, shutting and locking my door.

Everything smells so sweet now, the little pot of flowers by the door tingling my senses, enriching the room. If I look hard at each petal, I can find each tiny detail, every mistake that separates it from being perfect. At first it almost hurt, but now this strange enhancement feels normal.

I cross over to the mirror, and close my eyes. Should I look? I am afraid now to see how I have changed. What if it is for the worse?

But when my eyelashes flutter as they creep open, I find that I shouldn't have worried. A whole different person is staring in the mirror. There is no way that is me. The mirror must somehow be dysfunctional.

I laugh, slightly, then walk over to the bathroom and look into that mirror. Anger begins to seep over me as the same strange person stares back. What is going on? Why am I not the one shown?

I race to another mirror, and am alarmed to see the same girl standing in front of me. There are no other mirrors to turn to. I am trapped with this beautiful woman that strikes incredible jealousy in my heart.

This can't be me, for that doll-like girl is flawless.

Long, ruby red hair dances past her shoulder, smooth and not frizzy at all. Her face is in a perfect heart shape, with a pair of exceedingly bright green eyes and luscious red lips. Her body is slim and much taller than mine, about five inches added to her long, enviously curvy legs. She has a little bit more of a chest than I do, and long arms with slender fingers. Her skin is tanned and smooth.

But why is she wearing the same clothes as I was yesterday? And why do I see some stark similarities between me and her; in our eyes, hair, and face?

I reach up with one hand and slowly touch my lips. The strange, breathtaking girl follows suit, mirroring my actions. I smile, and she smiles also, revealing a set of perfect white teeth. Pulling my hair, I watch as she copies me, in perfect sync with my movements.

Who is this girl behind the glass? She obviously knows what I am thinking, to be able to copy my movements so gracefully. Every move she makes is like a ballerina's step, doing the exact same thing as I am with an added beauty. Everything about her is beautiful. She outshines a girl like Sidney easily, drawing all the attention. She is nothing like me.

Suddenly unnerved by her, I back off from the mirror, going to sit on my wonderful bed. My body sinks into it, suddenly surrounded by the deep mattress. It is hard to believe that I can be special, someone that can benefit Xavier's pack. What I can do now is amazing.

How can I run so fast? Forty miles an hour is as fast as a car on the road, when I used to lag behind the slowest jogger. I created cracks in the tree, and if I had kept at it, it would have broken. The Awakening will even allow me to create a spirit spear, by which I can kill my parent's murderers. Maybe it would be good to start meditating now in the forest. I want to avenge my parents as soon as possible.

I try to tell myself that is the only reason why I want to be a Spier, but I know that is not true. Being immortal appeals to me because of a man I can barely even think of without either getting angry or elated. Now I am stuck with him (or is it the other way around?) forever. Why does that not repel me?

A strange question begins to pound at me, scaring me to pieces. I stuff it into the depths of my mind, avoiding it completely.

I know I said I wanted to rest, but now that I finally met a strange girl that haunts the mirrors in my room, I have no intention of staying here. Might as well creep into the forest on the mansion grounds. I have become rather acquainted with living here, and I know where everything is.

I slip into the garden again, where the three werewolves have been lazing about for all this time. "Back so soon?" Wes asks slyly as I reappear, Xavier chuckling.

"That was a quick nap," Xavier says, and I smile. I am truly helpless against him.

"I'm going into the forest to try and meditate," I say quickly, then begin to walk towards the vast expanse of trees. However, a hand catches my arm, stopping me in my tracks.

"You can't go alone," Xavier says worriedly, "Shifters have already proven they can bypass the barriers."

"Watch me," I snap, tugging my arm away from his loose grip.

"Relax, Xavier," Jake agrees, "Yi's there. She will be safe with him." Xavier hesitantly backs away, and I start to sprint away before he has a change of mind. Yi is in the forest? What could he be doing there?

Why has he been so cold recently?

Once I reach the first wave of colossal trees, I weave in between them, hoping to find some clearing with a little pond. I did say I was going to meditate, and I am, but a nice little bath in the warm water will also do me some good. At the very least I can try to check my reflection to make sure that girl vanished.

My nose scrunches up a little, and a waft of pineapple-something hits my senses. It is similar to the scents of Jake, Wes, and Xavier, signaling me to the fact that this must be Yi. Without really knowing what I am doing, I start to move towards the smell, wariness beginning to creep upon me. I'm not all that eager to be alone with Yi, but it would make Xavier feel better, and he might be able to help me meditate. I also need to figure out why

as been ignoring me. At first, he was almost flirtatious, but ever since we captured that Shifter, he has changed. He looks upon me as if I am disgusting.

I stumble into a huge clearing, complete with a pool and lovely flowers. The little pond is as clear as can be, no fish beneath its waters. Joy erupts within me, and I completely forget Yi. I begin to shed my clothes so I can "meditate" in the soothing water.

"Hey, don't take your clothes off in front of me," the tree beside me speaks. I jump back, more than a little grossed out at the strangeness of this forest. Fright dances across my features as the voice suddenly gets closer.

"You only want to do that when you're alone," the voice teases, as smooth as syrup, "and right now, you're not."

"What's going on?" I ask as the grass suddenly crunches, though not by my feet. A branch cracks, leaves crumpled. "Who's there?"

"Your worst nightmare," the voice whispers into my ear, closer than ever. I scream, running away from the creepy words. Yi suddenly steps through the air, appearing before me like a magician, full of smugness. He stares at me, and begins to laugh hysterically.

Red blooms onto my cheeks as he smiles, examining me. "You look completely different now. Seems like I can talk to you again," he concludes after scanning me, "you don't look fully human anymore."

I narrow my eyes at him, unnerved by his sudden friendliness. "Why were you avoiding me earlier?" I demand, my stare sharp and piercing. He freezes for a second, and then opens his mouth reluctantly.

"Well, you... reminded me of someone I used to know the night we almost killed that shifter," Yi admits, sitting down in the warm grass. Everything about him seems to grow solemn at his words, even affecting me.

"Who?" I probe after a long, stretched silence.

"Her name was Raina," he grins weakly, "my childhood friend from thirty years ago, when I was born. I am a very young werewolf."

"Okay..." I motion for him to go on.

"When I was almost murdered by bank robbers-" he begins.

"Bank robbers?" I ask, confused. Yi is not a very good storyteller.

"I worked at a bank," he explains quickly, then continues. "When I was almost murdered, Jake happened to be passing by, and he saved me from them. I was badly hurt, with a bullet in the chest, so he went ahead and converted me without notifying the council. When it was known that I was a Stealth Talent, he added me to the pack, and I disappeared off the face of the earth. However, my best friend Raina coincidentally discovered me when I had my first morphing. She demanded to know what I had become. When I told her, she was not angry or disgusted, but interested. She told me that she was able to see the Shifters since birth, but never told anyone that she could. She asked me if she could watch one of our Shifter attacks."

"This is a strange story," I smile, "did you let her go?"

"Yeah," he sighs, "I was in love with her since kindergarten. I'd let her do anything." His voice is tinged with sadness, and boiling anger. "Even though Xavier said not to."

"What happened?" I put one hand on his back, calming him.

"She reacted just like you. It must be a woman thing, to feel too much compassion. Raina took one look at the man possessed, and said she couldn't let me kill him. She said he was a person, and that would make me a murderer." Yi is expressionless now, his words lacking emotion.

"Where is she now?"

"Dead. The shifter killed her before I could react," he says softly, a hard, determined look to him. "I hate them."

"I'm so sorry," I sympathize with him. Silence sizzles between us, and when Yi can't take it anymore, he begins to babble.

"She wasn't my mate, anyway. I will find someone new to fall in love with... I'm sorry, Mona, for being so mean. You just looked a little bit like her, and your reactions were exactly the same..."

"Shh," I pat him on the head, "cheer up. If Xavier can fall in love, you can too."

"But now," he adds, brightening a little, "you don't seem a bit like her. Your eyes are just like ours... I have a question, Mona."

"Yeah?"

"Are you a werewolf or a Spier?" he asks thoughtfully. "Your looks have changed, and I saw you run here really fast. However, I have seen no Spier abilities from you."

"I have no clue," I confess, "I don't know how to conjure a spirit spear, so I can't know for sure. What are you doing out here, anyway?"

"I have to practice my Stealth talent," Yi shrugs, "or I won't become fully matured. Right now, I can only hold my invisibility for about three minutes."

"Do you know how to meditate?" I ask him eagerly. He nods slowly. "Can you teach me?!"

"Here is what you do," he begins, lying in the grass, face up. "You can sit in the pool if you like," he smiles evilly, "I don't mind." With a big gulp, I decide to lie beside him. There is no way I'm taking off my clothes in front of him. He will probably steal them and run away.

"Breathe regularly, and close your eyes. Try not to think about anything. Clear your mind," he instructs. My eyelashes hit my cheek, and I try to think of nothing.

Wow, this is hard.

Silence reigns as I feel the thin blades of grass, as jittery as a rabbit. "You stink at this," Yi laughs, standing up, "I could feel you squirming around like an earthworm."

I continue to lie down, trying once again to focus without the attractive Asian by my side. All I can see is black. What happens after this? What do I do?

I begin to think back to Yi's story, and suddenly my mind flashes to the Shifter in the mansion. The young boy with eyes of fire. The devil beneath the skin.

I jump up and start to sprint through the forestry, ashamed that I would forget him. Yi gallops along with me, not even looking where he is going. "Where are you heading? You were actually doing well for a minute," he says with some concern. I ignore him, chugging away towards the mansion as fast as I can. I whirl past Xavier and the others, Yi stopping briefly to talk to them. They can catch up to me in a second, though, with their super speed.

The area around me grows dark as I enter the mansion, a stench belonging to the possessed boy wafting to my nose. I follow it like a bloodhound to a random door. Xavier zooms up behind me, anger in his features. "Don't go in there!" he commands, but I disregard him, knocking it open with all my strength.

The boy is laying on the luxurious bed, his dark arms and legs tied to the bedposts. A piece of heavy duct tape is stretched over his mouth, and his red eyes are wide with heart-wrenching fear.

The fear vanishes as I move closer, replaced by pure, savage madness.

"Mona! Stand back!" Xavier calls as I lean towards his face, "he can hurt you."

"Got a nasty bruise from him," Jake mutters, rubbing his slightly splotched arm. For some reason, I can hear everything, but all my focus is on the poor soul in front of me. I ignore the others, examining his bloodthirsty gaze and stained heart.

With sudden direction, I place my hand on his head, remembering that contact brings the voices. Immediately they pound in my head, hurting as they overwhelm everything. The same horrifying KILL command beats like a drum, and the whisper of a protest lays in the corner, unable to fight. It is much weaker than last time, I having to strain to hear it.

But this time, I can do more than just listen.

With strange guidance, I try to reach for the weak voice, wanting with all my might to help him. To aid his rebellion. Strength is leaving me, pouring into the one small protest. I suddenly find it hard to stand, and I wobble on my feet. Tiredness washes over me like a flood, destroying my defenses. But I keep going. The thought of saving this man from the same fate as my father helps me stay awake.

"Mona!" I hear faintly, reality trying to bring me back. I squeeze my eyes tightly shut, shaking my head no. I am fighting with him, and distraction right now will ruin it.

The protest grows larger and larger, and then starts to scream like a train whistle, high and exceedingly annoying. It deepens into a lion's roar, unending with power, unleashing its fury. The deathly command starts to fight also, growing in volume equally. My head and heart is pounding. Looks like I'm going to be deaf for the next few days.

A few more seconds of this torture, and then the command fades away, ceasing to exist. The red retreats from the teen's eyes, leaving a spectacular chestnut color. He is sweating, life truly returned to him. His stench slowly morphs into a neutral aroma, faintly sweet. He is emotionless for a minute, and then erupts into a spectacular smile. "Are you an angel?" he finally asks after staring for a moment. He is gazing at me as if I am a sky full of stars, with wonder and awe. Is his image of me a little warped?

"No," I grin back as I answer him, flattered. I turn to four open-mouthed werewolves in the corner of the room. Their jaws are nearly hitting their knees.

"That," Wes speaks for all of them, "was amazing. We've never seen anything like it." Xavier, with his beautiful blue hair, just stares.

I peer over into the mirror beside me, just noticing its presence. There it was again; that strange, stunning girl that I do not know.

Raising my arms, I peer at each of my perfect fingers, while the other girl does the same. There is incredible power hiding behind each of these fingertips, power that I have yet to unlock. Is this the me I have been so desperately desiring?

I turn to the still-awestruck boy staring at me with wide eyes, and my smile grows wider. Who knows what I can do with this power?

Anything is possible.

People Are Like Ants... They Always Follow Their Queen

A purple sun is cast over dark, blood red waters, whispers of screams still clamoring to leave the horizon. A castle like a shadow lays at the edge of the lake, the color of the night. True terror is in the air, mixed with fear, pain, and longing.

A man paces back and forth in a dingy room, muttering words that should not be repeated. Bookcases stretch across each wall, a single door creating the only gap. Soft chairs as soft as silk are lying about, and a minuscule coffee table is set in the middle of it all. Only one other person is in the room, listening attentively to every sentence he spits out after a string of expletives.

"I can't believe this has happened..." the man, face unknown, turns to his companion, "I made a huge mistake."

"Everyone makes mistakes," the slightly gray-haired, stubby man the size of a dwarf, does not even truly care about his predicament. However, the tall man with a veiled face is very distraught.

How can he fail not once, twice, thrice, but FOUR times in his mission? If he wishes to stay on his throne, he better be seeing more results from all these traps his servants have been dropping around the mansion. If not, his subjects will not obey him. They expect him to foil the prophecy, but he has only succeeded in helping to fulfill it.

This last attempt, though, is the crowning glory of his failures, the cherry on top of the sundae. It makes the others look like a simple game.

How could he have switched the two bottles by mistake? Sure, they were identical, and smelled almost exactly the same. But leave it to him to completely forget which one is which, and take the one that guaranteed disaster.

The veiled man, wrapped in a thick, velvety robe, continues to speak, words coming out of him like the soft flow of the harp. "I am the King," he emits, voice barely above a whisper, "but I am not worthy."

It is then that the chubby man truly comes into play. He marches over to the majestic man's side, tugging on his arm to force him to the small man's height. "You ARE worthy," he tells the man quietly, every word packing a powerful punch, "you are the only one in the entire kingdom with a true body. You are the only one that is free to be your own. You can do things your subjects can only dream of. Everybody wants to be you... You are the only one who can save us." His eyes are steady, gazing through the folds of the veil.

There is a moment of complete silence, and then the tall man rises upwards. Fire is alight in his eyes, anger and determination clearly seen. "Close the gates," he commands, "no one in or out of the kingdom may bypass it. It must open for no one. Also double our security around the kingdom. If they are ever found within the area, bring them to this castle. I want to gloat before I kill them forever, and with it, any chance of destruction."

"But what about... that?" the man points to a mysterious object resting in the crown the veiled man wears.

"This," he pats the crown softly, "is safe with me."

The object pulsates a glowing red on top of a wealth of rubies, electricity crackling in the thick, choking air. The tall man sits down in a rough leather chair and takes a sip from the wine glass at his side, smiling.

The next time he tries, he will succeed for sure.

My eyes fly open as I scramble out of my resting place among the tall trees and thick blades of soft grass. Which, coincidentally, is by a beautiful bathing pool that reminds me of the spa tub the pack owns at the mansion.

Or maybe it isn't coincidental.

But whatever the case, I have been getting wonderful progress on my meditation, although these frightening visions keep popping up sometimes. Is this what's supposed to happen? I haven't even conjured one spirit spear yet.

These strange dreams are getting more plentiful, many featuring the veiled man, and some showing the strange, deathly sharp gates as they bang to a shut. Everything I see is desolate, the kingdom not exactly the picture of health. Every time I shut my eyes, almost, I am whisked away to the place of smoke, death, and tears.

I start to run through the trees towards the garden after checking my watch, noting the time. Chills run through my stomach as I realize that school is only twenty minutes away, and with it, the stares.

Even a couple of hours staring at the mirror has not convinced me that the beautiful girl looking back is me, and if I am feeling that way, the school's reaction will be truly unpredictable. I almost want myself back, so I can go almost unnoticed through the crowds, but now since I am implanted into another's body, I will have to hunch to be below them. Xavier is treating me exactly the same as before, comforting me a little. Maybe this girl in the mirror really is an illusion, a hallucination concocted by my deepest, darkest desires.

Jake, Ray, and Yi treat me like normal also, although Wes obviously has hyped up his flirting, ticking Xavier off immensely. He has to almost constantly pull Wes off me, although I personally think it's rather funny. I have gotten used to Wes's hilarious advances, which is strange considering that just a week before I had never really talked to a guy, let alone a handsome one. I think Wes just does that because he knows it makes Xavier angry.

But school? A completely different matter. I know they will react. How they will react is the real question

I race into my room, smelling the sweet dandelions by my window as I look at the clothes thrown on my bed. All my clothes from before do not fit me, which is a shame because I didn't even get to wear them all. Somehow, almost magically, a whole new set of stylish apparel was in my closet this morning. They all fit perfectly, sliding over my new form like butter and flowing past my ankles. As I checked the back of them earlier, they all were designer clothing, leading me to believe Xavier had done some late night internet shopping. When I asked him, he didn't deny it.

Today's choice is a light blue blouse that reaches my hips and dark jeans that fit me like a glove. I shimmy out of my t-shirt and shorts, almost feeling like a "peeping tom" when the girl's unfamiliar, creamy skin is bared, and slip into the clothing. I am about the same size as I was before, but the length is completely different. I don't know how Sidney is going to take it when she finds that I suddenly tower over her. She likes to look down at me, but now she will have to tilt her head upwards.

I comb a brush through my now-long red hair, marveling at its softness. It isn't as exotic as Xavier's blue hair, but I feel it has its own appeal. It is completely straight and dries quickly, which are both strange but enviable qualities in long, thick hair. Everything I have ever wanted is what makes this new body, but instead of true admiration, I feel fear.

This is not what I want.

If there was some way to change back, regaining my imperfections, I would take it. Before, I wished desperately for change, but now I don't care as much. Once I desired everyone's acceptance, but now I only need one's...

I shake the image of him from my mind, scrambling to tug on my shoes. With one more glance at my watch, I run out of the doorway, heading to the bridge where Xavier and I meet.

A dastardly handsome bombshell with eyes like emeralds and luscious blue hair waves at me as I walk closer. "You look pretty in your new clothes," he says, his silky smooth voice sparking fire within me. I subconsciously straighten at his side, my flowing blood red hair dancing past my upper back.

"Really?" I can't help but squeak out those words, flashing him a smile to hide the discomfort. Maybe Xavier really likes this new shell I am now trapped in, one with physical beauty far surpassing the average human. I am currently almost Xavier's equal, our looks perfectly in sync. Men now desire this flawless body like women love Xavier's build. Inside beauty doesn't matter when you have eyes like emeralds and lips like luscious cherries.

"Of course," he offers me this heart-melting smile, and offers his arm. With a heart thumping erratically in my chest, I take it. I start the run, a slow jog that doesn't even tire me anymore, and Xavier easily matches my pace. He laughs, pure joy echoed in his eyes.

"Why the jog?" he questions.

"Because we have to get to school before we're late," I laugh back, hoping that he won't discover my truly troubled demeanor. He has enough worries of his own.

We continue for a few more miles in silence, and then Xavier pulls on my arm and comes to an abrupt halt. "Is there... something you need to ask me?" he prompts slowly, concern in his features. I suddenly realize that my smile had been morphing into a scowl as we ran.

I decide to ask the questions on my mind. "Xavier," I begin, "what did you look like before you became a werewolf?" Obviously worse, which is kind of hard to imagine. I tried to put myself in his shoes. If I was a beautiful werewolf and I just got mated to an ugly guy, what would I do? Part of what attracts me to him is his physical beauty; without it he could have just been another annoying, jeering guy.

Xavier reaches with one hand towards his pocket, pulling out a small picture. "I thought you might want to see this." He hands it to me, and I stare at the person I know so well.

His eyes are a crystal blue, framed by enviously long lashes and a face much like the present Xavier standing beside me. His hair is a golden blond with blue streaks, and his build slightly less attractive. But other than that, they were identical. "Why blue streaks?" I stare at the golden-blue clash, still managing to look attractive on Xavier's form.

"Because I lost a bet with my friends," he shrugs, "and was forced to do that. It just happened to be the day I was practically killed by a werewolf." He fingers his azure hair, sparkling in the light.

I feel so jealous. How could he look like that as a human?

"Do you... like the body you have now?" I question softly, and he laughs.

"Oh, this shell of perfection? Nah," he shakes his head, "I really don't care. It is the inside beauty that really matters." His emerald eyes gaze into me, understanding my inner qualms. Funny how he used the word shell also, as if he thinks of his physical appearance like I do.

Silence crackles in the air, tension between us. It is usually not like this, but now I have a biting curiosity that I must satisfy. Xavier senses it too, stiffening as my mouth opens.

"Please tell me." I look up from the dazzling picture and grab his arm. He seems resilient, but then breaks under my intense stare, weak against my hopes.

"Well, there's not too much to tell. I was driving to a party, when some strange force stopped the car completely. The windshield became blurry, and I was unable to see anything. There was dead silence, and then the creature ripped the car door from my vehicle. It was a monster, half man and half werewolf, what we call a Beast Talent. He immediately clamped down on my arm and dragged me to a clearing in the forest. There, he started to claw at me, a rather disgusting experience I would rather not speak of in detail," he shudders, "it was terrible. The werewolf was blinded by bloodlust and my somewhat pleasing scent. However, I managed to hurt him as well, and some of his blood got in my wound. The light of the full moon began to convert me. Once the werewolf realized what had happened, he tried to escape, but in a matter of seconds I was a werewolf also with a bloody vengeance. Werewolf conversions are nearly immediate, although yours was not the case because of the Spier blood. Anyways, I killed the savage werewolf and sort of... took his place. That is why the council didn't exterminate me for being a stray."

Xavier has killed someone? And he speaks of it so lightly. It is as if killing is nothing to him, almost like a friendly hug or pat on the back.

"The council again..." I think aloud, "what is it?"

"Well, think of it as a police force and a judicial court rolled into one. We don't have too many laws, but the ones we do have need enforcing. The first one is no new converts without alerting the council, except cases like mine where someone didn't intentionally convert me, and the other is to not reveal themselves as a werewolf to humans unless they are mates. The latter is not particularly enforced unless it becomes a serious matter, but the first one is very important. We do not want to overrun the human world, especially as immortals, with werewolves. The council consists of a ruling pack, of which a werewolf named Remi is the head."

"What about Yi, then? Why didn't they exterminate him?" I quickly remember that Yi got converted without approval.

"They pardoned him because he shows incredible promise with his Stealth Talent," he comments. "When he becomes fully matured, he will probably be one of the strongest Stealth Talent in the world. Already he is invaluable to the werewolf community."

"Wow," I think of cheeky, skinny Yi... the strongest Stealth Talent in the world? No way. He's too immature to be something like that.

We start up again, and I start to feel more comfortable by Xavier's side. The world blurs slightly around us, and I can sense his alluring presence washing over me like a flood. However, as the school begins to come into view just over the tips of the trees, a strange feeling of cold fear starts to collide with the peace, and I suddenly get shivers running up and down my spine. My knees begin to shake, and my grasp on Xavier's comforting arm gets crushingly hard.

"Ow!" Xavier rips his arm from my grip, "that actually hurt!" He looks as his now-red skin, indented with nails, a slight amount of blood seeping forth. I nearly gape at the pain I inflicted on Xavier's supposedly indestructible arm, wondering exactly what I will be capable of in the days to come. Xavier seems to be thinking along those lines too, being deep in thought.

We continue to travel through the bushes into the narrow pathway leading to school. My breaths become faster, and more frenzied as we go along. "Calm down," Xavier's relaxing, musical voice enchants my senses as it wraps around my innermost fears.

Students begin to merge with us in clumps as our feet pound on the sidewalk. I can feel them immediately latch upon me like lasers, burning holes through my skin. Immediately I try to shrink, wishing I could scurry like a rat into a hole in the wall. I am tempted to use my speed and zoom away from the rude people who only want to gossip and stare. I feel as if I am under a microscope, being scrutinized at every second.

As the crowd grows thicker with interested observers, I begin to hear what immediately comes after an intense gaze. "Who's she?" whispers erupt all around me. I can hear almost everything now, and I can easily overhear their words.

"Who knows. Maybe she's new."

"Look at those long legs! She's like a model!"

"Who is that hot chick by the blue-haired guy?"

"She looks like that ugly girl that always used to walk around scrunched over with a pissed off expression on her face except prettier!"

"Much prettier."

"Even Sidney is not as gorgeous as this girl!"

"Who the crap is she?" I hear Sidney's shrill, whispering voice as she walks a couple feet away from me. I shudder slightly.

We entered the school, Xavier reaching to hold my hand. I look at the amused people around us, suddenly flushed with embarrassment, and snap my hand away. "Not here!" I whisper angrily, though what I really meant is not ever. I am not going to let him disarm me again. The wall to my heart shall not tumble to ruin.

However, he is making it shake, and that is what is scaring me so much. I don't like to be vulnerable, and Xavier is doing an awful good job of making me feel that way. I am independent. I can't lean on anybody, for all they do is leave. My mind flashes back to that time, and my blood runs cold.

One more hammer to my heart, and it will fall to pieces forever.

Xavier frowns at me slightly. "What's up with you?" he says, staring into my soul with bright emerald eyes, "penny for your thoughts."

"I'm sorry, Xavier," I sigh, "but right now, they are worth much more than that."

"Name your price." I look up from the floor into Xavier's serious eyes, at the absolute certainty of his words. All I do is just gently shake my head, unable to give them away. I am not ready.

I wince inwardly as his hand touches mine, and then retreats as if he had committed some sort of crime.

Our classroom stands before us, reeking with boredom. This was the class with that uber-lazy teacher who just types on his computer all day long. Also... the only one I have with that vicious serpent named Sidney.

And this one just has to be first.

"Let's just get it over with," Xavier says, propelling me into the room to find our desks. The stares are worse here, people openly scavenging me, scanning my new appearance. It is just like before, except that I am practically imprisoned in here with them until the mischievous bell rings.

Sidney flounces into the room, her long, blonde tresses flowing past her upper back. She is adorned in a light pink baby doll dress, one a bit too short to be decent, and five inch wedges. Her baby blue eyes scan the room for a moment, then focuses on my form. She walks over to my side, a light, happy smile on her face.

"Hey Mona," she greets me, "Hey Xavier." I slightly smile back, unconvinced by her friendliness. "Nice" and "Sidney" are two words that do not mix.

"Hey Sidney," I speak, once again amazed by the prettiness of my voice. It is like an orchestra, a melodious harmony of notes coming together to create a few words. Sidney notices this, her smile growing a little tight-lipped. She obviously misses the time when my voice sounded grainy and weak.

"That is such an adorable outfit!" she practically squeals, "I love that top."

"Thanks," my smile grows a little wider and more rapturous, I pleased that someone likes the attire I so carefully selected. Maybe she is thinking along the lines of "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em!" I honestly have no clue why she is like this.

Xavier flashes her one of his golden grins too, causing Sidney to melt into a puddle on the floor. He seems very happy that Sidney is being nice to me. Sidney senses this, and craftily slinks to her seat as the fat teacher finally gets up from his perch on the swivel chair.

"Hello, class," he emits with a voice like a geek, assuming and haughty. "Today you need to turn to page 787 in your textbook..." He rambles on for a minute, then quickly concludes his daily two minute speech. "Read chapter 14, section 9, and answer all the following questions. What you do not finish is homework." He shuffles from the front of the classroom to the back of it, plopping down on his favorite plush chair. He never actually teaches us anything, just telling us to read. No one ever does homework in his class either, because he never checks.

Except me. I'm the only one that gets annoyed with my teacher because I actually want to learn something.

I quickly flip the textbook open to the correct page, while the others all whip out their phones and start texting and shouting to their friends across the room. Sidney starts whispering to Ian, and Xavier turns to me with a reassuring smile. "You're going to do the lesson?" he asks innocently. I nod slowly, beginning to sink into the paragraphs of knowledge, delving completely into the foreign lands I love to explore.

I can feel a set of emerald eyes focus on my face as I read, interest clearly shown. "You're so beautiful when you are like this," he says softly, almost mumbling to himself.

"Like what?" I almost shiver at his words, so full of caring and devotion.

"When you are reading, you seem so peaceful. Serene." He closes his eyes, leaning back against his chair, "like an angel. I met one once, you know." He is speaking barely above a whisper, so soft that only I can hear.

"When?" I ask eagerly.

"Well, right before I was converted, I was dying. The werewolf had practically torn me to pieces, and the pain was... well, no words can describe it. I was floating between delusions and reality. Then, right before his blood touched my skin, I had a dream," his eyes turn glassy as time ticks back for him, "it was about heaven and hell."

"Tell me about it," I demand, leaning towards him. I can sense his closeness, his dizzyingly attractive smell that nearly forces me to attack him with my heavy desire.

"I was on an island, completely alone. It was basically just a patch of sand, surrounded by miles and miles of ocean. A beautiful angel descended out of the clouds, heading my way. Along with her, a set of stairs appeared, pure white and leading into the clouds. However, when she extended her long, pale white hand, I could not take it. I reached as hard as I could, but right before I could even get within a foot of those stairs and the woman, they would seemingly get farther away.

Right beneath me, however, it was a different story. The sand rumbled and turned as hot as coals. Fire was immediately dancing beneath my feet. I howled in pain, running around the island to escape the burning. Finally, though, I was trapped in a circle, fire surrounding me at every angle. The woman was right outside the circle, and I felt that if I could only escape this prison, I would finally be able to reach her. But just before I ran through the fire, the whole island began to sink. Water began to creep up at every angle, waters so red that it seemed stained with blood. When I peered into the ocean as it nearly swallowed me, I saw that beneath me was a boiling pit of fire, and I was about to sink into it. Before long, the island would disappear completely, leaving me at the mercy of whatever was below.

It was then that the woman stared at me and gave a short little smile, disappearing into the mist like a ghost. The stairs went away too, leaving only me, the ruby red ocean, and the cauldron below."

I lean forwards, spellbound by his story. The way he speaks makes the story seem so real, as if it happened to me instead. "What next?"

"Nothing. I woke up, and found that I was a werewolf." Xavier says laughingly, "otherwise, I think I would have sunk into the pit." There is a buzzing sound, and he grabs his top-of-the-line phone out of his pocket. Many people turn their heads to look at the expensive limited edition luxury item in his hand, Xavier casually lifting it to his head to take the call.

"Yes, Wes?" His face is first of excitement, then melts into fury. After a moment of listening, he nods solemnly. "I'll help out," he says reluctantly,

just send someone to get me. At this school, you have to do this strange thing called checking out..."

Within a few minutes, a robotic voice echoes through the hallways. "Xavier Rochester, please come to the front desk to check out."

"Rochester?"

"We had to make up a last name," he whispers quickly. "Anyways, I will be back at 3 o'clock to pick you up. Apparently there is a rogue Shifter running around, killing everything it sees. We need to capture it before the police does."

"Can I come?" I beg. I'm sure I can bring out a Shifter from a person again; that one time was enough to convince me.

"No," he says firmly, "this one is really bad. I don't want it within ten miles of you until we secure it. All Shifters seem to have it out for you." He rises from his desk, majestically heading towards the door. He gives me a little wave as he exits, not even noticing the adoring stares following him.

As soon as the door shuts, the viper strikes. "Well, look here," the Barbie girl rises from her seat, "Mona is finally without her shield." Everyone turns to look at us. Once again, Sidney has scored center stage, and pulled me along with her. "Now that he's gone, why don't you tell us who did your plastic surgery?"

"I didn't get-"

"Obviously you did," she laughs, tossing her curls behind her back, "so you could keep Xavier." Sidney leans in, pure menace behind her words. "Xavier is just talking to you because he feels sorry for you. You are a weak, pathetic, ugly little loser who forced Xavier to stay beside you. We would also like to know how exactly you did that, witch. You better start confessing now. Everyone wants to know the truth." She pushes me, and I land on the cold, hard floor. Everything around me seems so painful right now. So bitter.

"So who was it?!" she nearly shrieks, as I rise to my feet, "who did your surgery?!"

"Sidney!" I try to yell, "I couldn't have gotten surgery! It's only been two days!"

Sidney ignores me, madness in her eyes. She tries to kick me, but I block her movement. "Oh, so you bewitched yourself along with Xavier?" she finally comes to another outrageous conclusion. "This is true proof that you are a witch." She snaps her fingers, and her girls come to my side. Each of them hold my arms to the wall with surprising force, though not nearly enough to stop me physically. However, it is the words that break me. I just stand there, sucked of all strength.

"Stop wishing for things that aren't yours," she creeps closer, her gorgeous eyes flecked with fury.

"Well, they aren't yours either," I squeak out, and she slaps me with all her might.

"They would be," she hisses, "if you weren't here." Indignation is in her voice now, along with pure hate. Blood begins to run from my cheek, and my mind flashes back to the memory of Ms. Penn scraping my cheek also. Maybe Sidney and Ms. Penn are related.

The other boys and girls crowd around us, staring at my now marred face. Sidney continues to question me relentlessly, without pause. "Did you brighten your eye color, or did you get contacts? So pathetic, changing it just to match your slave's eyes."

"I don't have a slave," I say softly, weak as the red liquid runs down my neck. It is throbbing, the blood disgusting me. But what is disgusting me almost as much is the teacher. What the crap is he doing? Can't he notice that I'm being bullied?

And probably killed by the end of the period, if this continues.

"Of course he's your slave. You force him to think you're beautiful, even though you aren't. You force him to hang around you, even though he deserves better than a lying witch like you," she snaps, each word like a knife stabbing into my skin.

One of the girls holding me takes a peek at my skin, and gasps. "Look!" she yells, and everyone in the room obliges.

"It's healing! And so quickly..." the girl continues, gazing at the now lightly scabbed skin, quickly retreating into perfect skin again.

"What are you?" Sidney looks in horror at the suddenly nonexistent cut, I wincing. These, out of all other words, hurts me the most.

I just wanted to be left alone. I didn't do anything to Sidney. Just a while ago, she didn't even know I existed. And now... I am a monster to everyone around me just because I didn't stay in my place. Because Xavier fell for me. The queen is out to get me, and her subjects just meagerly follow.

"You know," she says, pulling out a slender object, "I wonder if a big cut will heal as quickly... you never know with a witch." Silence is stretched taut in the air, only her voice reigning. No one steps forward, though many look with eyes of horror. However, I can tell even the sympathetic ones are appalled by me, disgusted with the fact that I am different.

She holds the knife closer, staring into my eyes. "Where should I start? Your face? Your arms? Your boobs?" Sidney casts a glance at my slightly enlarged chest, then smiles. "I think I will give your face a makeover first, because that probably took the surgeons the longest to perfect." Obviously she doesn't believe I am a witch, but is just using that to make more people hate me.

I'm not going to call for Xavier. Xavier has enough things to do already. I can't depend on him anymore.

She raises her arms and I close my eyes, waiting for it to come...

"Sidney," a rough, attractive voice stops her in her tracks. I slowly slide my eyes open to see Ian standing in front of me, a cold expression on his features. "This has gone on long enough."

"But Ian..." she whines, slinging her arms around his neck, "I have to teach this... thing a lesson." She gestures to me, and then swoops in for a kiss. "You'll let me, right?" she pouts. He stops her when she is inches from his mouth, disentangling himself from her grasp.

"Don't you have to be somewhere else right now?" he prompts her, staring into her eyes. Her gaze becomes hazy, glassy under his gentle stare. Her next words are submissive, expressionless.

"Yes, Ian," she gets up and walks over to her desk. Sidney picks up her backpack and walks out the door, and the girls drop me. I fall to the floor, the tears finally coming. They gush out of me like a flood, dripping onto my shirt I thought Sidney liked. I should have known it would turn out like this.

A hand wraps around my shoulder, the same relaxing voice entering my thoughts. "Cheer up, Mona. Everything's okay." I look up to see the whole class staring at me, completely quiet.

"Look at what you did to her," Ian pointed at all of them. "Each and every one of you."

"But we didn't hit her!" one of Sidney's girls exclaims, almost as if she did nothing wrong.

"You didn't stop Sidney from hitting her," he gave her a steely gaze; "you even helped, holding her back."

"I'm sorry!" another one of Sidney's minions leaped out from the crowd, hugging Ian, "I won't ever do something like that again! Sidney was just so..." she forces up a tear, looking into his eyes. It is immediately obvious that she likes him.

"Get away from me," he snaps, and she looks at him sadly, "I don't like liars." She retreats into the crowd, crestfallen. I hold my hands to my face, trying to stop them, but the tears keep spilling into my palm. Ian comfortingly hugs me tighter, whispering in my ear.

"I'm sorry I couldn't come earlier," he apologizes, "I was in the bathroom. As soon as I got back, this was going on." Gently he rises with me, pulling me upwards. "Cheer up."

"I'm okay," I choke through my sadness. I thought I wasn't supposed to depend on anyone. Easily I could have broken free of those girls, but it was the words that were like true stabs in the gut. I can't understand why I can't stand up for myself.

"No you aren't," Ian says softly. He sneaks a look at the rock-like teacher at the computer. "Stupid teacher," he mutters as he leads me into the hallway. Once we are alone, I subconsciously put my head on his shoulder, sobbing.

"What did I do?" I pour out my fears, not knowing quite what I am doing. Somehow his voice and presence makes me relax, makes me trust him. "What did I do to deserve this?"

"Nothing," he gently pulls apart from me, looking into my eyes. I notice that I don't have to look up so much anymore. His big blue eyes, so like Sidney's, are so close... "You are a person, just like us."

Guilt flashes through me as I realize I am not truly a person. Not anymore.

"But please tell me," he says, "why did your cut heal so quickly?" He seems more than concerned, actually interested. My heart rate quickens as I realize that maybe he thinks I am different. Maybe a person, but still different.

I am different. Why am I so ashamed of it?

"I am not normal," I say softly, "I am a monster." The tears begin again, never ceasing. Ian shakes his head.

"No. Not a monster."

I try to pull myself together. "Well, I'm definitely different," I insist.

"I prefer calling it unique, or special," he smiles, "and you aren't the only one." Carefully he looks up and down the hallway, and then pulls me into an empty room. The lights are dim, and dozens of empty desks are scattered around. Urgently he scans me, staring into my eyes. "Let me see..." he murmurs, all the while looking deeply at me. His gaze is penetrating, and I find myself begin to fall beneath them. Quickly I shake myself free of this daze, frightened. How can he do that with one look? I felt as if I was... losing myself.

"So it doesn't work on you," he mumbles, breaking our mutual stare. "That's what I thought." He breaks into an enchanting smile.

It is then that I notice how good looking he is. He has light chestnut hair, tanned skin, and a muscular body that is similar to Xavier's attractive build. Why do all these handsome guys keep popping up around me nowadays?

"Mona, I'm just like you," he grabs my hands. They feel soft and warm in his huge grasp, my slender hands fitting perfectly. "I'm special."

"Special? In what way?" Xavier suddenly flashes through my head. He's "special" too, even more so than me. However, he doesn't regard it as a bad thing, and my classmates don't bully him like they do me. Why am I treated so different? Why do I treat myself so different?

"Since birth, I have been able to hypnotize women," he says, a little bit too eager for my taste. I almost leap away from him. I definitely wasn't expecting that. But once I think about it, that would make sense. The way Sidney just obeyed Ian...

"Did you hypnotize Sidney into liking you?" I ask.

"She's just a toy," he shakes his head, "I don't hypnotize people, especially my toys, into liking me. They all fall for my stellar good looks." Ian grins, showing me a killer bicep.

I laugh. This is almost as hilarious and strangely creepy as when Xavier said he was a werewolf almost immediately after meeting me. "I thought people couldn't really hypnotize others," I giggle.

Ian gasps jokingly, "Mona! Hypnotizing is an art. People practice it all over the world. I just have an extra special gift for it." He is still grasping my hands tightly, and suddenly I feel the need to escape.

"I'm going to break up with Sidney," he says, "someone who I can't hypnotize is much more interesting to me," He shoots me a wink. "I like not being the controlling one."

"What?" I am growing nervous now. What does he mean?

"I'm going to make you mine, but without the hypnotizing. I want to see if I can do it," he grins. A hint of determination is in his eyes.

"No..." I back away, accidentally knocking into a desk. It tumbles over, hitting the ground with a clash. Fear is now in my steps. I don't want Ian. I want...

"I've finally found someone as special as I am," he tightens his grip, "this will be a fun game." The fear immediately recedes, and now I am almost consumed with laughter. So this is a game to him. He doesn't truly like me, but he wants me to fall for him. I smile good-naturedly. So this isn't a love of Xavier's caliber.

If only Ian knew how special I really am.

Party Time

"Just go ahead and try," I laugh, "try and steal me from him."

I point as a huffing and puffing Xavier stands in the doorway. He is staring at our linked hands with barely veiled disgust. I smirk, willing to play a little game of my own.

"I thought you were gone for the day!" I exclaim, ripping my hands from his with so much force that I nearly spin, and rushing to him, "I'm so glad you're back!" I give him one of his own bone-crushing hugs, and out of the corner of my eye, I see him slightly wince. "Act lovey-dovey," I hiss in his ear whilst delving for a kiss on his neck. It burns when I touch him with my soft lips, tingling with passion that is about to break from its collar. Xavier is bewildered for a minute, then he joins in, his arms wrapping around my form. For a minute, there is no place I would rather be. I subconsciously close my eyes, drowning in his intoxicating aroma...

"I know you guys are faking," Ian says confidently.

"What are you talking about?" I ask, pulling away from Xavier so I can see Ian's smug face. The curtain is closed, and the critic isn't satisfied.

He grins knowingly, "you don't do anything that regular couples would. You've fooled the rest of the school, but not me. I see how you rip your hand from Xavier in the hallways. I know that you don't love him."

I look from Ian to Xavier, alarmed. I rush to him, hugging him tightly. I should become an actress.

"Why would you say that?" I rant, "that is so mean!" I shoot Ian a death glare, and for a moment, Ian seems unsettled. And for another second, in the safety of his warm hands, I am unsettled too.

Maybe I have been lying to myself all this time.

Away from the eyes of our audience, practically buried in each other's arms, Xavier shoots me a wink. I roll my eyes, and the forbidden question flits out of my head like a stray thought, ready to return at a later date. A date I am definitely not waiting for.

"Okay then," Ian shrugs, "if you hate me so much, then we can just be friends first." He grins mischievously, "I know, sooner or later, you will be falling for my irresistible charm. I did save you, you know."

"Save you?" Xavier asks suspiciously, narrowing his beautiful eyes, "from what?" The animal in him seems to rise, and for a second I spy the wolf in him, baring his teeth at the intruder.

Ian's perfectly shaped mouth twists into a smirk. "Sidney, well, was having one of her bad days," he hints, leading Xavier to the obvious. He turns to me, utmost concern carved in his features.

"What did she do to you?" he asks with probing eyes that look into my soul.

"Nothing," I lower my eyes, ashamed that I couldn't have taken care of it myself. Ashamed that once again, someone had to save me.

Anger builds up in him, clouding his handsome features. "Tell me." For a second, I can sense his ancient, yet perfectly preserved mind, superior in almost every way as he speaks to Ian.

"Don't get angry with him!" I yell, running between them, "I will tell you myself."

My breaths are heavy as Xavier finally turns to me, the anger dissipated from his face. However, some bafflement is still in his expression. Why would I save Ian from his wrath? I don't know for sure myself. "What happened, Mona?" he questions me softly, gently.

I am nearly choking the sentences out, for it is my failure. I do not want Ian to tell, for Xavier will kill him, whereas he will only be disappointed in me if my lips form the words. But I don't want him to be disappointed. I want him to be proud.

"They bullied me," I look to the floor, staring at the floor, "because I am different. Because you talk to me." Silence sizzles through the air, thoughts lingering on the tip of my tongue. "Because suddenly I have everything they have ever wanted," I whisper, concluding my insight. Xavier's eyebrows rise slightly, and he chuckles.

"Jealousy, huh?" I stare at his face, contorted with amusement. He doesn't even seem serious. "So what did they do to bully you?"

"They were about to cut her with a knife," Ian cuts in; "they already slapped her and bruised her with their words." I marvel over Ian's thoughtful diction. They bruised me with words... nothing suits the impact better.

Xavier straightens, the laughter vanishing from him as quickly as a stray thought. "Sidney slapped Mona?" his words are full of caution and worry, "did she draw blood?"

"Of course she did," Ian shrugs, "you know how she likes to wear a ton of rings."

His face is now robotic. "How fast did it heal?"

"About thirty seconds," I say quickly, "they called me a monster." Memories rise in my mind, most of which I can barely bear to remember.

Xavier doesn't even look at me, staring at Ian. "Mona, go home. Wes is checking you out. I will join you later."

"What?" I stare at his deathly serious face with unrestrained worry. Suddenly it seems as if the happiness is sucked from the room, Xavier walking closer to Ian with measured footsteps.

"Go home," he growls at me, and I literally jump back. I am not fond of this side of him... it is as if Xavier morphs into someone I do not know at times like this. Quickly I race out the door and into the hallway, bringing the door to a gentle halt behind me. The last glimpse I snag of them is when they are inches apart, Xavier demanding something from Ian with surprising force. What is he planning? Why did their discovery of my quick healing change his attitude so much?

I force myself to trust him, walking down the hallway slowly. Deep in thought, I wonder what exactly Xavier wanted to talk to Ian about. Everything seems so mysterious now, cloaked in secrecy.

Everything went through a complete and total change, a 180 degree turn of behavior in that extremely hot classroom. Why did he send me away?

A golden vision troops to meet me just as the bell rings, people coming out of the classrooms and almost completely stopping at the sight. Such beautiful, shiny gold hair... not one person has hair even close to that color in the entire school. Even Sidney's voluptuous blond hair pales in comparison to this man.

I sigh as Wes waves at me, knowing exactly what will come next.

Great. Another round of whispers to pass among my classmates.

"Mona!" he calls, as if waving isn't enough, "we have to go!" He finally reaches me, putting his handsome face near my ear. Shivers run up and down my arm as he touches my arm. "We captured the Shifter, and you need to get there to coax it out as soon as possible."

People are edging closer to the rays of sunshine reflecting off his hair with eyes of wonder. Many more are staring at me with viciously envious eyes. They must be wondering why I am suddenly talking to all these beautiful guys.

I'm still wondering that too.

I allow Wes to drag me to the door, passing the tons of silent, staring people that would probably love to chop me in half right now. His hand feels so warm, but doesn't burn me like Xavier's touch does. They are both incredibly handsome, yet each of them feels so different.

Right before he whisks me outside, the door where I just exited swings open and two beautiful guys step out. One has dizzily blue eyes, while the other outshines him with eyes of emeralds and azure hair that glitters in the sunlight. Each move the blue-haired man makes is graceful and smooth, his body flawless. Some eyes are immediately magnetized to this new entrance.

Sidney appears in the hallway, walking as if she is about to faint. Cloudiness is in her eyes, and she almost stumbles down the walkway when she sees my face. However, she quickly turns from me and rights herself, heading to Ian as he waves her over. She transforms into the beauty queen she is right before our eyes, fluttering her eyelashes at Xavier as she starts to talk to him. And Xavier begins to truly talk back.

I can see the corner of his mouth turn up in a flirtatious smirk, watching the way he flipped his head back in a seductive laugh. Those actions used to be mine and mine only... why is he using them on Sidney? Strange, curious jealousy floods through me at the sight, and I quickly shake my head. I can't be affected by Xavier. I don't love someone like him, so it shouldn't matter to me.

But then why does it hurt?

Wes practically drags me into the bright outdoors, my eyes unable to tear away from Xavier on their own. He smiles as I blink once, twice... trying to banish the image of him from my vision.

"Looks like someone is lovestruck..." Wes says laughingly, patting me on the shoulder, "I knew this would happen."

"I don't LOVE HIM!" I angrily punch Wes in the arm, and he jokingly staggers backwards.

"It's okay, Mona," he tries to comfort me, "you guys are fated to be together anyways. Why are you so opposed to the idea that you might be in love with him?"

I freeze, my mind hovering over that one question.

"Because I don't like him," I cross my arms, trying to hide my discomfort.

"Yes, you do," he slings one handsome arm over my shoulder, "don't lie to your best friend."

"Who's that?" I finally crack a smile, all the while pulling away from his friendly gesture. "I don't have a best friend."

"That hurts, Mona," Wes holds his stomach as if I had stabbed him, "that hurts real bad." He stumbles to the ground, groaning so strangely that it actually looks like he's laughing...

I giggle along with him, pulling him up. We begin to walk again, this time a little more relaxed, my mind relieved of worrying about Xavier. Wes might as well be my best friend, because I have practically no one else. No girls want to talk to me, so many being envious, yet horrified over what they had seen today. A hole is in the pit of my stomach now as I realize I don't have a single friend that is a girl.

Crawling onto Wes's back, I hold on as he zooms into the forest. It is almost as if we disappear, only a whisper of reality as we whisk through the trees like a Shifter would. I feel weightless, as if I am flying as we travel. I will never forget this feeling... though it is not quite the same as the time when Xavier was the one beneath me. Whenever Xavier is the one carrying me, I can feel the pounding of his heartbeat, the warmth exploding between us like fire.

Suddenly we halt, and I find myself in the middle of a vast clearing in the forest. I soon recognize it to be the backyard at the mansion, one so large that it would easily swallow five football fields. The rich, enhanced air of the garden wafts to our nostrils, the sky clear and blue. I twist my head to look up at it, up at the sparse birds fluttering through the horizon like little, lost children.

But then, to contrast with the innocence, fiery hell was peering with eyes of red into my soul. This time the possessed one is a woman, beautiful and elegant with ebony hair and creamy white skin. However, she is writhing about in agony, and my heart suddenly aches for her. Just a few days before, I would have been jealous of her for being so beautiful. Now I know what a curse it can be.

Cuts stretch across her arms like veins, dark red blood oozing forth like lava from the depths of the earth. Both of them are being held down by Ray and Yí, her long nails scratching at their skin. It is quite strange to see, their arm constantly drawing forth blood then retreating as the wounds heal almost as quickly as they appear. But the pain is still there... every time she pierces their flesh, a wince comes forth on the corner of their lips. A smile stretches across her flushed cheeks, one corrupted by malice and mischief. Such a pretty monster.

I walk up to her, bending to look at her eyes closely. There is even more redness than the other boy I healed, so red that I am convinced she had been possessed for a very long time. "She was a bad one?" I ask them wonderingly.

"Terrible," Wes groans, "She had already killed thirty people by the time we even reached her."

"It might be better just to kill her," Ray says softly, "she's wanted everywhere. She will probably be on death row in a couple weeks."

Anger builds up in me, combined with horror and pure disgust. "It's not HER," I say sharply, "it is the Shifter inside her. Why should we kill her for something that isn't her fault?"

I lean over her, watching her form in the green grass. My finger trembles slightly as I place it on her forehead, shaking even more as I am immediately enveloped in voices. These voices are very weak and the boom of the overwhelming drum is drowning out everything. I can't even hear her voice, only sense her tiny protest as it drowns in the depths of torture.

How can I help her, who is so lost?

Suddenly I feel a terrible pain in my hand, and I jerk it away. Red smears across the tip, a throb in my index finger growing. I gasp as I realize she had bitten me, a bit of her blood on the end of her tooth. She is staring at me with real hate, a cackle emitting from her lips. Quickly I wipe my hand on my shirt and with a newfound determination, plop my entire hand on her forehead. I will not lose to this.

I search for the presence, amplifying her with all my might. All my strength, all my hope is poured into her, trying to help the one oppressed. Funny how the one hateful action fuels my drive towards the Shifter's demise.

A pair of hands seize me right before I fall into the darkness, no energy left. The draining of my force ceases, and I land into a warm embrace. Almost immediately the energy returns, fulfilled as peace comes. Quickly my eyes fly open, and I find myself to be near Wes, his eyes of concern. "You did it again," he smiles weakly, "she is saved."

I cannot move, for if I do, I will faint. Everything right now seems so dark, so weary. I hate this feeling I have right after helping the monsters, the feeling of complete and total helplessness. I always, at times like this, see my father with his eyes of red stare into my soul, cackling as he stabs a knife into my heart.

Reality dances a little further, a hairsbreadth away from my grasp. Everything becomes woozy, and I become aware that this is the end. Sleep has come to take me, and the death is on its heels. My father is chuckling as the blood seeps from my wound. This is what I get for trying to fight against the Shifters. I am too weak...

Maybe it would be best to close my eyes for a while.

"Mona," a voice whispers, on the edge of my almost nonexistent thoughts. I am floating, suspended in time. For now, I am dead. Dead to my hopes, dead to my troubles, dead to reality.

A hand shakes my arm. "Please wake up, Mona." The voice serves as a fishing rod, reeling me to surface no matter how much I want to lay beneath the murky waters. I cough and sputter, unwilling to revive myself. Being dead is so peaceful.

"W-what?" I groan, my eyes cracking open. The first thing I see is a clear, white ceiling. Then, there is a face. "Jake?" I wonder, spotting the crystal hair and the light skin.

"Yep, that's me," he grins with a vibrant smile someone could only describe as perfect.

No one else is around me, only the soft breeze and velvet covers. I peer up at his face as he continues to talk, obviously unwilling to surrender me to the void once more. "Xavier was here, but he had to go to his room to get ready for something about thirty minutes ago," he chatters, "we are all sort of used to you fainting by now. This one was pretty bad, about three hours. It is almost six o' clock already."

"Three hours?" I shake myself free of the suffocating chains, "usually it is around thirty minutes!" She must have sucked every ounce of energy I had. Anger flashes through my head at the thought that the beautiful woman took three hours of my life. Not that it matters anyway. I'm... immortal now, I suppose.

It is rather hard to believe, that I will be stuck with them forever. At first it sounded appealing, but now the thought of not living out the rest of my life seems dull and boring. It is as if we took a video tape, pressed pause on a certain scene, and threw away the remote. I never should have agreed... and I wouldn't have if not for my parents. But now it doesn't matter so much. It isn't like banishing these Shifters are helping my parents come back to life. However, it gives me a good feeling, as if my life is actually worth something. Although what I am now living isn't true life.

"Wes is taking her to a nearby airport to send her to Europe. Apparently she knows some French, and we found a passport in her wallet. Anywhere right now is better than America," he smiles slightly.

"Did she remember what she had done?" I question. He shakes his head.

"When the Shifter left, so did her memory. Just like the last few."

A sad, defeated feeling enters my chest. Shifters are so mean... just waltzing in and ruining people's lives for fun. Look at how they ruined me. I am who I am because of them.

Is that a good thing, or a bad thing?

I sit up, watching Jake stare out the window. He is alight with wonder, seeing the leaves shake off the trees and dance in the nighttime wind. They are swirling, twisting and diving, dipping and weaving, waltzing in the sky. I turn to look at them also, my small, red lips parting in a smile. The sun is hanging just over the ground, so close that they are barely an inch apart. The orange and purple are just beginning to spread across the horizon, and the garden flowers are shining like jewels in the light.

Then, I turn and peer at my own skin in its radiant beauty, creamy skin without a flaw. My hands are slender and smooth, along with my feet. I slide off the bed, walking to a mirror. For a minute, I watch my body in all its elegance, its perfection.

I hate this body, for it has brought me much sorrow. Beauty has a terrible, terrible price.

"Mona, are you okay?" Jake comes to stand beside me, placing a hand on my shoulder. He must have spied the small, almost invisible tear brimming in my eyes.

"Yes, I'm fine," I bluff, slowly pushing him away, "never been better."

"That's a lie," he says softly. There is a pause while I just stare at myself. Trying to believe the person in the mirror is truly me. After a few more seconds, Jake can't take it. "Go talk to Xavier about it," he points towards the doorway.

Maybe that would be best. After a moment of contemplating, I edge out of the room, heading towards Xavier's chamber slowly. My vision is still shaking, wobbly as I stumble over to the door. I think back to the school, when Xavier was talking to Sidney. Jealousy strikes like lightning, and I quickly shake my head. I don't want to remember. I don't want that green envy to blossom within me until there is no containing it.

I knock on the door, feeling the carpet beneath my feet crinkle slightly.

"Who's there?" Xavier opens the door slowly, looking out at me. Immediately his icy cold green eyes scan me, as if I am only a parcel. He seems tired, his handsomeness rugged. Slight circles are beneath his eyes, and he is wearing a t-shirt and jeans. I detect strong cologne that nearly makes my eyes water, mixed with that attractive scent that is on him naturally.

"What's with that cologne?" I walk into the room, trying to find the bottle it came from, "it is so strong!" Not that it doesn't smell good, but its presence is suffocating.

Xavier chuckles, immediately spiking my interest. "We both have strong senses of smell," he smiles, "but regular people don't."

He feels so cold to me right now. Why is that?

"But there are no regular people here," I point out the obvious, "only werewolves and... me."

There is a brief silence as Xavier checks his watch. "Oops, got to go," he says, "I'm going to be late." He shoots me a brief smile, and before I can protest, lands a kiss on my forehead. Then he starts walking out of the room, inciting my anger.

"Where are you going?!" I yell after him, but no response follows. Running into the hallway, I race to the garage. He is sliding into a car, the Mercedes that is used to impress people. Why is he driving? And why not one of the cheaper cars?

Is he going back to that stupid club he said he would stop visiting?

I jog to the front door, and zip into the wild underbrush. Tailing the car, I follow it perfectly. Yi has been teaching me stealth techniques, and I have gotten pretty good at it. My heartbeat pounds furiously in my chest. Why can't Xavier tell me what he is doing?

I begin to question my own actions. Why am I acting like the jealous girlfriend? Not that I am his girlfriend. Not at all.

I wonder briefly why I am such a good liar to myself.

The forest ends, and the houses begin. I find it a little trickier to maneuver through the scenery and behind the car. The car is easier to spot than most, with it being a strikingly red color. However, it must be incredibly easy for him to see me, wearing a light blue shirt, dark jeans and is running like crazy.

Quickly I duck behind a bush as the car suddenly halts. Xavier probably caught sight of me, and was wondering if the figure was really me, or a ghost. There is a few more seconds, and then the car starts again. I creep along, trying to let the car get as far ahead as possible without losing it.

I almost trip over a branch, scraping my foot slightly as I stumble along. The blood comes forth, and then disappears completely as the wound heals. With the fast recovery comes remembrance, and I recall Sidney's deathly sharp nails as they scraped across my cheek...

With a shudder, I shake myself free of the daze and follow the car into a strange neighborhood. The houses are huge here, almost like mansions. It reminds me of Ken and Barbie's dream house, a perfect world for the perfect couple. Suddenly I think of how Barbie, the perfect girl, must have felt when she gained envious girls' fondling and young boys' hatred.

The car stops in front of a gigantic house, the biggest one in the neighborhood. It is a creamy color, with enchantingly tall pillars and a beautiful, yet small fountain in the yard. Gorgeous flowers line the walls, and a huge set of marble doors stand proudly in the front. It is beautiful, almost as

elegant as the mansion in the forest.

The door swings open, and a slender, yet built man exits the building. I gasp.

Ian?

He swings down the stairs with a swagger that suits him so well, sliding into the car smoothly. I suddenly hear Ian muttering, my brain shockingly processing Ian's words.

"I thought I wouldn't have to go to her stinking party..." he says sharply, "why do I have to help you, anyway?"

"Because if you don't, I'll beat you up," a melodious, joking voice replies, a hint of seriousness is involved.

"Whatever." He slams the door shut, and suddenly I hear nothing except the grumbling of the engine. What party would be going on right now?

I think briefly about the terrible feeling in my stomach. This feeling is usually associated with one person, one I know very well. Didn't Sidney say she had a party on Monday?

But if I go to the party, then won't they see me? How am I going to slip in without being noticed...?

A stupid, obnoxious plan forms in my head, and I immediately act upon it.

I walk to the door after the car drives away, standing on the flawless floor. Excitement ripples through me as I raise my knuckles and knock. I have never done anything this crazy before.

A small, petite girl opens the door, her golden-brown eyes staring up at me in wonder. She is very slim, adorned in a mini-skirt and a low cut top, but so tiny she looks like a little girl. Her hair is a bright, dyed red, and her skin is a light brown color, probably generated from some tanning bed. She is pretty, though, with pixie-like facial features and pink, kissable lips.

"Hey," she scans me slowly, crawling over every inch of me. Then she lights up, joy in her movements. "You're really pretty!" she smiles, her voice peppy. She sounds like a cheerleader, yet I can't find it in my heart to dislike the teen.

"Thank you," I laugh, hoping to win her over, "I'm Mona, Ian's girlfriend."

"Really? I'm his sister, Lauren." She goes wide-eyed, "he got lucky this time! You might be the only girl so far that is as hot as he is." I narrow my eyes slightly. Did Ian hypnotize his own sister to be so adoring of him?

"Yes," I try to get to the point, "in fact, I'm trying to find him right now. Do you happen to know where he is?"

"Ian?" she peers into the road, then back at me, "oh, he left. You just missed him."

I choke back a laugh as I realize my plan is working perfectly. "Aw, that's too bad," I force a pout to my lips, "where did he go? Maybe I could meet him."

Suddenly she grows pale, her hand rising to her mouth. Her lip trembles slightly, and her next words seem restrained. "He said he's going to Sidney's house," she says softly, and then her eyes narrow. "You know her?"

"My boyfriend's ex-girlfriend!" I exclaim with faked recognition, "why would he want to go there?" My mouth parts in a perfect, astounded "o" along with the girl.

"I'm sorry Mona," her face grows resolute, "but Ian might be cheating on you. He does it all the time... I tell him not to! He never listens to me, though."

I mold my expression into one of fury. "I need to catch him in the act," I say angrily, all the while laughing inwardly.

"Yes," she says, "but I think it is a party where you won't be welcome."

This conversation is going perfectly. "What if I somehow get a disguise?!" I ask energetically, as if the thought just popped into my head.

She brightens up also, "that's a great idea! Come inside, and I'll dress you in some of my clothes." Swinging the door open wider, she ushers me inside. For a minute, my eyes are overloaded from all the luxury around me, but then they slowly adjust.

Dark, elegant couches lay beside a roaring fireplace, a marvelous set of stairs to the side. The main room is huge, accented by a very small pond filled with koi. A gorgeous chandelier hangs above me, crystals casting light along the ceiling. Lauren just walks past all this stuff as if it is nothing, starting up the stairs with the click of her heels. Even with her four inch heels she is about five inches shorter, and I am wearing sandals. However, she seems to wear an elegance, a dignity I feel that I may be lacking. This a rich girl's aura, full of confidence and self-assurance.

I scurry behind her, rather curious to see Lauren's room.

As we enter, I notice immediately that it is not a huge room. There is a beautiful, queen sized bed, accompanied by some nice dressers and a desk with a huge Mac computer. There must be more than this.

"This is pretty," I try to get her to show off more so I can see the true splendor.

"Really? You think so?" she smiles like a puppy, "this isn't even the best part, though!" I laugh as she leads me to another door. It is so easy to read a rich person's mind.

She slides the door open to reveal a walk in closet about the size of her room, with sofas, TVs, and rows and rows of clothes. I stare at the racks, all labeled with the category they fit into. "I told Daddy I didn't want a big room, but a big closet instead. And he got me one!" she claps her hands happily, and I get a basic idea about just how rich they are.

Leading me over to the party dresses rack, she calmly surveys me. "Most of my stuff won't fit you, or will be very short. You will just have to try this stuff on." Almost immediately she stacks a pile of dresses on me, and leads me to the huge "hall of mirrors".

"Start now while I find you a suitable wig," she commands, then disappears into another rack. I stare at the clothes, at my body, and back at the clothes.

Fun.

I slide each dress on, one after the other, wincing at how short each one is. If it is short on Lauren, then that makes it incredibly short on me. Some aren't even past my butt, and others are like shirts.

I find a simple, yet seductive dress out of the pile, designed to reach right past Lauren's knee, and slide it on. It fits perfectly, although the skirt hits mid-thigh. I decide to simply settle with that, liking the simplicity.

Lauren waltzes in with a dark black wig, straight and shiny. With a flourish, she pulls out a pair of black stilettos from the bucket by my side and practically throws it at me. "I think we are similar shoe sizes. Squeeze into it, okay?"

She pulls my hair back into a bun, placing the wig over it. It doesn't look very real, but at least makes me look completely different. I watch myself in the mirror. This will just have to do...

"Thank you," I offer her my best smile, "now, could you tell me where Sidney's house is?"

I waltz into a dirty yard, stained with beer cans and cigarettes, with disgust. A huge house looms before me, music pounding furiously from within. People bubble around the entrance, many lounging on the several chairs outside. There is much movement inside the house, several girls in

bikinis and others in dresses like mine. There must be a pool around there, for so many people to be in swimsuits.

Suddenly I feel overdressed.

I stumble to the doorway, edging into the crowd slowly. People immediately rub up against me as I am swallowed by the crowd, many of the whispers starting. I stand out like a sore thumb, and I momentarily regret letting Lauren dress me up like a Barbie doll. I should have insisted on jeans and a top, instead of settling for this...

Suddenly I spy Xavier's head of blue hair, talking to a random girl in the crowd. She is wearing a light swimsuit cover-up and has brown hair. He leads her away, spiking my interest and even jealousy. What is he doing with her?

I back into a corner, my gaze focusing on the two figures navigating through the crowd. I recognize the girl to be one of "Sidney's", and my breath catches in my throat.

Suddenly, Ian appears, and the girl is immediately whisked away by the enchanting man as Xavier quickly returns to the floor. He smiles at another one of Sidney's girls, initiating the conversation once again. After a few more minutes, Xavier leads the girl to the exact same spot, where Ian appears again with a sly smile across his face. The first girl reappears in the crowd, grinning broadly.

What is going on?!

It is like Xavier is running an operation, snagging a girl that belongs to Sidney and taking them to Ian. He is moving rather quickly, being such a sweet talker that he can get a girl to follow him to the moon in seconds.

"Who are you?" a harsh, abrasive voice asks. I look up into the face of Sidney, her face in a grimace. She is wearing outrageously thick makeup, and a dress that defies all my expectations as far as provocativeness goes. Her heels are much larger than mine, her whole form intimidating. My expression morphs into morbid fear, and I race away from her like lightning.

I clatter outside, swinging off my heels. I grab them in my hands as Sidney appears before me, curiously surveying me. A crowd forms around us, many curious to see what she was asking about. Sidney probably regrets calling attention to us, for now people will compare us.

"Who are you?" she asks again, peering into my eyes. I should have gotten contacts.

Suddenly she reaches forward and rips the wig from my head. "Mona!" she screeches, "I didn't expect to see YOU here." She smiles laughingly, "I thought you would get that you aren't welcome."

I catch the wig as she lets it drop, holding it close to my chest. "I just wanted to... visit," I squeak, barely above a whisper.

Sidney looks at me with a smirk, "well, you got here at just the perfect time! We can finish what we started from this morning..." She takes a step forward, "we can see if another cut will heal just as quickly as the first one."

The pool behind me comes closer and closer as I back up, and soon my feet are on the edge. There is no place to run. No place to hide.

"Leave my girlfriend alone," a smooth, commanding voice erupts, and a muscled arm links to mine. Sidney's eyes grow wide, and she smiles weakly.

"Girlfriend? So it is official?" she says rather bitterly, "congratulations."

I look up into Xavier's face to find he is glaring at Sidney. His beautiful blue hair is sparkling along with his green eyes, and his arm feels so warm. However, what shocks me so much are his words. Girlfriend? I am his girlfriend?

Ian troops up on my other side. "Yeah, Sidney," he says menacingly, "stop being mean. I don't think we can be together anymore, especially with you acting so jealous like this."

Sidney gasps along with her many followers, and we can see why. Ian is one of Sidney's strengths. Some of her popularity points. Ian is the quarterback on the football team, and that guy is usually reserved for the best looking or most popular girl in the school.

It is at this time that Sidney must realize that her throne has been usurped.

We start walking towards the front of the house, when the snake spits out some last minute venom. "I wish you had died when I pushed you the other day," she hisses as we pass her, each word like a lash against my skin. I haven't ever had someone hate me this much before, and I have to admit, it hurts.

Xavier suddenly turns, fire alight in his eyes. He is like a bull, ready to run someone over while he stares at Sidney. With sudden force, he crosses over to her, and shoves her in the cold water. She squeals, splashing underneath the surface.

Without another word, both of the guys escort me out of the house and into the car. People stare at us on the way out as if we are aliens, as if they don't know us.

Well, this is an interesting development.

Xavier unloads me into the backseat as if I am cattle, the other two grabbing the front. As the engine roars to life, we bathe in silence, and I feel, for some reason, as if I am about to get scolded.

"Mona," he sighs finally, making me jump when he says my name, "why did you come?"

There is a pause as I dig for an answer that doesn't sound like admitting I was jealous. "I just wanted to... meet you there?" I meagerly reply, my answer not even sounding true to myself.

Xavier laughs, a noise that makes my heart flutter. "That's a lie," he grins, "I saw you following me all the way to Ian's house."

"I was that easy to spot?" Terror strikes my heart. I thought I did pretty good, considering the nearly barren scenery.

"Well, I've had a lot of practice," he looks to the mirror and our eyes meet. Right now, they are soft, full of laughter and sweetness. "You really shouldn't have come," he emits resignedly; "it isn't like the party was much fun for you anyway."

Ian twists in his seat to look at me. "Where did you get that hot dress?" he asks, "it looks like something my sister would wear." His eyes rake over me appreciatively, a smirk gracing his lips. I begin to feel uncomfortable.

"Yeah," Xavier threw in, "I don't remember you having anything like that at home." His eyes narrow. Something tells me he doesn't like me wearing a dress like this.

"I, uh..." I tried to stop, but Xavier's eyes urged me on, "borrowed it." I stare at the dress, how it seems perfect even after I traveled through that crap. The stilettos are still in my hand, along with the furry mess called a wig. He stares at the wig as if it is a monster.

"Well, whatever the reason, you didn't have to follow us. We were trying to wipe the evidence of your cut healing so quickly. That's all," Xavier quickly diverts the subject, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

"Really?" I reply. That does seem to make sense. I feel like a stupid idiot now. "So what about Ian?"

"I hypnotized them," Ian says proudly, "into believing they had never seen it."

"And we were about to get to Sidney," Xavier snapped, "Until YOU just had to make a scene!"

"That was Sidney!" I huff, "leave me alone."

"Anyways, the point is to trust me. When I leave you behind, it is usually for a reason," Xavier finally scolds, and I shudder a little under his calm criticism.

Ian winks at us. "Leave her behind? You guys stay at the same house?"

We both ignore him.

"Well, you could tell me the reason," I say softly, "instead of keeping me in the dark."

"Oh, I will, from now on," he grins, "to stop you from following me." I suddenly get the feeling that Xavier won't let off of this topic for a very, very long time.

We stop at Ian's house, and he practically jumps out. "Thank you, Ian!" I call, and he gives me a little wave as he climbs up the steps to the doorway. Right before we roll out of the driveway, I see Lauren run out and pounce on her brother, smiling broadly. I look at them enviously. What I would give for a normal family...

Zooming home in silence, we gaze at the beautiful flowers as they fade into towering trees. "Xavier?" I finally say, as we are buried in the forest.

Xavier looks back at me. "Yes?" he says, gazing into my soul.

"Do you... understand forever? How do we know if we are immortal?" I try to phrase these questions correctly, these questions without a true answer.

"I have never understood forever, although I may be able to grasp it a little bit better than you might," he stares at the road, his hair ruffling in the air, "I have been a werewolf for a while now, and watching your friends shrivel up and die while you stay perfectly the same is rather disturbing. It gives you the feeling that you are not even real, not even a human. Time and time again I check the obituary to see that one of my parent's friends is dead, living to be even eighty years old. I always think to myself, I know them. I used to talk with them. My parents were the worst. They made me cry the most. You know why, Mona?"

"Because you loved them the most?"

"Because they were my only links to reality. Back ten years ago, I could point at a regular human and say 'You are my mom. You are my dad.' However, I can't do that anymore. Nobody knows me. I am invisible, yet visible to the human eye. I have no connection with them. All I have is my pack, and my mate," he glances at me, smiling weakly.

"I already have no connections to reality," I stare at the floor, facing the undeniable truth, "I am dead to many already. Maybe I should have died along with my parents so I wouldn't have to be so alone."

We reach the mansion, and the car stops. Slowly, the car door opens, and a strong, masculine hand grabs my own. He whirls me into a soothing embrace. "You won't be alone anymore," he whispers into my hair, "we will be together."

We stay like this, suspended in time, each feeling comfort in the other's presence. All the while, my heart is about to burst out of my chest, escalating in speed as the seconds go by. A blush blossoms upon my cheeks as I realize he can probably feel my heart as it beats... all for him.

Embarrassed, I back away, looking anywhere but at him. When I finally glance at his green eyes, I can see the glint of a smile in them. He knows... and he is laughing at me.

I punch him in the arm, unable to control my mortification. He laughs and grabs my hand, holding it in a deathly grip from which I cannot escape. I can feel myself turning into a tomato.

"To answer your other question," Xavier says softly, "we don't know for sure if we are immortal. In fact, we know we will perish someday, due to the prophecy. However, many of us are over a thousand years old, so that sort of makes it confusing. What should we call ourselves if not immortal?"

I am not even listening, absorbed completely in the heat of the moment. My heart of ice is melting because of his burning touch, sparking fire beneath my skin.

"Xavier!" Yi calls, suddenly appearing in the doorway, "come quick!" His handsome eyes are wide, and the door is wide open for us both.

Xavier's eyes grow wide also, and he lets go of me as if I was nothing. "Give me a second," he apologizes, "I'll be right back."

He disappears in the house, leaving only us outside. I walk in after him, Yi shooting me a smile. "Sorry that I interrupted your... um... private time," he smirks as I pass him into the house. I turn and shoot the worst scowl I can conjure at him. Yi can be so annoying.

The huge door comes to a stop as I start walking through the hallways, following their smell to where they are located. "Mona, stop!" Yi calls after me, "stay here with me! You aren't supposed to-"

I abruptly stop listening to him, getting closer and closer to whatever the werewolves are trying to hide.

As I approach Ray's room, I begin to hear more voices. "I guess we knew it would come sooner or later," Jake says.

"What are we going to do?" Wes asks, adopting a frightened tone that is much unlike him.

"We will probably have to evacuate," Xavier says firmly, "we need to protect her."

"Aren't you surprised that they finally figured out how to email?" Ray laughs, "up until last year they always sent letters."

I creep in through the open doorway, seeing immediately that they all are crowded around a computer. As quiet as a cat, I slip right behind them, peering on the screen. Internet Explorer is on, and the site is Google's Gmail. A certain email is displayed, and they are all scanning it vigorously.

"What is this?" I ask calmly, causing almost all of them to jump.

It reads;

Dear Pack Number 101,

It has come to our attention that you have converted a human to a werewolf without our approval. This is the third offense within Pack Number 101 in 50 years, and although the last two have been pardoned, this last offense is simply inexcusable. You are called to a hearing on Wednesday of this week at Headquarters to determine the pack's fate. The newconvert will be promptly exterminated. Have a good day.

Sincerely,

The Council

All of them turn to look at me, a sad expression on their faces. Except for Xavier, of course, instead with eyes of fury. This cannot be good.

Come And Catch Me, If You Can...

I look at them all, wondering what is going on.

"You guys converted someone?" Peering over their shoulders, I squint at the words. Maybe I missed something.

But instead it just clarifies the obvious.

"Uh, nothing!" Wes quickly moves to block the screen, "they are talking about another pack!"

"I'm not stupid," I glare at him, pushing him aside. I glance at the screen intently, looking at the words on the screen. Understanding dawns upon me, enlightening my thoughts, my questions. "Then why is it emailed to rayisbeast4ever@gmail.com?"

They all look sheepishly at the floor.

"Xavier," I put my hands on my hips, "tell me NOW." He looks up at me with his spectacular green eyes, not even the hint of a grin at the corner of his mouth.

"It seems as if the Council has tracked you as a recent convert, when you are actually not fully converted," he says quietly, leading me to the worst possible conclusion.

"So..." I look at the screen again and again, "they want to kill me." That can't be true. I never hurt anybody. I didn't even want to be a werewolf. And now this?

"You'll be okay," Xavier wraps an arm around my shoulder, "we won't let them do anything to you. I promise."

I try to drown in his comforting presence, but this time, it does no good. It only makes the pain worse. My heart pounds, thumping furiously in my chest.

"You shouldn't have told her," Ray says loudly. He narrows his eyes at Xavier.

"I would rather have her know the truth," Xavier hisses at his identical counterpart, "and there is no helping it now. We can't just wipe her memories."

Silence erupts in the room as I quickly walk away, hoping that I will reach my room before a single tear falls.

"Well, Xavier, that doesn't exactly give you any brownie points," I hear as my footsteps reach the hallway.

Who cares about brownie points at a time like this?!

I start to run, my feet flying, even blurring as I pound to my bed. Once I am there, I bury myself below the covers, trying to quell the thumping of my heart. Before, I never would have cared about dying, but now I don't want it. It used to be so close that I could kiss its dry, crackled lips, but now I fear it.

The werewolves have frozen time for me. They have thrown away my old body. They have filled me with promises that I would live forever.

And now they want to kill me.

Something about that doesn't seem quite right.

A presence enters the room; a beautiful, glossy-haired man that always takes my breath away. He comes to sit by my side, staring into my eyes.

"You don't believe me when I say that I'll protect you?" his thick, velvety voice murmurs, a graceful hand stroking my hair.

"I just don't know, Xavier," I whisper, shutting my eyes tightly. Do I believe? Do I really?

A fierce, determined look enters his eyes, flame alight. His fingers snap away from my hair, clenched in a fist. "Well, what do I have to do then?" he almost yells, scrunching up his eyebrows in fury. "I've saved you from practically everything. I have been at your side constantly. What more do you need to finally trust me?" I can feel his frustration, his lack of comprehension at my behavior. I don't quite understand either.

Anger begins to boil within me as well, irrelevant anger that doesn't make much sense in my head. "Well, where were you ten years ago? When my parents were murdered?" I say softly, menacingly. Each word is meant to be a sharp stab, a burning pain within him.

He just stares at me, a wondering look on his face. Then he gets up, his elegant form brushing against the stool he was leaning against, and nearly stumbles out of the door.

Tears brim at the corners of my eyes, and I let them fall down my face in rivers.

I remember when I was younger, when life made sense. When I had two parents, a house, and a pet. At times like these, Scotty would scramble into my arms, barking crazily until he was safely perched in my embrace. Then I would hug him, and his warm fur would absorb my sadness until it was sucked away.

Why did I say those things to Xavier? He couldn't have known about my parents' death, let alone save all three of us. I am being so unreasonable, so stubborn and like a spoiled brat. I AM a spoiled brat, not thankful for what I have.

Not many can say they are mates with a hot, stalker-like werewolf.

I guess it is my greediness biting inside me, making me wonder why even though I now have many things, it is like I have nothing. So much has changed... my heart has even been stitched back in place by a man I am unwilling to love. But I still feel empty, broken, like my heart has just unraveled and spilled onto the floor.

A conflict is raging inside my head. Xavier is a creep. He's obsessive. He's sweet. He's supernatural. He's forever.

He's the handsomest thing I have even seen.

Once again I bury my head completely under the covers, ashamed at myself. Xavier doesn't deserve to be hurt like this. I am the one at fault. I destroyed one of the things that matters to him the most.

His gigantic, incredibly treasured pride.

* * *

He does not look at me when I enter the room.

I have never felt this before. His cold, icy treatment has never been released upon me. In the two and a half weeks I have been staying here, his aura has always been warm, comforting. But now I feel unwelcome.

Everyone else can sense this sudden shift in behavior. Xavier's face is like stone, impossibly beautiful, yet unchangeable. Yi is just sitting at the kitchen table, playing with his spoon. Wes doesn't flirt with me, shooting me a brief, encouraging smile.

Jake hands me a small milk carton and a bowl of yogurt. "Eat up," he says brightly. I grab a spoon off the table, shoving it into the sweet, yummy goodness and letting it linger right in front of my lips before closing my mouth over it.

"Please sit down," he directs me to a chair; "we have to talk to you about some things." Being careful not to make eye contact with the blue-haired beast, I plop down, staring into Jake's green eyes.

"What is it?" I say as if I am being forced to sit through a funeral for someone I don't even know, shifting my facial features to suggest that I would rather be anywhere but here. I know I should apologize to Xavier, but my own arrogance does not allow it. All that fills me is bitterness. Heart-wrenching bitterness.

I sneak a quick glance at Xavier, only to find that he is staring at the wall, the window, anything but me. Anger is on the edge of his lips, and his face is resolute. He suddenly turns, catching my gaze, and I finally get to see his eyes. They are burning hot, like fire, scorching me completely. Quickly I look away.

"Mona," Jake starts slowly, "we are going to do everything we can to protect you."

I suddenly get the feeling he is bringing bad news.

"So until Wednesday, you will have personal bodyguards. One will be Xavier, obviously, but Ray also volunteered himself. They will follow you everywhere, Ray in the shadows, Xavier right by your side. Is that clear?" he asks sharply.

"Yes." It is not like I have a choice, anyways. And why would Ray want to guard me?

"And on Wednesday, they will both transport you to a safe haven, where the Council will not be able to find you. We will stay here and fight."

Alarm rises within me. "What good will that do? I don't want you guys to risk your lives for me! I refuse." The guilt would eat me alive if one of them died.

"Mona, we are okay with it. Chill out," Yi says between mouthfuls of Cheerios.

"At least let me fight along with you!" I beg.

"Let's face it," Ray smirks, "you wouldn't exactly be much help to us if you stayed, would you? You can't even conjure a spirit spear, and although you are stronger than the average human, you are also the weakest out of the werewolf population. Plus, you can get rather clouded judgment, and that doesn't exactly help you when fighting."

This is when Xavier would usually punch him in the face, but this time, he doesn't budge.

"Ray got a point there," Yi swallows the rest of his milk, smiling with a white mustache. I narrow my eyes at him, almost snarling. However, I feel almost helpless under their light attack, suddenly realizing how much I have grown to depend on Xavier over the last two and a half weeks.

"Just three days," I say softly, closing my eyes, trying to imagine the probable scenario. Ray stalking me, Xavier walking by my side like a robot. Fun...

"Oh, and you will have to miss school," Jake adds, almost like an afterthought. My eyes grow as wide as saucers.

"WHAT?!" I roar, almost causing the table to shake.

"I knew she wouldn't take it well," Ray muttered to an immobile Xavier, nearly causing my rage to explode.

"The council might be tracking you through the school," Jake tries to explain, "and then it will be easy for them to ambush you on the way home or something. When they realize we aren't traveling to Headquarters on Wednesday, they will immediately send their spies after you."

"Fine," I throw my hands in the air, leaving my half eaten yogurt on the table. "Now, if you will excuse me, I'll just go outside and celebrate my lost privacy."

I stomp away, very much aware of the fact that I resemble a toddler rather than an eighteen year old girl. I've pretty much gotten used to these theatrical entrances and exits... I'm more of a drama queen than I thought.

The world swirls around me as I open the doors to the garden, breathing in deeply as I am enveloped in beautiful sights and aromas. The flowers are even prettier than yesterday, growing more in maturity and loveliness. The colors are bright, as if they are sucked out of the rainbow itself. Trees, full of fresh, decadent fruit, sit pleasantly around the area. I walk over to a peach, and daintily pick it from the leaves. A clear fountain is in the middle of it all, perfectly clean and filtered, and I run the water over the delicacy. With finality, I chomp a bite out of the side, almost sighing as the sweetness almost rolls off my chin. This is pure luxury, one of the finest things I have tasted.

Why is everything so perfect here? Everything is always so clean in the mansion, but I never see them pick up a broom. The food grown here are so delicious, yet I never see anyone tending to them. My clothes always return in my closet immaculately laundered and groomed, but I'm not sure even Xavier knows where the laundry room is.

There must be more going on around here. I am sure of it.

I go to sit by the fountain, balancing edgily on the side, at peace with the world around me. When I finish my peach, I hold it up with my good arm and throw it almost a hundred yards away into the vast forest. Let it decompose over there.

Life has been so easy... without the domestic chores Ms. Penn used to stack upon me, all I have left to do is homework and socializing with the werewolves around me. However, living in a haven with hot guys has its bad points. I always feel like I have to look pretty and attractive around them, like I can't wear sweatpants or oversized t-shirts. Whenever I wear something revealing, though, I am immediately scavenged by their eyes. It can be rather uncomfortable.

I can't even remember the time when I didn't care about clothes and looks, even though that time was only a while ago. I have no idea if that is bad or not, but it is certainly a sign of my definite change.

"Ray, you can come out now," I say nonchalantly, staring pointedly at a slightly ruffling bush about five yards away. There is silence, and I look at it dubiously. "Seriously, Ray, come out," I demand. "I know you are there."

"Have I gotten worse?" Ray moaned as he trooped from behind the bush, "Now even a measly crossbreed can detect my presence."

"Shut up," I snap, "I'm not a crossbreed. I'm a Spier."

"Oh yeah?" His eyebrow cocked, he surveys me jestingly. "Prove it."

I glare at him, saying nothing. It is not my fault that I can't conjure a spirit spear. It's just taking some... time. And he certainly does not have to make fun of me about it.

"I thought so," he chuckles, "for now, you are a crossbreed. Do you want to see if you can shift into a dog or wolf?"

I scrunch up my eyes in anger, staring at him with murder in my eyes. Ray knows that I have already tried to do that, and ended up failing miserably.

"I'm just kidding!" Ray smiles quickly, plopping down beside me on the fountain's edge. "You can't take me so seriously."

"Actually, I can," I snort, "especially when I know for sure that you are serious."

He laughs, and for that one moment, he looks exactly like Xavier; his brown, glossy hair flipping in the wind and his eyes twinkling. "You're right," he smiles briefly, "I was serious." There is a brief pause, and then he speaks again, "I honestly don't think you are a full-fledged Spier. Maybe you will never manage to grasp the ability to form a spirit spear."

His absolutely true words hit me like a hammer, making me consider things I have never thought of before. Will I ever be able to do what a regular Spier can do easily? What might I accomplish instead?

I laughingly consider the irony of my situation. The one thing I wanted the most when deciding to become a Spier, even disobeying Xavier for the chance to get it, was the ability to avenge my parents by killing the creatures I detest. And now, even after I have gone through everything, the

special Talent seems even further away than before.

"Ray, do you really and truly believe that?" I sigh, leaning up against him, marveling at the way my skin sizzles as we make contact. It is close to the way I feel with Xavier... sparks racing through my veins, exploding like fireworks. But no matter how alike they are, it still feels different, a little more dangerous and forbidding with Ray.

I watch his silent, composed face as he looks at the crystal blue water in the fountain. His green eyes are absolutely hypnotizing, an incredibly deep and slightly dark color. The scar that stretches across his cheek also attracts my attention, rough and jagged. Butterflies flutter in my stomach, awareness in my features. Is this strange reaction occurring because his face is Xavier's?

I shake my head, dismissing my thoughts. I cannot think of Xavier right now, much less his identical counterpart.

The silence spans longer, until the tension is stretched tight between us. I almost forget my own question, while fingering the fabric of my shirt, distracted by the scenery around me. Ray is almost frozen, his expression unmoving. "I hope you don't," he finally whispers softly, "for it will be even worse for you then."

"What?" I cock my head, "why worse?"

He stares at me, a dead-set expression on his face, and I suddenly know that he isn't going to say another word on this subject.

I try to prevent the terrible silence from occurring once more. "Ray, can I put my head on your thigh and try to conjure a spirit spear again?" I ask curiously, subconsciously hoping to prove him wrong. Hoping that I can do the near impossible.

He nods, then motions to the fountain. "Sure! Maybe this will help out too." With a dastardly handsome grin, he takes both of his hands and pushes me towards the water. There is a splash, and then I am submerged in the clear substance, my jeans and shirt completely soaked. He steps in also, peeling off his shirt as if it is a second skin. His tanned skin is so close, it sends sparks through my spine. "Xavier!" I squeal at him, subconsciously shivering. The fountain isn't exactly a hot tub.

His smile quickly morphs into annoyance, regarding me coldly. "I am not Xavier," he states, "and I will not be your replacement for him."

"What?" My dripping wet hand alarmingly flies to my mouth. Did I say that?

"That is what my entire life has been, from the very beginning," Ray bitterly rants, "I have always been considered to be the slightly Frankenstein-ed version of Xavier. At the bachelor auctions, I was always second to Xavier. Even Talent-wise I am lacking, just shy of him. Our looks are identical except for my ugly scar and messy hair."

"Are you twins?" I ask softly, looking into the angry eyes I know so well. They remind me of just a few hours ago, when Xavier stared at me for the first time ever with a mixture of fury, pain, and hopelessness.

"Yes," he smiles briefly, "Xavier was the oldest by 3 minutes."

"It's okay, Ray." I shoot him a bright smile, splashing him with water. "You are special in your own way. I'm not going to lie; you and Xavier DO look alike. However, people don't look at you and say 'Look, there's Xavier.' They say 'Look, there's Ray.'"

"I wish I had your confidence," Ray stares into sky, leaning back in the water, "but right now, I am nothing."

I start to lean on the center of the fountain, Ray looking at me amusedly. "I thought you said you were going to lean on my thigh," he says with a smirk.

I can't do that. Not with his tempting expression and shirtless upper torso. I'm not invincible.

"Nah, I think I will pass," I smile, edging a little bit further away from him, trying to escape from the hot guy that is almost making me drool. Ray follows me, a blur of motion until I am suddenly in his arms, unable to move. He is so close...

"Focus," he instructs me carefully, "breathe."

"How can I breathe when you are squeezing me so tightly?" I whisper harshly.

"Lean on me," Ray whispers into my ear, "pretend I am Xavier. Immerse yourself in your mind. You can succeed this time, Mona. You can do it."

I feel myself drowning in him, even though my head is far above the water. Suddenly the arms surrounding me are slightly different, feeling overflowing. It is now the arms and body of the one I love the most.

Did I just think the word love?

Alarm flashes through me, but then vanquishes as quickly as it comes. My eyes are closed, the darkness peaceful. I can feel it coming, forming in my head. It is there, if only I can grasp it.

Suddenly the shackles break, and it slips from between my fingertips. My head snaps back, and then I feel myself sinking so quickly...

In a beautiful room, lined with thick, blood red curtains and marble statues, there is a long table. A person reclines in each seat, each looking very uncomfortable, fidgeting in their position. A chubby, stumpy man is standing off to the side, pouring drinks into teacups, and then delivering them to the impatient men.

Silence is reigning over them, not even one breath heard. Each man looks like a statue, still and unmoving. It is almost like a painting, calmness in the air yet violence hanging just beyond. Annoyance and anger flits on the corner of one slender man's mouth.

"When is he going to get here?" he finally emits, his voice echoing around the large chamber. Murmurs begin, each one of agreement. They grow braver and braver, until they are speaking harshly and openly.

Then suddenly there is a hush, and the anger quells. All eyes shift to one place. The rough fidgeting begins again, surprise morphing into fear.

The veiled man casually glides to the head of the table, a smile brimming on the edge of his lips. He does not sit, towering over the other men.

"Would you like some?" The chubby man waddles over to him, holding out a cup. The veiled man takes it from his grasp, nodding slightly.

"This emergency meeting is in session," he says, his words as smooth as syrup. It seems to relax the group, each one hanging on his words. "Anyone want to state their concern?"

"Why are you doing almost nothing to capture or kill it?" the slender man says, glaring at the veiled man, "it should be dead by now" The veiled man slowly walks over to the other man's side, a smirk still on his lips. With great satisfaction, he pours the steaming hot liquid from his cup onto the slender man's head. A yelp escapes him as he urgently presses a napkin to his head.

"You know nothing." The veiled man continued to smile, but this time it is twisted, fake. "How dare you question my efficiency in this task? That is a question I should be asking all of you. Why are all of our subjects running around, causing havoc in our world and the world below? You all should have better control over them."

There is a brief pause, and then he quietly speaks, "I hope you all had a better reason than this for arranging this meeting." All the other men ashamedly look to the ground. The veiled man surveys them quietly, the smirk finally disappearing from his features. "I hate it when idiots waste my time," he hisses, causing many of them to jump.

"Can you tell us what your plan is?" a slightly chubbier man with raven black hair in the corner of the table asks politely. He seems to be the most complacent of them all, yet has a strange, dark aura.

"Alas, that is not possible at this time," the veiled man shrugs, "I can't tell everyone in here my secrets. My plan is confidential. However, there is one thing I can inform you about."

The men all lean in, their ears perked towards the words that are going to come. They all seem to sense that this is something big.

"We are planning an ambush," he smiles, speaking boldly, "they will all be there, with limited protection. If we gather enough of our own, we can take them."

"Where is there?" the black-haired man asks, curiously looking at the veiled man.

Gasps reverberate around the room as the he releases his answer.

~Xavier~

I never should have blown my top.

Her attitude infuriates me, yet interests me. Her every move makes my blood sizzle, yet attracts me as well. Why does she have to keep me guessing at every turn? Why can't she just say I love you too?

A guy can only take so much, even if the girl is your mate.

I walk down the hallway, guilt nipping at my skin. Mona was in a bad mood when she said that... I know she doesn't mean half of what she says. But it still hurts, even the thought inducing a sharp pain in my chest. She probably really hates me now.

I try to please her. My looks are probably the most she could ask for. I have a mansion, and she never has to do any domestic chores. The only thing she seems to be bothered with is the fact that I am different. The fact that my whole world is... was different from hers.

But she seems to grow more and more unsatisfied with each passing day, a frown ever growing on her lips. She spends more and more time with my buddies, not with me. And even this morning her smile seemed to sparkle at Wes.

I should apologize to her; make it better. I want to hold her hand, and talk to her like normal. This separation is almost more than I can bear. I can barely sense her now, our anger ripping us apart. It should not be this way.

Yes. This must end.

I troop to the door leading to the garden, following her scent. It is so sweet, so rich, like the finest of desserts. I nearly lick my lips as I push the door open, hoping to see her in the grass, playing with a bird, and then smiling at the sight of me. "I'm sorry for hurting you," she would say, "I really love you." Then I would smile, and everything would be forgiven.

But she is nowhere to be found.

My eyes search the garden, puzzlement abounding. I smell her rich fragrance; it being so strong that it nearly knocks me over. She has to be here. Where is she hiding?

"Mona?" I ask loudly, only to notice a sudden shift in movement. Ray twists his body in the fountain to look at me. He is shirtless and soaking wet, his brown hair plastered to his forehead.

"What the crap are you doing?" I ask. It is probably around fifty degrees in that fountain.

"I'm keeping Mona warm," he shrugs, "she needs some body heat." He shifts a little more, and then I can see her, suspended in sleep. She is leaning against his bare skin, as wet as he is.

"What is this?!" I roar, temper completely lost, "how did you guys get in there?"

"She just came up to me and said she needed somebody," he says.

My face begins to grow red, fury in my eyes. Ray stands in the water, carrying Mona with him. He steps out of the fountain and lays her in the grass gently. "Looks like Mona doesn't need you," he says softly, "You need to treat her better, or she just might find someone else." He takes his dry shirt from a nearby tree, and drapes it over her. "I got to go," he walks to the door, "I'll give you some time alone with her. Maybe it's time for you two to kiss and make up."

The door swings shut after him and with it swings my insanity.

I glare at her furiously, and then I take Ray's shirt from her body. With barely suppressed anger, I clench it in my fists. Subconsciously I shift into a wolf, tearing the shirt with my teeth.

I lift my nose to the sky, and let loose a howl.

Admirers Can Be More Frightening Than Your Worst Nightmare

~ Mona ~

The grass tickles my toes as I shift slightly, sleep releasing its strong hold on me. The sun's warm light washes over my bare skin, my hair as it is sprawled over the grass. I stagger to my feet, wondering why I am here in the garden.

My gaze shifts towards the fountain, and then everything comes back to me in a flash. I blush as I think of my time with Ray earlier, with the fountain and statue. Ray's hot embrace felt very comforting, for sure, but at the same time, it was terrifying. What if Xavier had seen us? What would he have thought?

I hate to admit it, but I miss him. I want him to laugh and joke with me like he used to. He has really grown on me, so much that I am almost longing for a touch, a brush of his fingers. However, he is really impatient. It hasn't even been a month yet, and I have shed my old skin, healed people of their sickness, and had guys actually flirting with me. Even now, my brain is about to go into overload. Why can't he understand?

Many times, though, it feels as if I am lying to myself. As if that feeling is already present inside of me, but shoved into the corner. As if I am denying the truth. My heart beats like a drum whenever he comes close, my senses awakened and aroused in his presence. The attraction is so strong between us... even I have a hard time. I can barely imagine what he has been feeling ever since he met me.

Possibly he is angry because I repress my emotions; especially the one he desires the most.

I walk to the garden door, resolute. This can't go on anymore. I have to fix this.

The door swings shut behind me as I pound through the halls, racing towards his door. The world spins as my vision almost becomes blurry, I quickly realizing that I can't really last long under his anger. For some strange reason... his feelings actually matter to me.

His room is so close, a step away. I can sense the anger, the pain boiling just beyond the wooden door. Sadness surges in my heart.

I raise my knuckles and tap the door, my heart's beats escalating as I sense him suddenly freeze in his movement. There is a moment of complete and utter silence, then footsteps as he shuffles towards the door.

A hand slowly turns the knob, and swings the door open to reveal himself. His tanned face and body is bedraggled with worry and fury, his hair limp and not shining like it normally does. He stares into my eyes, and I study him also. However, I soon find that there is nothing to examine. His emerald eyes are blank like the surface of a crystal pool.

"What do you want?" His words sound more like a statement than a question, short and abrupt. Chills enter me, racing through my entire being.

"I wanted to say..." I have a hard time choking out the word, for I have never truly said it before. But now that it means so much, I feel that I have to say it just right. That the word has to slip perfectly through my slightly chapped lips.

He surveys me coldly, and hardness enters his features. "Please go away," he groans, as if I am only an annoyance, "I don't feel like talking to you right now." He vanishes behind the door, closing it as quickly as he can.

I catch it with my foot, wincing in pain as his incredible strength works against me. "Stop, Xavier!" I yell, "You are going to break my foot! Please talk to me!"

"You don't need me," a fierce accusation breaks through my defenses, making me freeze. My foot is pushed away from the door, and it is roughly closed in front of me. "Go talk to... Ray or something! Who it is doesn't really matter to you, does it?" His anger is seeping through the doors, making me sink into a puddle on the floor.

Why would he say that? I am shocked into silence, edging away from the room now as if it is a ticking time bomb. I... wasn't even given the chance to say sorry.

Maybe I will follow his bitter advice.

I knock on the door that is a couple of feet farther along the hallway, leaning against it after the sound is made. My breaths come short and ragged, and saddled with each one is nearly suffocating disappointment. When it finally swings open, I lose my balance and fall towards the ground. A strong form stops me in my tumble, a laugh echoing through the air. "Clumsy Mona," he chuckles, "what's up?"

"Why is Xavier saying that I don't need him?" I ask angrily. A small smile appears at the corner of his features.

"Oh, Xavier is just being overdramatic," he waves his hand in the air, "He will cool off soon."

"Cool off from what?!" My voice rises as I interrupt him, anger surging through my blood. Ray looks so calm and collected, though a little surprised at my burst of words.

"You can figure that out, Mona..." his seductive voice drops to a whisper, and I find myself leaning in closer. "You're very smart."

I think over Xavier's previous words, feeling unsettled at the way Ray's eyes stare piercingly at me. Suddenly understanding comes to me... what if Xavier saw us and misunderstood?

I shake my head in annoyance, wondering why all this stuff has to happen to me. "He's too angry to talk to me right now," I sigh, "so I'll have to clear it up later. But Ray... did you say anything to him to make it seem even worse than it looked?"

"Of course." He shoots me one of those dizzying smiles.

I glare at him. "Thanks. I appreciate it." Leave it to Ray to willingly make the situation ten times harder for me to fix. "What did you say exactly?"

"Oh, just that we were having a great time splashing around in the pool! That's not a lie, right?" he smirks.

I punch him in the arm. "You always make a mess out of things, don't you?" I say half-jokingly. It seems okay to laugh now, when it becomes obvious that all actions will just be futile towards solving the problem.

"A hot mess," he winks, then steps away from the door. "You want to come in?" he invites, motioning for me to enter the room. Realizing that I have truly nothing else to do, I follow his movement.

It is not a luxurious room, with one queen-sized bed and limited walking space. However, a beautiful desk lines one wall, with numerous shelves full of thick books and various objects, like a crystal globe or a vase with flowers. Even more surprising, the opposite wall features a trophy case, full of huge statues, plaques and medals.

I walk over to the case, peering at the immortalized men, all in mid-run. They shine like gold itself, without a scratch upon them. "Are these track trophies?" I ask, watching them sparkle.

"Yes," he says plainly, staring at them also. "I used to be the star track runner on our team." He places a hand on the glass, the tiniest bit of a smile forcing its way onto his lips. I can see the wistfulness in his gaze, as if he wanted to be returned to that time of glory.

"What happened?" I ask softly.

His eyes suddenly flash, and he lifts his head from the glass. "I was changed into a werewolf by my brother. He told me it was exciting, that I would enjoy it. He told me we would be brothers forever," he looks to the ground, bitterly spitting out the words, "but all it has done is tear us apart."

I look at the bottom of the largest trophy, where words are engraved. It says 1st Place in 100 Meter Dash. However, right underneath these

words is the word Ray, and his last name is scratched out.

"I had to disappear from the world I had known and loved," he said softly, "I had to sneak in the school and delete my name from their records. I couldn't participate in sports, because that would clearly be cheating. Everything I had was gone."

"And I would have been a track star!" he continues, his eyes lighting up, "I could have gone to the Olympics if I had worked hard enough. I would have been famous and loved by everyone. But instead, I had to disappear from society. A different life was now waiting for me... one with secrecy, deception, and no expiration date. I can't look forward to death, because there is no death. I am living a twisted lie of a life."

"But can't werewolves be killed?" I ask.

"Yes, but it takes incredible power, and there is nothing around us with that power. There is not a single werewolf for miles and miles."

"So you hate Xavier..." I trail off, still staring at the scratched off name. I can tell the feelings placed into those scratches... anguish and the regret of losing what mattered the most.

"It is more of a love-hate relationship," he laughs.

For once, I feel that I understand Ray's actions and feelings.

"You are a good guy," I pat him on the shoulder; "I hope that soon your life will be worth living to you." Feeling that the time had come for me to leave, I amble out the door, shutting it behind me.

Great. Now I have no one to talk to.

I go into my room and lay down on the bed, sighing as I sink into the plump mattress. It is less than twenty four hours before I have to go into hiding, but even now it seems like an eternity. Night is crawling onto the horizon at a snail's speed, each second becoming an hour.

I want to lose the world, to leave it behind forever. I envy the time when my life was simple and I could sleep without the stress of waking up the next day a step closer to imprisonment by the wolf police.

Alert streaks through my mind when I recall that email from two days ago, one that called for my termination. I haven't even thought about what would happen if I was found guilty by the council. How would they exterminate me? It is almost impossible to kill a werewolf... oh yeah. I'm not a full werewolf. I'm not even a true Spier.

But how can I prove that I am a Spier? I can't even do the most basic of all skills; conjure a spirit spear. And what I can do is very much different from what a Spier does.

My eyesight becomes strained, and I find myself falling into a type of slumber that isn't fully sleep. My eyelids slip downward, and the world turns black before me.

There is a sudden squeak, and I am immediately awake. My eyes stay closed, but my heart beats ever faster.

I freeze completely, not moving a single muscle. The small, nearly inaudible noise resounds once more around the room, and I am sure that there is an intruder. My nose detects a slightly flowery aroma, one full of old and graying age. Alert surges through my blood, suspicion in my thoughts.

I slowly open my eyes, aware of the darkness surrounding me. It is darkest of nights, almost as black as when my eyes were closed. Without a sound, I slip onto the ground, my feet making no resounding impact with the floor.

I spot the outline of a small being standing at my closet door, shuffling through my clothes. I creep forward like a snake, slipping across the floor towards my target.

Suddenly, fright stiffens the creature, and it hurries to the door. I lunge for it with amazing speed, grabbing its ankle. Its flesh is soft like a human's skin, yet wrinkled and weary. "What are you?" I ask angrily, "Why are you in my room?!"

A small yelp escapes the strange creature as I grip it tightly, unrelenting. "Nothing, mistress! I am nothing." Its hands reach to cover its face, whimpers escaping it. Alarm evacuates me as I hear its voice, so soft and gentle that I cannot be afraid.

"Don't move, ok?" I ask, and let go of her ankle. I walk over to the light, and reach for the switch.

"NO!" The creature's shriek is plainly heard throughout the whole room. "Please, no bright light," it begs, "it will kill me." I pause with my hand on the wall, staring at it.

"Then how do I see you?" I question it softly.

"Turn on the table lamp," it suggests. I pad over to my dresser and twist the small knob. Soft yellow light floods the room, and I can finally see it clearly.

Large brown eyes are set in a wrinkled, sagging face, with thin lips and a pointy nose. Her smooth gray hair is in a bun, and her small, three-foot form is adorned with a simple dress and apron. She looks like a perfect, yet miniature grandmother.

"I am a phoenae," she says softly, as if the name itself is of the utmost importance. "I work here, for the masters."

Without a word, I open the door and beckon for her to follow. There are small shuffles of movement, and then we both reach a door. I raise my hand to knock, but then my hand freezes. I suddenly realize that I had subconsciously traveled to Xavier's room, and that I was not welcome to him.

Let's try the other door, I think, quickly shuffling a few more steps down the hall. Trying not to be loud, I slip into Jake's room.

The silver-haired man is sitting at his desk, tapping keys on his cutting-edge laptop. When I am barely an inch away from him he swivels in his chair, facing me stoically. "Why are you coming to talk to me at-" he checks his watch, "-eleven o'clock at night?"

"I would like to know what this is, exactly," I gesture to the slender creature in confusion, and Jake's eyes widen. "It was in my closet three minutes ago."

"I guess you were bound to notice eventually, with your newfound abilities," he shrugs slightly, leaning back in his seat. "She is a phoenae, a phoenix-like creature that ages every day, and is reborn every night at 12:00. She and a few others clean the mansion for us."

"They aren't slaves, are they?" I turn to look at the pitiful, wrinkly creature with a frown.

The phoenae's bright brown eyes flash. "No, mistress," she says hastily, "My most gracious masters are helping me and allowing me to live in luxury!"

Jake smiles handsomely. "It is very difficult for a phoenae to get a job and survive, especially since they are very short, have an aversion to very bright light, and go through the aging process at a terrific speed every day. Also, they have an extreme passion for steak, which we have an abundance of."

"And I get to have it every day!" she squeals. I stare as the wrinkles on her face multiply at an incredible rate.

"So, in exchange for protection, steak, and a place to live, they work for us," Jake concludes, turning back in his chair to look at his computer screen once more. The taps begin again, and I turn to walk back into the hallway.

My eyes grow soft as I look at the strange creature with the gentle voice. "What's your name?" I ask, my words as smooth as honey flowing

through my lips. Even if she is a big ball of wrinkles, I feel the urge to be nice to the only girl I have seen in the mansion.

"Danae," she says shyly, smiling up at me. Her teeth are shiny white and perfectly aligned, which doesn't seem to fit her current appearance. However, something about her unnatural grin is enchanting, making me feel more comfortable. I smile back.

"Danae, you don't have to clean for me," I tell her firmly, "I can do that myself, unlike these incompetent werewolves." I return to my room, flouncing back on the bed. Danae hurries in also, protesting furiously.

"But Mistress shouldn't have to do such a thing... cleaning is only for the servants!"

"You are not my servant..." I look at her plainly, "I do not have servants." I do not think I can bear having a servant, when I was practically a servant myself to Ms. Penn not too long ago. Also, I hate it when I leave my shirt on my chair to wear the next day only to find that it is missing when morning comes.

"But-"

"Leave," my voice now oozes with command, "and don't come back here to clean again." She shuffles outside, closing the door behind her. My head flops onto the pillow, swirling with new ideas and thoughts. First werewolves, then Shifters, and now phoenaes?! How many other creatures are out there that I don't know about? Obviously Xavier was lying to me when he said there were no other supernatural species out there.

My eyes will not close this time.

The night edges away as I shift and sit up in my bed, thinking about everything.

Hours later, my door swings open and Ray walks in, smiling grimly. "Good morning..." he surveys my cross-legged form, "or not. Did you have a bad dream or something?"

"I just couldn't sleep last night," I slide out of the bed, looking into the mirror. I pull my incredibly long ruby red hair into a ponytail, and turn to face him. "I just found out who was stealing my socks every day," I say dryly.

He laughs, a genuine grin dancing across his features. "Sorry, I forgot to tell you about that."

"Well, anyways..." I stare at him, "what do you want?"

"For you to get ready," he says, "we will leave in a couple of hours." He holds out a small drawstring bag, printed with the word Moonlight.

"Where are we going?" I inquire wonderingly. I stare into the small pouch, wishing for it to be one of those magical ones that fit a whole closet into a tiny space. When I was officially an orphan, everything I owned could fit into that one bag. Now I have so much... stuff I can call my own. Stuff don't want to lose for fear of having nothing again.

"Okay," I stare at it resignedly, and then back up at Ray. "How long will this last?"

His face turns stone still, resolute. "We will probably, if we avoid capture at all, be in hiding for a very long time."

It is then that I realize just how serious our situation is.

"I'll get ready," I take a step back and sit back down on the plump mattress, dazed. Ray seems to sense my hidden dismissal and slips outside into the hallway.

I lay the pouch beside me and stare around the room, looking at my various possessions. What should I bring and what should I leave behind?

After a second of pondering, I grab my emerald ring from the bedside table. It isn't needed to keep me safe because I have really bright green eyes now, but the fact that... he gave it to me makes it truly worth a spot in my bag. I would wear it, but it seems to symbolize the good times we have together, and those are the times I don't want to remember right now.

"Mistress," a small, gentle voice whispers from the hallway. My head shoots up as I see an unfamiliar phoenae peering into my room. Her ebony hair is long and wavy, surrounding a heart shaped face. With big, brown eyes and ruby red lips, she seems to be very young.

"Who are you?" I ask sharply.

"Danae, Mistress," she replies respectfully, "may I come in?" I stare at her beautiful features with suspicion. She looks nothing like the grandmother I saw last night.

"I... look different in the mornings because I am a phoenae," she cautiously continues when she notices my confusion. I suddenly realize that this was what Jake was talking about when he said phoenaes go through the aging process very quickly. It is hard to believe that this short, yet amazingly slender woman will morph into an old, wrinkled one by night's end.

"Come in," I wave my hand slowly, and she comes by my side. She looks at the bag, and a frown appears on her face.

"Are you leaving?" she asks softly. I shake my head.

"No, we are just going to play a little hide and seek," I sigh, casting her a glance to see if she bought it. Danae dubiously returns the look.

"Let me help you pack," she takes the pouch and holds it tight in her little fingers. The phoenae slips to the closet, viewing it appraisingly.

"What makes you think you can help me pack?" I say in a rather brusque manner. She ignores me, looking through my clothes. After about ten seconds, Danae pulls out a shirt and a pair of jeans, along with a moderately thick jacket. I gasp when I realize that those three articles of clothing were my favorites out of them all.

"Wear this," she hands me the jacket, "in case you get cold."

"How did you know?" I ask wonderingly, fingering the soft fabric. She smiles, the same glitteringly white teeth shining at me.

"The person that does the laundry knows a lot about the person she is cleaning for," she says, then lifts her arms. "Can you lift me onto the bed?" she embarrassedly asks. I laughingly comply, lifting her small form and putting her on the mattress.

Danae comes to stand behind me, and places her tiny fingers in my hair. "What are you doing?" I stiffen at the touch.

"Relax," she smiles again, "and close your eyes." I oblige her once more, focusing on her finger light touch as it skims through my hair.

Silence reigns for a while, and then she speaks again. "Mistress, may I request something?"

"Yes," I softly reply, thinking how nice it is to actually have a civil conversation with a girl. I can't even remember the last time that has even happened.

"You said you didn't need a servant..." she twirls a strand of my hair in her fingers, working her magic, "but I can be something else."

"And what is that?"

"I think what you need most at this time is a friend." She pauses for a second, and then continues to fold and twist my hair. "If you will let me, I will be exactly that."

A slow smile appears on my face, and my eyes start to flutter open. Quickly I try to shut them, but a marvelous sight catches my gaze.

My hair is compiled into an elaborate updo, with braids and weavings. It looks so beautiful with my green eyes and the flawless face that isn't truly mine. I gaze at the wondrous style, trying to figure out how she did that so quickly.

"Can I come with you?" she inquires softly, "I promise I won't be a hassle."

I am still struck silent; partly because of her earlier request, and partly because she actually wants to come with me into hiding. Is a screw loose in her head or something?

"Of course you can come with me," I reply, "but why would you want to?"

"I have been in this mansion cleaning for over thirty years," her voice gains an edge of wisdom, "doing the exact same things over and over. I'll miss my steak, but this is a chance for change. For excitement. And what is the point of having a new friend if you can never talk to them?"

"That's true," I admit, laughing softly. Thirty years. I can't imagine her to be that much older than me... although I could have thought that with her other appearance last night.

"So can I, Mistress?" she asks, reaching over and pulling a thin flower out of a delicate vase. With precision and accuracy, she places it in my updo, putting the final touch on the masterpiece.

I laugh genially. "Danae, don't call me Mistress. That is how a servant would address me." She laughs too, and lets out a little squeal of happiness.

"Thank you, Mona," she nearly stutters on my name, "I have never had a woman as a friend before."

"Me either," I say in reply, and she gasps.

"But you are so beautiful! How could you not have some friends at school?!" she practically exclaims. I just shake my head.

"This new skin is only a facade... the one I used to have looked far worse."

She just looks at me with concern. "You are like a flower in full bloom," she states, before your appearance may have just been budding, but your conversion is what made it truly blossom."

"But that was just because of my conversion! If I didn't go through with the conversion... this would have never happened!" I say furiously.

"I tend to believe that a conversion gives a werewolf different levels of beauty, based on the inside beauty they always have possessed." She jumps off the bed and walks towards the closet once more. Danae returns with some underwear and heavy socks. She stuffs it in the bag, making it full to the top. "You are exceptionally beautiful, Mona," she says softly, "and I don't think you fully appreciate the blessing God has given you."

Expressionless, I stand up, staring at the face that isn't mine. Could it truly reflect who I am on the inside, or is Danae just spitting out lies?

"Come on," I take the pouch and start walking outside my room.

"I want to pack first," Danae apologetically says, "I will meet up with you in a minute. Get some breakfast."

I stare at her for a second, then without a word I walk downstairs, my stomach grumbling. The first werewolf I see is Yi, cooking an omelet in the kitchen. His hair is messy and wild, which contrasts greatly with the frilly apron he is wearing.

He turns to the sound of my laughter, startled. Once he realizes that it is directed at him, a blush spreads across his cheeks. "I didn't want anything to get on my clothes!" he nearly squeals.

"Of course..." I chuckle, "while you have that on, though, can you make me some scrambled eggs?"

He flips the omelet, and then slides it out onto a plate. He carries it into dining room, then returns and slides off the apron. "You can have it," he smirks and hands it to me, "make your own breakfast."

"That's not something an apron-loving man should say when he is caught in the act," I smirk back, showing him my small camera, which is in the process of recording his every movement.

"THAT'S NOT FAIR!" he yells, lunging for my phone. With lightning speed, I draw my hand away at the last second, Yi tumbling on the floor. He snaps to his feet, racing at me like a bull. I cringe slightly and start to close my eyes, but a form slips in front of me and takes Yi head on. Yi bounces off like a spring, dizziness in his eyes.

"No one is touching Mona on my watch," Ray smiles, his body incredibly close to mine.

"Don't worry, Ray, he was just playing," I step out from behind him. "Yi, could you please make me some scrambled eggs now?" I laugh. As he watches, I slide the camera deep into my pocket—so deep that he would have to assault me to get to it.

He glances at me angrily, then ambles over to the refrigerator and pulls out some eggs.

After another quick giggle, I turn back towards Ray. "Where are the others?"

"Getting ready," he replies, "I'm surprised you got packed so quickly. What did you bring?"

"Just one set of clothes," I dryly state, "it's not like you gave me room to pack anything else."

"True." He lets loose a big, hearty laugh.

"Couldn't you have given me a bigger bag?" I complain, but he shakes his head.

"Look, I got a debit card, and that is what counts. It has all of our money on it. We can buy what we need."

"But..."

"We need to stay light," he gently, yet firmly insists, "we can't have you dragging a backpack around." I give up immediately, looking at the floor. They just don't know what it is like to be a girl.

A tall, muscled form fills the doorway, his gaze directed at Ray. His face is magnificent yet weary, with faint circles underneath his eyes. Even one glance at him strikes pain in my heart.

"Xavier," I begin, and he looks my way. Fire and electricity immediately snap between us with our sudden connection, along with passion and regret. In addition, a strange type of hate is emanating from him, burning me to a crisp. Ironically, I shiver.

"I need to talk-" I am interrupted by the shrill sound of the doorbell ringing. It sounds like the chime of a thousand bells, making even the ground vibrate.

"Why don't you get the door, Mona?" Ray asks politely, though eyeing Xavier.

"Okay," I shuffle to the hallway and look back at Xavier. At first we make eye contact but Xavier looks away, dissatisfied. I shake my head slightly, and then I start to run. Before the last chime sounds, I am in the foyer, staring out of the thin windows.

Rain is flooding down, the cold fogging up my view. The clouds are dark and intimidating, shrouding the world like a thick blanket. A shivering figure is huddled outside, his or her head and arms covered by a thin jacket.

Without a moment more of hesitation, I fling the door open, hastily urging the person inside. I can tell that the figure is a girl, for she is wearing a knee-length dress, one that is rather low-cut and very fashionable.

"What's your name?" I ask her softly. She doesn't answer, clutching her soaked jacket with long, pointy fingernails. "Do you want me to take that and wash it?" I gesture towards the jacket. She remains silent, unmoving.

I move my hand towards the jacket, but then she finally speaks, stopping me with her voice. "Where is Xavier?" she softly demands, "I need to see him." All the while she keeps her head down, as if she is afraid of my gaze. Water drips off her bare skin, soaking the carpet beneath her feet.

"Okay, but don't you want to change into something dry first?" I offer, but she shakes her head sharply. Golden ringlets tumble from her jacket head covering, shiny and smooth.

"Come on then." I lead the way back to the kitchen. She follows me softly, making almost no sound. "Hey guys, we have a visitor. It looks like she

came in the rain."

"A she?" Jake and Yi perk up, their voices blurring together. All of them race to the doorway. Xavier, though lagging behind, follows their movement. Ray remains sitting at the table, engrossed in his newspaper.

"Yeah," I say dryly. They stare at her like she is an unwrapped present, immediately turning on the charm.

"What's your name?" they chorus, smiling brightly. They drink in her beautiful appearance, her nice figure and golden hair.

She is silent for a minute, and then she says, "Meryl."

Xavier turns stone white, the very life sucked out of his statuesque features. "Meryl," he chokes, "how did you find us?"

Her head snaps up, and the werewolves are immediately struck by a familiar face, judging by their expressions. She is wearing thick Raybans, so I can't see her eyes, but her skin is flawless, along with her luscious red lips.

"I have... connections," she says slowly, peering straight at Xavier. He narrows his eyes, staying silent.

She takes a step towards him, distraught in her features. "Why did you leave me, and the entire club for that matter, that night? Was it because of a girl?" She gets right to the point.

He stood, his face hardening. "Maybe it was, Meryl. But you really don't have to know. You have broken our contract, and I can sue you until there isn't a dime left in your pocket. If I were you, I would leave right now before that happens."

"Was it this girl?" she mercilessly continues, whirling around and flinging a single, accusing finger at me. "Was it she that bewitched you?"

He casts one glance at me, and then returned his gaze to her, silent. A smile appears on Meryl's face, one full of laughter and mocking.

"Or maybe you left because you were different," she turns back to face Xavier, "I saw you that night. I saw who you really are." Her voice takes on a menacing edge, but then softens with her next words. "I am the only one that will accept you, Xavier."

Xavier stares at her, horrified.

She smiles, "you are a monster, Xavier. I am the only person you can be yourself with."

I can't take it much longer. This is like an episode of a soap opera. Does she really and truly believe that? He is so handsome that any girl would run off with him, regardless of his quirky, morphing-into-a-wolf tendencies.

I break down into a fit of laughter, causing the crazed girl's attention to turn to me. "So you know too?" she asks dangerously, each word like a sharp dagger against my skin. "You think you can deal with him?"

"Meryl!" Xavier frantically tries to turn her attention away, "you only saw me shift once! You know nothing else about me!"

She ignores him, staring at me. "Looks like I'll have to get rid of you then," she mutters sharply, and then flings off her sunglasses. Her eyes are as red as blood.

She races at me, the jacket flying off her arms and head right into Ray's face. I quickly dodge her attack, running to other side of the kitchen. Ray snaps to his feet, looking anxiously at Meryl.

She looks like a rabid dog, full of thirst for blood and fighting. All four werewolves run at her, but she avoids them easily. She is very quick and nimble, racing through their grasp like it is just a game.

Somehow Meryl makes it over to my side, a Swiss Army Knife in her hands. She grabs my arm as quick as lightning, holding it to my throat. "Don't move!" she shrieks, pressing it towards my neck. A single bead of blood forms at the edge of the knife, dripping down it towards my chest.

They freeze, even their heartbeats slowing. Her smile widens to one of madness. "Now, Xavier, I want you to watch me kill her," she says darkly, staring straight at him. My life flashes before my eyes, and I feel even more regretful for trying to end it only a couple of weeks ago. It is such a wonderful gift... one so easy to lose.

A few more agonizing seconds pass, full of pain as she makes an even deeper cut. I look down towards the blood, and then snap my gaze to where it was before. A tear bubbles at the edge of my eye, sliding down my cheek. The other werewolves look just as horror-struck as I feel right now.

Suddenly, there is a blur of movement, and Meryl howls in pain. The knife slips from her hold, clattering on the floor. The werewolves immediately race into action, and within a few minutes she is firmly held by Jake.

Danae stands on the table, holding a dagger dripping with blood that isn't mine. She shoots me a smile as the werewolves force her on that table, nimbly jumping off and taking the knife to the sink.

Shock crosses my face when I realize what she has done. "Danae!" I shout, racing over to her, "you saved my life!"

"Yes," she says plainly, "I couldn't lose the only friend I have." She washes off her knife, then takes a towel and wipes my neck.

"Thank you so much!" I smile, and then hesitantly laugh. I have never felt so... relieved in my whole life. I walk back to the table, and without fear I place my hand on Meryl's head. It is so easy for me to heal a person now, having done it so often.

When the red had finally faded from her eyes, the werewolves still refrain from releasing their hold. Xavier's eyes are bloodshot, full of savagery and anger.

"We have to go," Ray abruptly let go of Meryl, fury in his features, "the Council must have already forced our barriers down if a Shifter managed to make it to our doors. Who knows what will come our way!"

"Yeah, we have to go," Xavier agrees, his silky smooth voice washing over us. "Put her away," he commands. Jake and Yi silently slide off to do his bidding.

"Can Danae come with us?" I ask, a hopeful expression in my features. They both stare at me, confused.

"Why would she want to come?" Ray asks biting. Danae appears by my side, smiling. At this distance, I can tell she has aged considerably, a few gray hairs sprouting from her scalp.

"Because I want to have an adventure," she smiles enchantingly, and I see Ray's firm expression soften. Without a word, he turns and walks to the door, vanishing from my gaze. Xavier looks at me for a second, and then follows Ray.

After a couple of minutes, Danae and I meet them at the door. My neck is patched with a band aid, and I am carrying my small pouch. Danae is adorned likewise, but the two werewolves are carrying nothing.

"Let's go," Xavier says softly.

The rain soaks my hair as we race into the darkness.

Runaways

Our feet pound onto the dirt in perfect unison, each of us in sync with each other. Danae is next to me, having to take two strides for my every one, and Ray is on my other side. I can't even see Xavier past Ray's form, but I can sense his presence. His enchanting smell always tends to weave its way to my nose. It is so strong that it almost makes me fall out of step, invoking sorrow and regret through my blood. I can sense his anger, his frustration pounding against my defenses.

I shake my mind from him, focusing at the scene before us. An endless expanse of trees is ahead, making me wonder when it will end and I will finally get an unobstructed view of the thundering sky again. We are moving considerably slower than usual, since Danae and I are dragging the two werewolves down. I can tell this speed is bothering Ray, a frown gracing his features. He seems to be afraid as well as angry, fright in his expression.

For some reason, I can't bring myself to possess that same emotion. For how am I supposed to be afraid of an invisible attacker that I have never seen before? Every step we take is one step farther away from the enemy, but how do we know the enemy is chasing us in the first place? I know this unseen villain is a threat, and I realize that we must run. However, I do not get the familiar feeling that I am running for my life, that all the stakes rest upon our ability to evade this problem. For some reason, it almost feels like a game.

So it is no wonder that I am not putting all of my effort into my actions.

In addition to my laziness, Danae seemed to be breathing heavily as she runs, sweat pouring down her tiny body. To keep up with the werewolves and I, she has to work twice as hard as us. I can easily see that she won't last that much longer. But she is courageously gritting her teeth and continuing without a complaint. I soon realize that she wouldn't speak a word even if she was on the brink of death.

Minutes stretch into hours, the forest ever continuing. I had no idea it was this big—we must be delving deeper into the sea of trees instead of trying to escape them. So many questions brim at the edge of my lips, then retreat as I unsuccessfully try to break the atmosphere of silence surrounding us all. The tension intimidates me. I am afraid that I may upset our steady rhythm if I utter a single word, and Xavier will be even more furious at me than he already is.

Every second becomes identical to the next, nothing changing as time slips on. Rain continues to pound at us, fiercely beating at our backs and soaking us to the core. The wind's sharp claws further accentuate the bitter cold, gripping us and never letting go. It is a nightmare in itself, even my vision growing hazy in the downpour. If not for my silent companions, I would have given up already, crawling under some random tree and sulking.

I narrowly miss a branch, swerving underneath it with inhuman speed. The sudden movement seems to shock me into reality. I have been in some sort of trance, and this rude awakening also brings about awareness of the pains in my stomach. I glance over at Danae to see that she has almost collapsed, barely pulling herself along. Ray, on the other hand, is barely breaking a sweat, chugging along even quicker than when we started. I assume Xavier is in the same condition.

After a few more minutes, the pains grow past my stomach and envelop my whole being. I cannot take this any longer. I cannot abuse myself to this length just to escape the invisible enemy.

"Stop." My voice is commanding, urgent. I finally pause my feet, and the rest of them come to an abrupt halt as well. Weariness creeps upon me, until I have to hunch over for breath. When I look up, I find Ray, Xavier, and Danae staring at me.

"Danae and I must rest," I say firmly, speaking the words Danae refused to say. She looks at me with unspoken gratitude. Ray's face is emotionless, and Xavier's face is full of fear.

"We can't stop now," Xavier urges, "we must keep going!" His face is devoid of any redness or exertion, only occupied by the rain flooding down it.

"Well, can we at least have a bite to eat? I'm starving!" I beg, looking directly into his eyes. I am not afraid of him, even though he is angry at me. My hunger is changing me from an ashamed girl to a brave, yet desperate one. "It would also be nice to get some more clothes, or to get under some shelter and let them dry. Aren't you guys cold?"

Shivers ripple through me as a strong burst of wind brushes past my wet skin. I am sure the two werewolves can sense my vulnerability, but strangely, I don't care. All that matters to me is to get some food to grace my aching stomach.

"Okay," Xavier immediately melts after my sad display, his expression still hard as a rock but his tone soft and gentle. I just gaze at his perfect form, missing the affection he used to lavish on me, the affection I hated with all my might. I can tell he is weary of this fighting also, but he is also torn by the sight he saw in the garden. How can I express to him that I can't have just anyone?

Not that I'm going to start treating him with love if he accepts my apology. I still refuse to fall into that deathly snare of desire and passion, even though I can't think of any reasons for holding back anymore. My lips beg to be touched by him, my eyes gravitating to him constantly. And his scent... exudes potently strong pheromones that disarms me completely. My entire body wishes to be embraced by him, to surrender everything.

"There is a fast food restaurant about a mile from here..." Ray says, checking his phone, "to our right." He slouches against the tree, water running down his form. I almost forgot it was raining.

Lightning lights up the forest, golden whips of energy igniting the air. Thunder soon follows, its wail crackling through the air and hurting my ears.

"Let's go." I look into the sky, marveling at its horrendous temper tantrum. "Ray and Xavier, let us get on your backs so we can go there quickly."

Without a word in complaint, they oblige. Ray gets to me first, smiling brightly. "My lady?" he bows, and I laugh at his weird fake accent. Xavier, slightly dismayed, lets Danae clamor onto his back.

Ray shoots me an encouraging smile, then charges through the forest. It takes a second for my mind to adjust to the speed, but then I am fully alert, looking around. There's a fast food station only a mile away from here? Is it right in the middle of the forest? So far we have been traveling for almost fifty miles and I still haven't seen anything.

I cast a quick glance at Xavier, which soon grows into a lengthy stare. I admire his muscles, which are bulging as he exerts them. His sparkling blue hair glistens as crystal droplets dance down each strand.

But what bugs me the most is Danae. She is clutching at his back, her youthful features matching his in beauty and gracefulness. For some reason, the way she is hanging on him annoys me. She really needs to get off of him.

I shake my head, trying to rid myself of these thoughts. I can't be jealous. I will not allow it.

I hug Ray's chest, attempting to delve myself into someone else. To try and see if just anyone really is all I need. However, there is no spark. The warmth is missing from him, and as I pull him close, all I experience is bitter cold. I don't feel excited, passion not arising between us. Even when I place my head on his back, I cannot hear the thump of his heart. It almost feels like I am riding a horse instead of a hot werewolf.

Light appears in the distance, finally flooding the forest. When I see it, my heart jumps in my chest. Deliverance, it seems, is finally here. We will finally see buildings instead of endless green. I wish I will never see another tree again. Maybe it is a wish that will never be fulfilled, but it is still one

of my deepest desires at this point.

We are soon swallowed by the light, standing in an old and worn parking lot. It is strewn with gravel, few cars in sight. It seems to be the opposite side of town, on the very outskirts.

I slide off Ray, shaking the dust off my clothes and smoothing my hair. Danae follows suit, sweeping her black hair into a loose bun. I can see the wrinkles already creeping onto her face, multiplying at an alarming speed. At first, it seems alarming, but now I just look at her with interest.

"Hey," she glances at her skin with wide eyes, "I'm completely dry!" I look at my own body to find that I am dry too, and that the rain has been reduced to a light patter, fizzling away by the second. The dark thunderclouds are retreating, traveling to wreak havoc on another unlucky town.

"Wow," I say with incredulity, "If I had known this would happen, I would have asked for you guys to carry us much earlier!" The freezing cold has escaped me also, traveling behind the flock of clouds as they hurry to their destination. I hug myself with my jacket, delight filling me as warmth enters my body.

"Let's hurry to the fast food place," Ray says warningly, "we are still running away, you know." He seems to be the most worried out of all of us, tapping his feet hesitantly against the gravel. I briefly wonder why he is acting this way, when he is usually so laid back and relaxed. Creases are in his face, worry afflicting his brow.

Xavier takes one glance at me, and then turns to follow Ray. Danae and I follow them both, still slightly weary from the lengthy run.

"Is this the adventure you wanted, Danae?" I ask her softly, not without a little giggle. She looks at me and shoots me a smirk.

"Maybe a little more exhausting than I thought," she admits, "but for the most part, it is exactly what I wanted." Her bright smile enchants me, and I admire her ability to hold her head high when she was almost reduced to tears in the forest. If I had not stopped us, Danae would have fainted within a few minutes. That would have caused endless embarrassment for her.

We reach the end of the parking lot, staring at the small brick building just beyond it. I can smell the food, lingering just beyond my grasp, beckoning me urgently. It intoxicates me, begs me to taste it. We spend a second staring at the posters of mouthwatering food and drink, and then I bend to my desires.

I snatch the credit card out of Ray's hand, almost running to my highly anticipated destination. I slide through the doors quickly, and then focus on the huge menu hanging above the cash register. On it is yummy displays of hamburgers, hot dogs, and chicken fingers—all that greasy food that I love.

I edge in line behind three portly men, Xavier and the rest of our group following me. "Do I need to order for you guys or do you want to order on your own?" I ask them, my voice tinged with excitement. I have not been to a fast food restaurant in over ten years, so every action is an exciting adventure to me. It is almost like I am at Niagara Falls or the Grand Canyon, my eyes open wide as I survey my surroundings.

Xavier looks at my expression and laughs. "It's okay," he says, "we can order on our own. If we order together, he might get confused."

We are now second in line, and my stomach starts to get butterflies. How do I order my food? Is there some sort of special protocol for something like this? The cash register is a pretty cute teenage boy, who looks incredibly bored and tired. Everyone behind him, in the kitchen, is acting the same way. I don't want to look like an idiot in front of them.

I lean my head towards Danae and whisper, "you go first. I want to see how to order."

She glances at me, and then lets a tiny giggle escape her. "Okay, Mona," she agrees, then daintily steps in front of me. Xavier and Ray both shoot me an inquisitive glance, but I ignore them, focusing on my teacher as she steps up to the cash register.

We gave her some heels before she left, but even now she can barely reach the countertop. The boy has to look down at her, and is soon surprised by her beautiful, adult face. His eyes widen slightly, and then quickly readjust.

"What do you want?" he asks, back into his bored trance.

"I would like a kids meal with fresh fruit and a hamburger," she says quickly, her words polite and fluid. As she speaks, the items she is requesting appears on a small, electronic screen beside the cash register. His hands move in a blur as he plugs in her order with a practiced hand.

"Anything to drink?" he questions, looking at the cash register with a dreary expression.

"A bottled water," she smiles slightly, then reaches into her pack. Quickly she pulls out a ten dollar bill, handing it to the boy. He quickly gives her the change and then her order disappears from the screen. I walk up to the desk, nervousness pumping through my blood.

"What do you want?" he asks, not looking up. He seems to be playing with a broken key on the cash register, pressing it multiple times.

I stare at the menu once again, trying to make up my mind. "Is the hotdog or the cheeseburger better?" I ask him, staring at the plethora of pictures. He ignores me, just pressing the key over and over again.

Anger surges through me. "Is the hotdog or the cheeseburger better?" I ask in a slightly louder voice. He finally looks up, and his expression morphs into surprise once more. He scans me as I stand there, crawling over my face and body.

"I think the cheeseburger is better, honestly," he says after he recovers, shrugging. He doesn't look back at the cash register, but keeps his eyes on me.

"Well... then I want the number five super combo." I continue to look at the menu, my brows furrowed in concentration. "And I also want a full-size house salad and a lemon pie," I conclude.

His eyebrow rises. "A whole lemon pie or one slice?" he asks suspiciously.

I check my stomach... yup, still grumbling. "Yes, a whole lemon pie," I confirm.

"Is this just for you?" he asks wonderingly. I smile at him, and the whole kitchen pauses for a mere second, their attention caught. I can't believe this new appearance of mine can spellbind people so quickly, when my old skin did just the opposite.

"I eat a lot," I laugh, merry pearls of amusement reverberating around the old building.

He pauses for a minute, then smiles back, unable to resist. "What soda would you like with your combo?" he asks, finally looking back at the cash register.

Soda?

"Um, what do you have?" I ask, trying to buy some time. I haven't had a soda in my whole life! What do they taste like?

"The flavors are right here." He gestures to a black machine with colorful labels dancing across it. "We have coke, sprite, mellow yellow, fanta, and root beer."

I peer at each label, utterly confused on what I want. What if I don't like the flavor I get? Anticipation races through me.

I give up after a few seconds of contemplation. "Can I just have a milkshake?" I inquire.

"For an extra price, yes." He nods slightly. He has such pretty eyes, a crystal blue that looks like the sky. I feel myself being drawn into them, marveling at its depth and beauty.

"I want vanilla." I shake myself out of my trance. He notices that I have been looking at him, and he smirks. He opens his mouth to say another word, but then I quickly swipe Ray's card. I don't want him to hit on me... especially in front of Xavier. Who knows how terrible that would be.

He shuts his mouth, then opens it again. "Do you want any condiments?" he asks, opening a small drawer. I know that's not what he was going

to say only a few seconds ago.

I have no idea what condiments are. Not again...

I cast a quick glance at Ray and Xavier behind me, sending them my distressed signal. Ray comes up behind me and whispers, "that's a fancy word for ketchup and mustard." His hot breath tickles my ear.

The boy stares at Ray as he comes closer to me, and then shifts slightly to the side to see Xavier. Envy radiates from him as he asks, "Are you with them?" I can tell he is jealous of their stunning looks more than the fact that I am probably the girlfriend of one of them.

"Yes," I answer him, and then I quickly move away. The pounding of my heart slows down as soon as I am away from that cash register, steadiness now entering me. I never knew ordering could be so scary.

"You did well," Danae smiles at me, magically appearing by my side. I grin briefly, turning to look at her small form. "I could tell you were nervous though," she winks, and I blush.

"Well..." I lean against the wall, looking around the fast food station. Dingy tables and worn out chairs are scattered around the area, the floor dirty and made of old fashioned tile. The walls seem fragile, as if they may crumble to ashes in a few seconds, and the few booths they have are torn and stained. "It is just that I haven't been to places like this before," I confess, "I have spent almost my entire life, or what I can remember of it, in the orphanage. Everything outside of it is completely new to me. For me, it is like I have entered a completely different world."

I wait a little while, watching the way the boy is drooling over Xavier and Ray. His face is full of admiration, studying them intently. Xavier and Ray, however, don't seem to care, completely ignoring him.

They finish ordering and walk over to us, all attention gravitating to them as the light amplifies their perfect features. Girls that are scattered across the room turn their bodies so they can get an eyeful of pretty boy hotness. It seems as if everywhere we go they attract way more eyes than they should... it is a little annoying, honestly. Everyone seems to stare at them as if they are aliens—they really do possess an ethereal beauty that is almost unnatural. They all notice, I can tell, that Ray and Xavier are different from everyone else.

"Once we get our food, we need to eat it quickly," Xavier cautions, being careful not to look me in the eye, "we can't wait for the council to find us."

"How would they know where to look?" I ask wonderingly.

"All of the council members tend to have excellent senses of smell," Ray says, "if they get one item that has our aroma on it, then they can track us like a pack of bloodhounds. Of course, they cannot do that if we are several miles away."

"Oh," my eyes grow wide, "but then surely they will be able to find something! Especially if they take the mansion... my smell must be on everything I have touched!"

Ray looks at me, then surveys our surroundings. "It isn't safe here," he turns back to us, whispering softly, "we must find another place to finish our conversation."

Xavier follows suit, examining the premises. "But where can we go that is completely private?" he expresses his concern.

But I am distracted by something much less serious. A delightful fragrance creeps to my senses as our food is placed on the counter. "Food!" I squeal with delight, nearly skipping to its location. My tray is huge, stacked with a full sized pie, salad, and super combo filled with fries. Xavier and Ray's trays are even bigger because they both ordered two super sized combos. I lift the huge stack of food, laughing at how easy it is to do so. Before my transformation, I probably would have struggled to carry it.

Danae craftily smiles at us, holding her small meal. "I think I have an idea," she winks. Gray hairs are already covering her head, her eyes bright and adventurous.

The eyes follow us as we exit the station, all of us wondering just what Danae has in mind. She leads the way over to the road, navigating around the line of cars waiting to go to the drive through. Cars whiz by us as we stand right before the highway, eyeing the gleaming shine that radiates off each one.

I lick my fingers, wanting to savor even the tiniest flavor of greasy fries. Everyone's attention gravitates to me, Ray immediately laughing.

"You ate all those fries?" he chuckles, staring pointedly at the gigantic, now empty box in my hand. I smile, my teeth shining brightly.

"It was so good," I laugh also, "I love greasy food."

"Hey," Danae advocates, "I ate all of mine too!" We all swivel our heads to Danae's small, empty kids meal bag. I notice, suddenly, that the bag is decorated with fairies and pixies. It seems to suit her, the more I think about it. One of the black haired fairies on it looks almost identical to her.

We simultaneously roll our eyes at her miniature bag. "As if that's a big feat," Ray says dryly, causing me to laugh. Xavier just looks at the ground, looking more out-of-it than anything.

"Well anyway," Danae directs us back to the situation at hand, "what we need to get is a car. Look, just across the highway!"

True enough, a gigantic car dealership is less than a mile away. "Wow," I comment softly, "that's a good idea. Why didn't we drive a car in the first place?"

"Because the council would immediately know we were gone and soon catch up to us with their super speed," Xavier finally answers, shaking his head, "I don't know if this is a good plan."

"But this way we can confuse them!" Danae fiercely defends her idea, "AND we are right here next to the highway. We can go pretty much as fast as we want when we drive it."

"Let's try it," Ray takes our side, "I think all of us are pretty tired from running." Obviously he is just speaking about both Danae and I, but nevertheless, it is a semi-valid complaint.

"But... how are we going to cross the highway when cars are going so fast?" I ask, looking at the frightening buzz of the usual traffic. Danae's eyes crease—I can tell she didn't notice this problem until now.

"Ray! Xavier!" She whirls around and nearly barks their name. "Can you take us across the highway on your backs?"

"I don't know," Xavier answers, "we can definitely go through the traffic unscathed if we were traveling with the general flow of movement. But just zipping across the highway like this? I have no idea. A car might be able to hit us, especially since there are so many of them passing at one time."

"But what else can we do?" Danae asks fiercely, "are we going to go back into the forest where they can find us?"

I look around the highway, hoping to find some other way we can avoid this problem. However, nothing comes to my mind. For as far as I can see, the highway extends in both directions.

"It's just what we have to do," I firmly say, "we have to take the risk if we are to escape the council. We can't wait any longer, because we don't have the time to waste." I can tell they all realize this too by the way they stare at me, then at the road; all with a fierce look.

"Jump on," Ray directs me, bending down into a crouch. I hastily obey, sneaking a glance at Xavier along the way. He is frowning, Danae sitting on his back peacefully. I can tell he is a little bothered that Ray, once again, gets to carry me.

We stand along the highway, looking for some sort of entrance, a break in the endless line of speeding cars. Danae and Xavier are in front of us, and we are lingering close behind.

Anxiety pounds around my head like the beating of a steel drum, heartbeats threaded with fear. The initial excitement from doing the unknown has faded into cold-blooded terror. For some reason, it feels as if I am racing to meet my death rather than escaping from it.

"Hey," Ray notices my nervousness, and smiles. "Why did the werewolves cross the road?"

"I don't know. You tell me," I respond, rather irritated. This is not the time for jokes.

"To get to the other side." He winks, and after one strained moment, I laugh genially. He is smiling as if he just told me the joke of the year, and I can't help but humor the handsome werewolf.

The laughter seems to loosen up my insides, to make me feel more relaxed and at ease. I don't honestly know what to think of Ray anymore. At the very beginning, he was mean and rude, but as time goes on, he seems to be much more pleasant. Even now, in the face of danger, he tries to cheer me up, noticing my frightened demeanor. He has done many bad things, but for some reason, a small part of me believes him to be a genuinely good guy. Maybe even one I can honestly call my friend.

If only he could get along with Xavier.

Suddenly a break occurs, the line parting for a split second. This is the moment.

There is a sudden whoosh of air, and everything around me blurs into a mix of colors, splashing like paints on a canvas. My mind grows dizzy, my head frequently thrust back by the violent wind. All I can hear, over and over again, is Xavier's voice. He is whispering in my ear, the words too soft to make out.

Suddenly there is a blow, knocking the breath out of me. I feel myself flying, as if I have suddenly grown wings. My head hurts terribly, the beats of my heart overcoming me. I am thinking of nothing. I am nothing.

Until a pair of strong arms encircle me, holding me close to a warm body. With it comes peace, settling over me like a thick blanket. After a few seconds, my eyes gradually open, trying to focus on the brightness around me.

"Xavier?" I ask softly, as the blurry face before me sharpens.

"I'm right here," he comforts me, holding me close. I sit up in his arms, looking around. The first thing I notice is that we are on the other side of the road.

The second thing I notice is Ray, sprawled out in the muddy grass.

"Ray!" I yell, trying to jump out of Xavier's arms. However, a strong pang of pain graces my left side when I try to move, torturing me with its restraining whip. "Whats wrong with me, Xavier?" I ask after the spear of fire retreats from my body.

"You both were hit," he says, anger flooding his body, "that giant truck over there suddenly had the will to have a sudden burst of speed. When it hit you and Ray, it was abruptly stopped and around five cars crashed into it. Ray let go of you, trying to throw you away from the danger, and I caught you just a few seconds ago. I think your side may be bruised."

I look at the wreck on the road, marveling at the trouble it has caused. The cars are sprawled across the lane, right behind a massive truck. Police cars are heading up to the action, their lights flashing.

"And all because of us," I sigh, bringing about another wave of pain. He frowns, staring at the truck.

"No, it was that truck's fault," he says firmly, "if it had kept at its normal speed, none of us would have been hit. I hate to say it, but we are lucky that you are converted, because a blow like that normally would have killed a human."

"Is Ray okay?" I question fearfully.

"I think he has passed out," Xavier responds, distraught at the edge of his voice. We both watch as Danae examines him.

"He was hit from this side." She rolls up his shirt, pointing at the mass of blood and bruises. "He seems to be healing very quickly though. I would say that it will be completely stitched up in a couple of hours, and the only thing left will be the bruises. I'm surprised that he still made his way over here even after he was hit."

"So he will be alright?" Xavier asks fervently. I can sense that he cares deeply for his brother, maybe more than he lets anyone know. They seem to share a deep bond that not even hate can break.

"Yes," Danae finalizes, "but we may have to carry him to the car dealership. And look at him! He is covered in mud!"

"We can fix that later," Xavier says assuredly, then gestures to my form. "What about her?"

Danae scampers over to us, looking at my left side. "She's fine. Just some heavy bruises."

Xavier tries to put me down, looking at me worriedly. "Can you walk?" he asks me. I wobble on the first step, but with his help, I walk in a small circle.

"Its good," I say finally, "I can walk. I just cannot twist my body."

"Ok," Xavier smiles, "that's good. I'll carry Ray then." He hoists Ray onto his back without complaint or even strain. The car dealership is only a couple hundred feet away, and for a minute, it symbolizes deliverance for me. Deliverance from the burning pain I have whenever I twist my torso.

"What kind of dealership is this?" I inquire to distract myself.

"Pommel," Xavier immediately answers, "a very expensive type of car."

"Do we have enough money for something like that?"

He winks at me, saying nothing. We walk in silence to the front of the dealership. I am struck by the dazzling cars surrounding it, all shown in their utmost glory. It feels like I have walked into a sea of brilliance, drowning into the blinding opulence of each car.

"Wow," I say softly, surveying the vehicles with wonder. Xavier ignores me, walking to the front door with Ray on his back. A man in a suit opens the door for us, his black hair slicked to his forehead.

"Good morning," he says in rich, elegant tone, although his eyes widen when he sees Ray. "Does he need to be taken to the emergency room?" the man asks frightfully.

Xavier shakes his head, and the man gets an eyeful of his beautiful blue hair, sparkling as he moves his head. "He just passed out a little earlier and fell in the mud by accident."

"Oh," he says in a surprised tone, probably confused by the way Xavier says "passed out" so lightly.

"Which of these cars are the fastest? You have so many of them, beautiful too..." he asks, his words pouring like honey from his lips. I can feel the man instantly falling under his spell, and he smiles.

"Yes, they are beautiful," he agrees, "some of the best cars in the entire world are here." He leads the way to a certain car, gleaming and slender. It is shiny silver, and only has two car doors. "This is the Pommel Fly 3000. It rides so smooth that it makes the rider feel like they are actually flying."

I stare at the tiny car with disbelief. Does the man really think we can fit in that thing?

"And this one." He gestures to the car beside it. This one is a deep bronze, ripping with power and beauty. "This is the Pommel Ginger, one of our premium vehicles."

Xavier stares at the Pommel Ginger, examining it closely. There is not much room in this one either, and it is a convertible. It almost grabs too

much attention, clearly not someone that wants to be conspicuous.

"But what is your fastest car?" he finally asks, his voice tinged with annoyance. "These cannot be your best." It is almost like he is not satisfied with the gorgeous cars before him, as if he is seen much better. The Pommel representative stares at Xavier for a minute, then smiles.

"You are right, sir. These magnificent beauties are not our best. Come with me." He walks towards the middle of the giant dealership, smiling. We follow him, Xavier with an expression of dubiousness.

"Here, ladies and gentlemen, is our masterpiece." He gestures to a ruby red car that doesn't seem to scream "I'm rich" or "I'm beautiful". It is just a plain, attractive four-door vehicle which stuns me with its simplicity.

"This car is the Pommel Fire, the first of its series. We make it so fast, so powerful, that the body can only be this simple without lowering both of those two factors. It is so tough it can run through a brick wall, and is completely waterproof. It may not be our best looking car, but it is certainly our best performing one."

"I'll pay you double the price," Xavier interrupts, "right now, if you will let me drive it out of here right away. We are in a hurry."

"Double?!" he says in alarm, "but sir, this car is worth"

Xavier hands him a debit card. "Now. Hurry." He seems to be annoyed with the man, and his surprised demeanor. The man takes one more surprised glance at Xavier, then backs off into an office. We wait for a minute, then he returns to us and looks at Xavier with new eyes. With shaking fingers, he gives the card back to Xavier.

"Sir, are you a celebrity?" he asks, peering at Xavier closely.

"None of your business," Xavier answers sharply, then opens the car door. He places Ray in the backseat, then slides in the front. Quickly we follow suit, noticing Xavier's urgent behavior.

When the car begins moving, I glance back at the man's face, still gaping.

"Well, that was fast." I laugh, watching Xavier gradually loosen as he drives, a smile growing on his features. I can tell that he greatly enjoyed intimidating that guy.

I examine the innards of this expensive car, The car is very luxurious on the inside, the seats made with some absolutely amazing material that I can almost sink into. A large touchscreen stretches between Xavier and I, 3D animations dancing across it. For a little while, I amuse myself with that, fiddling with the virtual buttons.

Then I remember how hungry I am and I grab my food and start eating a slice of my lemon pie.

When we enter the highway, the car growls with power, accelerating quickly. For one quick moment, it feels like I am riding in a rocket instead of a car. Xavier grips the wheel tightly, the smile getting broader on his handsome features. I laugh once more at his expression, and he turns to look at me. Electricity and passion instantly crackle between us, and for a few seconds, we can not pull away. I feel myself drowning in his green eyes, losing thought of anything else.

Then he shakes his head and turns to face the road, the smile melting off of his features. I quickly look to the window, red blossoming to my cheeks.

And then I see the gigantic truck that is still sprawled across its lane, surrounded by two police cars. An officer is talking to the truck driver, a large, heavy-set man wearing ragtag jeans and a t-shirt.

I catch a glance of red as we zoom past them, my own eyes growing wide.

That man... has the eyes of hell.

Shifters just seem to have it out for me. They must be simply unsatisfied with the fact that, while they did seriously wreck my life, they haven't managed to take it just yet.

I decide to inform Xavier, in case this Shifter appearance has more importance than it seems. "Xavier-"

"Ray's waking up!" Danae says excitedly, staring at the hump beside her. I twist in my seat to look, watching the mud-splattered Ray rear his head. His hair is sticking in every direction, dirt smeared on his cheeks.

"W-what happened?" he stutters slightly. He puts his hand to his face and wipes off some mud, opening his startling, emerald eyes.

"We got the car," Xavier updates Ray emotionlessly, keeping his eyes on the road. A small frown soon graces his lips. He takes a quick look at me, then urgently snaps his eyes back to the wheel.

"I see." Ray examines his surroundings. "Why did I pass out?"

"Because you were hit by one?!" I exclaim, twisting to stare at his tanned features with a jesting look.

"Oh... really?" Ray asks absentmindedly, "must have been a pretty big car." He lifts up his shirt, looking at the bruises and almost-healed scabs trailing along his body. I can't help but notice once more how defined his muscles are, with a six pack that looks like it belongs on a body builder.

"It was a truck."

"That makes sense. No wonder the breath was knocked out of me. If it was a regular car then I wouldn't have passed out like an idiot."

Stupid werewolves. They always have to be the best at everything.

"You know," I interlude, "most people DIE when they are hit by a car."

"That's true," Ray nods his head thoughtfully, "humans are much weaker than the werewolves. But they do have a very good thing about them."

"Which is what?"

"They are constrained by the goddess of Time. They have purpose in their life. The blessing of Growth graces their morphing bodies," Ray shrugs, "to me that is worth more than all the money in the world. Werewolves, on the other hand, are frozen forever until the moment when they shatter."

The atmosphere falls, and silence reigns. Should I tell Xavier about the red eyes, or will I just stir up trouble? Now that I think about it, did that man really have red eyes in the first place, or did I just imagine it?

I look at Xavier once more, open my mouth, and shut it.

Exhaustion creeps in, chilling me to the bone. The seats are so soft and comfortable that it just begs for decent use. After a few minutes, sleep overcomes me like a tidal wave, and I surrender all to the dark night that steals away thought and reason.

* * *

"Mona."

"Mona."

A hand shakes my shoulder, jerking me awake. My eyes slip open, and once again Light enters my world. "Who is this?" I ask groggily, my face probably reflecting the confusion I feel.

When everything solidifies, the first thing I notice is azure hair that is fine and long, each strand shimmering like a rainbow. Then a chiseled,

stunningly handsome face comes into view, followed by eyes of green.

"You need to get up for a little while and walk," the man commands, letting go of my shoulder. I wearily sit up, looking at the scene beyond Xavier's head. Once again I am in Xavier's arms, the warmth and attraction almost immediately consuming me. The car is missing, and we are located right outside of a large building with plenty of windows.

"W-what?" I stutter as he gently places me on the ground. He starts to walk, and I follow him.

"We needed to find a place for the night, so we chose to stay here. Both Ray and I figure that we have lost the council at this point, but we need to move constantly to avoid them if they pick up on our trail. We had to park the car down the road from here. And you were asleep, leaving us to decide what to do with Little Miss Drooler."

"I don't!-"

"Yes, Mona," he cuts me off, "you do."

I huff, folding my arms in annoyance. I have never really thought about it before, but Xavier is probably right.

"So are we staying in a nice room?" I ask curiously.

"I guess you will have to see for yourself, now won't you?" he says slowly, deliberately. For some reason, it seems to me as if I am stupid to him.

"I guess." With these words, our conversation fizzles to nothing, and the awkward silence begins to swallow me whole. The hotel is rather dingy, with dirty carpet and furniture. Xavier leads me down a small hallway, and then stops at one door. He pulls a key out of his pocket and slides it through a metal box hooked to the front of the door. There is a beep, and the door is yanked open by a gray haired Danae. She is completely old now, her skin wrinkled and rough.

"Hey!" she greets me warmly, in mid-laugh. Ray comes to stand beside her, grinning like he just won the billion dollar lottery.

"I love TV!" Ray exclaims, his eyes bright and happy. He seems more loose and energetic with each passing day, losing his negative attitude that he used to possess. I wonder what has caused him to change.

"What are you watching?" I ask curiously.

"It is this soap opera I found!" Danae smiles, "hurry and come in, its about to start and I don't want to miss it!" When some sort of opening theme blares through speakers to our ears, she rushes to the bed, plopping on it gracefully.

The room is small, with a door to the right, two beds, a kitchenette, a bathroom, and a small bedside table. It is really large, though, compared to my old bedroom at the orphanage.

"We also got an adjoining room, by the way," Danae calls over her shoulder, "so everyone can have his or her own bed. Ray and I already called this one. We are going to watch this show all night!"

I walk to the door and swing it open, opening my eyes wider when I realize this room looks exactly like the other one. I thought it would lead to another bathroom or a closet.

My pouch lays on my bed, a pair of pajamas right beside it. I slip into the bathroom, peeling off my old clothes and shimmying into the light, soft material. I wonder where Danae managed to get this...

Once I go back outside, I see our big TV stretching across the wall. Xavier is just sitting on one of the beds, thumbing through a magazine of some kind. Following suit, I slip onto my own bed, propping myself up like he did.

Right now NASCAR is on, which Xavier doesn't seem interested in at all. It bores me also, the fast cars only serving to make me dizzy. I want to change the channel, but the remote is nowhere to be found.

Then I finally spot it, by Xavier's side.

For some reason, it is hard to ask him for the remote. It is hard to even speak, to ruin the strained silence that has settled over us like a thick woolen blanket.

I sit there for a long while, until I am about to snap. Briefly I wonder if Danae planned for us to be in the same room together. If she did this on purpose, then I might just hate her.

"May I have the remote?" I finally ask, my voice robotic and expressionless. Xavier looks up at me, his green eyes gazing right into mine. He puts the magazine down and picks up the remote, leaning over to give it to me. I reach out my hand, stretching to close the distance.

My hand grasps the remote, and the tips of my fingers touch his in the process. With this touch comes a shock as frightening as a bolt of lightning, electricity and a crazy burst of uncontrollable passion boiling through my blood. The remote tumbles from our hands, hitting the floor with a thud.

Xavier immediately gets up, a spark in his eyes and despair in his features. With a sudden urgency, he races to my side, remote forgotten.

"I can't stand this any longer! I'm sorry for being mean," he begs, "just please, let us be anything but this! You can treat me like dirt, or a child, for anything from you is better than nothing at all. I can be a plaything to you if you wish, as long as I am something!"

"Xavier." I attempt to calm him down, my voice alike to his in nervousness and pleading.

"Even if you like Ray, please keep me at your side! Allow me to be your friend, or at least your acquaintance. This bond of ours is too strong for either of us to sever, even though you may wish it so-"

"Xavier," I say in a slightly louder voice.

"Because I don't think I can do it anymore! Your scent is so overpowering that it envelops me, causes me to lose all train of thought-"

"Xavier!" I command, "stop!"

Finally his tender lips come to a close, and with it comes peace. For a few seconds, this peace washes over us like a tidal wave, and everything is perfect.

"I have never-"

"Don't say anything," he whispers breathlessly, "I promise I will accept any conditions as long as you will acknowledge me. Please, no matter how much you must hate me..." He trails off, his eyes alight. I want to protest, but now doesn't seem like the time. We both lean in, I realizing how close we actually are. Not much more of a hairsbreadth away, his perfection and insecurity shines plainly for me to see. If only one of us tilts his or her head, then we will kiss. My heartbeat quickens and excitement floods through me.

I can't believe it. We just have a major problem or fight, caused by a misunderstanding that hasn't fully been cleared up between us, and right after we will share our first kiss.

Our "bonding", I suppose. I can only hope it leads to something good.

My hands shake and my face turns a cherry red. With barely contained anticipation, I purse my lips, looking up at the man mated to me. The one that was chosen to be mine.

Centimeters away, and edging closer...

His top lip brushes against my cheek as he suddenly swivels his head in response to the blare of his cell phone. Red is on his face too, spreading like wildfire. He sneaks a quick glance at me before grabbing his phone, a small pout dancing on the corner of his lips. Disappointment

crackles through the air.

I curse that phone.

He fiddles with a few buttons, and then a small message is displayed on the screen. As Xavier reads it, his face turns a deathly white. "It is from Jake."

"What does it say?" I ask fearfully.

He sits in complete silence for a second, staring at me. Then, after the moment is over, he says, "Took the house. We are prisoners. They are coming for you too."

Alarm overcomes my being, the shroud of doom once more descending upon me. For some reason, I can already tell that we are completely finished.

Puppy Love

My bed is soft, but not nearly as warm as I wish it to be.

I shiver underneath the thick covers, tossing and turning furiously. I struggle to get warm, yet only the cold embraces me. The desire for a certain man grows at an alarming rate, as I know that one touch from him would instantly make my body go hot with passion.

But at the same time, I am afraid of him. Sadness and a strange fear races through my mind as I recall once again his confession to me, his impassioned plea for forgiveness that strangled my heart. I wanted to rectify our misunderstanding, but he refused to listen. I could tell that he was stressed, his eyes full with pain and desolation. He was almost desperate for me, as if I was his bread and water. Just remembering that one look from his statuesque features ashamedly brings a tiny tingle of happiness to my heart.

But what is he truly desperate for? Is it just for our mating to be fulfilled, or because he loves me for who I am?

Once I really think about it, if I was not his mate, he would not have fallen in love with me at all. In fact, I would have been dead now. I would have been given everything I asked for on that one awful night.

"I can tell you are thinking hard," a deep voice cuts through my pondering state. His words are followed by a little laugh, and the crinkle of a smile.

"Ray?" I slowly sit up, struggling against the headboard. Looking up at his grinning face, I reluctantly smile back. "What are you doing?"

"Getting you. Everyone else is in the car."

"How long has it been?"

"About three hours. It's time, Mona." His face is now deathly serious. "We cannot stay here anymore. Our lives are at stake."

"I feel so woozy..." I attempt to swing my legs off the bed, clutching Ray's shoulder for support. "Please, help me," I whisper into his shoulder, leaning on his broad form.

Without another word he sweeps me into his arms, cradling me like a baby. It feels so good... so warm. As I look up at him, I can see his concern and determination. For a minute, I see another in his place, with bright blue hair and smooth skin.

"Forgive me," I quickly apologize, slipping into the vast nothingness as my eyes slide to a close once more.

* * *

The first thing I see is Danae's face leaning over mine. Now she seems as young as a teenager, with luscious, dark hair. As I sit up, my own flaming red hair slaps against my arms. For some reason, I feel extremely nauseated.

Her large eyes search mine with great concern. "Are you okay?" she asks softly, and I grasp her arm tightly.

"I don't think so," I confess, "I think I am car sick." Being in a car like this reminds me of... that fateful journey with my parents. I haven't really been overly fond of them since then.

"What's wrong?" Ray twists in his seat, staring at me. I try to avoid looking up and seeing the whiz of cars in front of him.

"I feel like I'm going to throw up," I confess, holding my stomach. His eyes carefully examine my appearance; obviously trying to decide for himself how bad of a condition I am in.

"Xavier, we are going to have to park the car soon or Mona will vomit all over the seats." Ray turns his head back to the front, leaning forward in his seat. "I don't know where... but we need to find a safe place to either get some meds for her or to ditch the car completely."

I spare one glance outside of my window but all I can see is miles and miles of road. There is no gas station, no store of any kind.

"Where are we going to hide?" I inquire, my voice coming out a little raspy and low.

"I'm hoping that when we reach Pack 24 they will help hide us, but if they don't, then we will continue to travel north until we reach one of the sanctuaries," Xavier says firmly, keeping his eyes straight ahead. Even from the back I can sense his fierce determination, his desire to escape the invisible villain.

Miles and minutes pass, and with every bump I feel a new wave of nausea. Ray keeps his gaze focused on me, somehow encouraging me without words. Danae is just as tired as I am, leaning her head against the window.

CRACK!!

My head leaps up as a resounding noise fills the air. "What was that?!" I scream, searching for the source of the noise. Xavier jerks the car off the road and races towards the trees on both sides of the interstate. "Hold on!" he yells, narrowing his eyes. The speed escalates from 80 mph to over 100.

CRACK!!

A gasp escapes me as I hear the same sound again. The window beside me splinters as a small metal ball is suddenly wedged inside of the thick glass. Spider webs blossom in the small area, reaching to the far corners of the window. "WATCH OUT!" Danae screams, tugging me over to her side just as it shatters, glass shards falling all around us. One hits my leg, and instantly blood starts to drip from the small wound.

We are all jerked around as he navigates us into the forest. I am thrown against the opposite seat where the glass is, Danae unable to hold me. Tears slide down my cheeks as I feel thousands of tiny pieces pierce my body. I crawl back over to her, and begin to break down as I hold her arm. There is another blur of movement and Ray is at our side, shielding us both from the waves of glass flying towards us.

"We are going to have to ditch the car!" he yells to Xavier as another shot rings out. This time it hits the window that stretches across the back. "Normal bullets wouldn't shatter windows like these," Ray mutters to himself angrily as cracks run through the back window.

"What do we do?" I ask, mashed between Ray and Danae. Many more gunshots crackle through the air as we swerve deeper into the forest, scraping past trees and rocks.

"On the count of three, open the door," Ray instructs me calmly.

"Why? If we do, we will be killed by the bullets!"

"Mona." He stares into my eyes, serious as ever. "This time, you are just going to have to trust me."

My fingers reach the handle, gripping it tightly. Tears are flowing like a waterfall from my face onto my shirt and jeans.

"1 -"

"Ray, don't! That's what they want! They are trying to scare us into leaving the vehicle!" Xavier shouts, twisting around briefly, "They know bullets can't seriously injure us!"

"It's safer out there than it is in here! We are all getting hurt by the glass!" The shattered pieces from the back window are falling like rain on our heads, scraping our skin. "And anyway, I don't think those are normal, run-of-the-mill bullets," he continued. Xavier raises his head once more, eyes

alert.

"2," Ray whispers in my ear, shielding me as best he can. My hands are clammy from holding the metal handle. I hold my breath, waiting for all this to end, for it to be over. Maybe I will wake up and find out that this was all a dream.

"3!" My eyes slip to a close as I wrench the handle open. There is a blur of motion as we all fall towards the ground, and for a moment, it seems as if all this is occurring in slow motion... as if we are just gracefully falling out a slowly-moving car.

Ray zooms out of the car, grasping both of us in his arms before we ever hit the ground and we are gone, traveling faster than the car ever did. In seconds Xavier is right along beside us.

"Let me take one," he tells Ray, holding out his arms slightly. Ray rolls his eyes, and soon I find myself in Xavier's strong arms. I almost sigh with relief as I lean back against his chest—although I hate to admit it—I have missed this so much.

Almost as much as I have missed him.

For what seems like ages we run through the forest, bullets shooting through the air. One hits a tree by us and it cracks, falling right beside us. I gasp as another drops to the ground soon after. Bullets aren't supposed to be able to knock over trees.

Another series of trees plummeting to the ground follow a series of gunshots. "Xavier!" I scream as a gigantic one blocks our path; this one was laced with quite a few shots. Xavier turns quickly and we both realize that we are trapped in a circle of trees. "Who could have planned something like this?" I ask, my breath coming in short gasps.

Without answering my question, Xavier leaps to the top of the tree and prepares to jump off of it.

"If I were you, I wouldn't do that," a deep, commanding voice erupts from behind us. Chills race through my spine as we turn to see a man standing in the center of the circle. He had beautiful golden hair, much like Wes's, that stopped right at his shoulders.

Xavier narrows his eyes. I can tell these two are not exactly friends. "And why not?" He stands firmly on the top of the tree, not backing down.

"Members of my team are stationed on every side. There is no chance of escape." The man laughs a little, smiling brightly. "Hello, Xavier. Good to see you again, though I certainly did not think I would be seeing you so soon. Why don't you step down from the tree?"

Xavier doesn't waver.

"Did you see our newly developed bullets?" He gestures to the sky as a bunch of shots race through the air. "These are specially modified to have the ability to pierce the toughest of skins. Good thing you avoided them so far... if one hit you, it would have hurt."

Suddenly the man notices me in his arms. "Is this the convert? She's a pretty one." Xavier's grip tightens around my form, holding me even closer to his warm chest. "How about you convince your boyfriend to step down before anyone gets hurt?" He asks me, a hint of contempt laced through his seductive voice.

"Maybe it would be a good idea, Xavier," I whisper into his ear, fright clearly painted onto my features, "they seem to know what they are doing."

"I'm not going to give you up." At these words, butterflies flutter in my stomach and a blush inches its way onto my cheek.

The man dramatically sighs. "Bring them out, Daemon."

An imposing man with sunglasses comes out from behind one of the trees, carrying two men. He places them near the feet of his leader, emotionless.

"Say hello to Jake and Wes," the leader smiles, pulling a dark object out of his pocket, "or I should say, tell them your goodbyes unless you get down from that tree." Thick, blood-stained bandages are wrapped around Jake's arm and Wes's calf. They must have been hit by those deadly bullets.

He holds the dark object over their heads. I recognize it to be a gun.

Where is Yi? He couldn't be... dead, could he?

Xavier looks down, and slowly steps to the ground. Anger is laced through his gaze as he lifts his head and glares at the man. He doesn't seem to notice that Yi is missing.

"This is your fault for trying to run," the man says plainly, "it didn't have to be this way."

"You know my reasons for running," Xavier replies evenly, his eyes like lasers. The man shrugs in reply, a slight smirk dancing across his handsome features.

"I'm afraid we are going to have to bring you all in." With a wave of his hand, several figures jump over the trees into the circle. Most of them are strong, handsome men, not one of them appearing to be over the age of forty. The rest are beautiful wolves. Their eyes flash an emerald green.

Feeling rather awkward, I stumble out of Xavier's arms and stand beside him. Scanning the row of men, I see no familiar faces. Danae and Ray are a few feet away from us, obviously trying to judge how powerful their opponent is.

"You have to let Mona have a trial," Xavier insists firmly, "or I won't surrender." He steps towards the leader, clearly intent on picking a fight. Immediately two tall men surround him, forbidding him from proceeding any farther.

"Why should I do that when you so blatantly broke the rules and even tried to escape going to headquarters?"

I listen to their argument for a few seconds, and then my gaze wanders. I search my surroundings for other werewolves, wondering if any more were hiding in the bushes. Maybe if I run as fast as possible, I could escape while the leader's attention was focused. Without making any sort of noise, I inch towards the tree trunk...

...Until I spot a huge, handsome dog with silky smooth chocolate fur and a large caramel splotch on his eyes leaping over the trees. Its eyes roam the circle, then stops on me. We stare at each other for a minute, frozen. Tears spring to my eyes.

He flies my way, sprinting a mile a minute. By the time he reaches me, I'm laughing and crying at the same time.

"Scotty!" I exclaim as he rubs my hand with his soft head, just like he always did in the past. He has gotten so big now, almost as large as I am. Heads turn to watch us, but I don't even care. "What are you doing here?" I ask him, "Where have you been?"

He barks once, staring deeply into my eyes. I wish I knew how to speak dog.

I hug him by the neck, drowning in the warmth and softness of his fur. It is so good to be with him again.

A hand touches my shoulder, and I look up to see the face of the leader, his face in a grin. "Why is he with you people?" I ask him sharply.

"Because he trusts us," he gently says, "and so should you."

I stand up, scanning the faces that are looking at me, crawling over my face and body. Immediately my gaze connects with Xavier, noting the look of bewilderment on his features.

"I have to go with them," I tell him calmly. His eyes grow wide.

"Why? They are going to kill you, Mona." Distress is laced through his voice. "Don't you realize that?"

"I have to go with Scotty," I insist, rubbing my hand across his back.

"I can't let you give yourself up because of a dog!"

"Well," the leader bumps in, "I think you can and will." The two men around Xavier grab his arms fiercely. "And Mona," he tells me in a low voice, "I'm very interested as to how you and... um... Scotty know each other. Both of you can tell me all about that later."

He raises his voice. "As you all know, there's a sanctuary near here that we can take us back to the headquarters. Let's get moving." As I glance at the members of the pack, I suddenly notice Ray and Danae's absence. They must have escaped while the leader was talking. "Are you ready?" the leader asks me softly, "My name is Ferrars by the way."

"Nice to meet you," I smile thinly, "and I have to warn you, I can't run as fast as you guys can. That's why Xavier was carrying me here."

"No problem." He sends me a beautiful smile, sweeping me into his arms. However, all I can feel is the coldness of his arms and chest. For some reason I don't trust him at all.

After a short while we reach a small clearing marked by very bright green grass. As I look up to the sky, I notice how clear and perfect it is. Wasn't it a dark, stormy gray this morning?

Ferrars gracefully puts me down, and then navigates to a rock planted in the center of the clearing. Two strong men follow him and place their hands on the rock. With much effort they lift it, placing it slightly away from where it used to be.

"Take the prisoners first," he commands. A slightly skinnier, handsome man with dark brown hair grabs my arm, roughly dragging me to where Ferrars is. "Be gentle with her, Soka," he cautions my escort. I can feel his calculative gaze scan me as we pass him.

I gasp when I see a deep tunnel where the rock used to be, small and dark. Without realizing it, I clutch Soka's arm tightly. "Are you scared of the dark?" he asks with a little laugh. I glare at him in response, though still sticking to him like glue as we slowly descend down a small stairway into the tunnel.

"To be a werewolf, you sure don't act like one," Soka comments, "you seem like a regular human, besides your green eyes of course. The master even carried you! He never does anything like that for anyone. He seems happier today than he has been in quite a while."

Feeling like my companion is in the conversational mood, I ask, "Is he the leader of all the werewolves?"

"He's actually the second son of the real leader, but he is next in line to the throne."

"What about the first son? Shouldn't he take over?"

Soka casts me a laughing glance. "You really don't know, do you? Zayn told me that you didn't have a clue back in the forest but I didn't believe him until now."

"I don't have a clue about what?"

"The first son isn't... suitable to be our leader. Although I have to say, he's much better at being a leader than Ferrars is." He snorts. "Ferrars always needs someone to chase, fight, or kill. He can't take more than five minutes of peace."

Silence reigns through the tunnel, the only sounds being the monotonous footsteps as the rest of the group begins to follow us. "Where are we going? What is this tunnel for?" I ask him worriedly. This tunnel seems like it goes on forever, and I'm not sure if I can take much more of this.

"Headquarters," he says softly, "and this is what you would call a portal. The council has a ton of these scattered around the world, hidden in places called sanctuaries. They can take you wherever you wish to go. It is very useful for werewolves who are trying to escape some sort of persecution."

"How can they take you everywhere you wish to go when there is only one passageway?" I don't see any other tunnels leading off this one, which isn't saying much since I can barely see anything.

"All you have to do is think about where you want to go as you travel through the tunnel and you will come out of the portal at that destination."

"You talk too much, Soka," a dangerously deep voice interrupts our conversations, "you shouldn't be telling all this stuff to the prisoner." I look back and I can barely make out the outline of his face.

"What does it matter, Zayn? She's not going to last very long at Headquarters. Who cares if I tell her a few of our secrets?"

"We don't know that. She might get lucky. Ferrars seems to like the look of her."

"He was just acting like a gentleman. It wasn't because he liked her."

I say nothing, slightly offended.

After a few minutes we see a light at the end of the tunnel. Excitement flows through me as I realize that I am so close to getting out of the tunnel and seeing the "Headquarters" for the first time.

"Do you need me to carry you?" Soka laughingly asks as I almost trip on a root. As we reach the light, I can finally see his face as he makes fun of me. I punch him in the arm, surprised at how comfortable I feel with this guard, especially considering that he is bringing me here to die. I guess it is because inwardly, I feel like I am going to be okay.

As long as I have Scotty.

"It's so bright!" I shield my eyes as we step out of the tunnel. I feel immense relief as the world greets me once again. The grass is perfectly green here, the trees elegant and healthy. Even the sky here is just as clear as it was in the sanctuary.

But even more beautiful is the castle right in front of my eyes.

It is so big, with its turrets reaching towards the sky. A sparkling, crystal clear lake lies behind it, wrapping its arms around the entire castle like a moat. There is a gigantic wall surrounding the entire area, which makes it seem even more like a castle out of a fairy tale.

"This is where the council lives?" I ask Soka.

"This is where everyone who is important lives," Soka says plainly, "and yes, that would include the council and their mates."

"Is there any children living in there?" I ask, remembering Ray's words when he told me about the impossibility of having a child between two werewolves.

"Rarely ever are children born in the castle."

"But what about the leader?"

"That... was a special case." Soka loudly snorts and Zayn knees him in the back. "Ouch, man! What was that for?"

"Show proper respect," he says fiercely. As I glance back this time, I can see a large scar stretching across his rather grotesque features.

Ferrars heads to the front of the group, his long golden hair shining in the light. "Guards, take the members of Pack 101 to the dungeon," he commands, unsmiling. As Soka drags me past Ferrars, however, he stops him. "You're coming with me," he says, grabbing hold of my arm. Soka disappears into the train of soldiers who are vanishing into the castle. Xavier, as he passes us both, shoots Ferrars the glance of hell.

Ferrars laughs. "Your friend is funny. I think he likes you."

"Maybe." I decide not to tell him about Xavier and I. That would not help either of us.

He starts walking to the castle, dragging me along. He has a surprisingly tough grip, one that I could never break out of. "You better count yourself lucky that I'm feeling nice today," He grins, "you don't want to be where your friends are, that's for sure."

I keep silent, determined not to give him any sort of answer. Looking at my feet the entire time, I am whisked through the castle, sadness finally beginning to creep into my heart. Where is Scotty? The whole reason why I did not put up a fight was because of him, and now he is nowhere to be found.

"Here we are," he finally says, stopping at a small door. "This is a little bit better than those dungeon rooms. Even though you are our prisoner,

... you are still a lady and deserve to be treated like one... especially since you might not be staying here very long."

I finally lift my head as the door swings open to a simple room about half the size of the one at the mansion. However, it looks clean and probably is way better than the dungeon cells. "Thank you," I softly say, walking into the bedroom. The bed is pretty large and inviting, beckoning me to lie upon it.

"If you want to change into some better clothes there are some in the closet," he smiles, walking over to a door and opening it to reveal quite a few outfits. "There are also a few necklaces in this drawer that were left here by some of the ambassadors."

I search through the closet until I find a beautiful, yet simple top with a skirt that gathers at the side. Closing the door so he can't see, I change within seconds. It is amazing how fast I can accomplish things now.

I exit the closet and move over to the drawer just to look at the jewelry these people left here. All of it is beautiful, but the one that stands out to me the most is a small emerald orb dangling on a thin silver chain. If I stare into it, it almost feels like I am looking into Xavier's eyes.

"Let me help you," Ferrars's voice turns seductive as he takes the necklace and fastens it around my neck. I can feel his breath on my neck as his fingers play with the ends of the chain. "You look very pretty," he comments, smiling at my form as he steps away.

Against my better judgement, I look away. I wanted to yell at him for hurting my friends. For capturing us against our will. Even though I know it will do no good.

Friends. I have friends now.

Friends who mean so much to me, even though I would never admit it.

Ferrars frowns when I don't say anything in response to his compliment. "Are you worried about your friends?"

I nod slowly, and he walks even closer to my side. He takes both hands and places them firmly on my shoulders. Electricity arises from his touch, shocking me to the bone. Is he insane? What is he doing?

I try to calm down my anger, knowing that it will not get me anywhere.

"It is true that your pack has committed a grave offense," he starts solemnly, "surely you understand the necessity of enforcing the rules. Without rules that are respected and followed, our entire world would fall apart. With that being said, however, you have just met probably the only person right now who can help you out here, and maybe even your pack. So please... please do not cry." His voice turns tender and he drops his arms as a small tear begins to run down my cheek.

I'm... crying? Over what?

After questioning myself in confusion, I look back into Ferrars's bright eyes. "Could you save us? I'll do anything."

His eyes darken with my words, clouding in its center. I wait for a few seconds impatiently. "Ferrars? Did you hear me?"

I don't even know why I am begging the enemy for help. Since when have I ever been so desperate?

"Uh... yes. I did. I don't know what came over me. I apologize. Uh... don't worry about it. I'll take care of you, I promise."

I do not like where this conversation is going. I suddenly realize that one of his hands have been touching my shoulder this entire time. No wonder I have been shivering so much.

I treat him with one of my best, though obviously fake smiles. "Thank you, I really appreciate everything you have done."

His face suddenly freezes, and contorts into a scowl. "What are you doing to me?!" He asks, extremely frustrated. It is as if he has become another person, staring at me like I normally would a piece of steak.

That's it! I knew he was bipolar.

"Doing what?" I ask, shocked. There is a blur of motion and then suddenly I find myself on the bed, pinned down by Ferrars.

He looks like an animal now more than ever, staring at me hungrily. Fright jolts through me as he reaches to unbutton the top of my shirt.

"Please..." I beg, tears beginning to form and roll down my cheeks.

Completely ignoring me, he impatiently rips open the first button, then the second. I almost scream as his eyes begin to glow bright like the sun...

But then they stop glowing almost as soon as they started. His face is full of bafflement as he seems to return to his normal self. "What is this?" he asks angrily, "you are mated?"

I look at the mirror to the side and suddenly notice a small mark near my neck. It is in the shape of a crescent moon with a circle around it. "How long has that been there?" I wonder aloud, rubbing the spot with my fingers.

"And what is this?!" He stares at the gap between my shirt and the skirt, where a similar mark lies on my hip. "But you have such an irresistible smell... this is impossible! I can't even control myself around you, yet you are mated to not one but two men?"

He backs away, staring at me with fright. "What are you?"

"Can you explain to me why you assaulted me just then?!" I ask furiously.

A slight pause follows as Ferrars tries to recover. "It's your smell," he groans, "it is so intoxicating that it nearly knocked me down when I first saw you. I was planning on marking you as my own, but looks like two people beat me to the punch. It should be impossible to be mated and smell like that! I don't understand at all."

"Did you say... I was mated to two men?"

Ferrars roughly steps forward and points to both of the markings. "These are mating markings. The reason why my eyes were glowing was because I was trying to mark you, but I stopped because of the shock of discovering that first mark by your neck. If you are mated, you are supposed to smell kind of like a rotten egg to everyone but your mate, but you are not like that at all."

He nearly runs away from me, staring as if I am an alien. "Good night, Mona. I apologize for my rudeness, but right now it would be best for both of us if I stayed away from you. There is some food on the tray." He shuts the door quickly, and I hear a click shortly after. He locked me in.

I stand up and examine myself in the mirror. I had never really noticed the markings before, with them being almost like regular, minuscule birthmarks. Today has definitely been a day of surprises. For one, I'm surprised I am still alive after Ferrars looked at me like he was going to eat me.

Totally exhausted, I plop back onto the bed, wondering how the crap I got two markings. It is almost too much for me to take in all at once. Is Ferrars a genuinely nice person or is he the person that I caught a glimpse of tonight?

I remember Ferrars's angry question, "What are you?", with complete confusion.

What am I?

A few minutes later, the door squeaks open to reveal a majestic, beautiful dog. It shuts behind him as he comes towards me. "Spotty!" I smile, patting the spot to my left. "Come and sit by me."

As he joins me, I find myself telling him everything that has happened with Ferrars. Spotty has always been so easy to talk to... I was always able to tell him anything that was on my mind ever since I was young. Minutes stretch into hours as I pour out my fears, hopes, and past since he left.

His big eyes search mine as I confess, "Ferrars... he was going to mark me until he saw these." I show him my two markings, and he growls.

He... asked me what I was, Spotty, and I don't think I have the answer to that. Do you have any clue? I know I have changed, and it has been so long since we parted..."

"Why are you even here, Scotty? Did they kidnap you?" I ask him after a few moments of thought. He stared at me in response, unblinking. The peculiarity of this entire situation seems to hit me at this moment. The werewolves here are not really the type to keep pets.

Suddenly overcome by sleepiness, I lay my head down on the pillows. "Goodnight, Spotty," I shoot him one last smile, "thank you for listening."

He lays his body near mine, curling around me so I can almost hear his heartbeat. His soft breath against my neck feels so much different than Ferrars's did earlier. For some reason, both of us being together like this feels... so incredibly perfect.

My eyes slip to a close, my mind drifting off into wonderland.

In the middle of the night, I briefly become suspended between sleep and full consciousness. Confusion arises within me as I realize a broad chest is now against my back instead of soft fur, two legs almost intertwined with mine. An arm is slowly caressing me, stroking my stomach, arms, and thigh; and lips are murmuring soft words to my ear.

"You are only mine..."

Why Does Everything Have to Be So Complicated?

Even as his warm, strangely familiar fingers dance over my skin, I feel no discomfort. Relaxed breaths brush against the back of my neck, somehow sweeping away all alarm. I feel an alien desire to lay here forever in this enchanting embrace.

Am I going crazy?

Fighting the strong urge to once again close my eyes, I jolt upright. Suddenly losing my balance, I slip off the bed, tumbling towards the ground. With a loud crash I bang my head against the cold stone floor, a slight wave of pain sweeping through my bones.

There is silence for a few seconds, then a voice. "Mona?" For some reason, the word sends shivers through my spine with its irresistibility. The light by the bed switches on as fingertips woozily grasp it, filling the room with brightness. A head appears over the side of the bed and I nearly go into a self-cataclysmic shock.

It is like I am falling under a deep spell, mesmerized by the striking beauty of his features. His hair is a golden-red, chaotic strands springing in every direction. Skin as clear as crystal holds a masterful pair of lips and a small nose, slightly tanned by the warmth of the sun. However, his beautiful, incredibly large brown eyes are what keep me spellbound. They sparkle slightly as he surveys me, confusion plainly showing in his features.

I find myself unable to move, frozen to the core. "Mona?" he repeats, a dizzy smile appearing on his face. And what an attractive smile that is.

His grin suddenly vanishes as he casts a glance at his hand, an expression of horror soon replacing it. "Oh no..." he groans as if in pain, "I ruined it now." His head retreats from view, although his hand reaches to help me up.

"Who are you?" I try to be rough and forceful with my question, but I can't as soon as I catch sight of those hypnotizing chocolate eyes. All my anger evaporates, leaving me completely defenseless as I stand up across from him. Those eyes remind me of my father.

Instantly I notice his bare chest, rippled with muscles. He sits up against the pillow, his head in his hands. "I didn't mean for this to happen," he sighs apologetically, glancing at me cautiously.

"For what to happen?" I take a look at the floor, suddenly embarrassed by the thoughts I am having.

"For this," he waves his hand at both of us, "for you to see me in this way."

I just stare at him, waiting for answers.

"I'm sorry," his eyes crinkle adorably; "this must be a shock for you. I let myself get out of control." Newfound alarm races through my blood, my mind racing to new conclusions. Glancing at my rumpled clothes, I suddenly realize that I never changed from last night. Surely this attractive man didn't... do anything to me.

"Crap, I must have shifted in the middle of the night," he mutters darkly to himself, cringing as he looks once more at his human hands. Within a flash, clothes materialize on his skin, making me blink several times.

"Why do you seem so familiar to me?" I ask him finally, and he pauses.

"You might want to sit down," he recommends, and I slowly obey him, suspicion racing through me. Raising his gaze to mine, he reluctantly holds out his hand.

"Hello, Mona. To you, my name is Scotty."

All consciousness escapes me as true shock overwhelms my being.

* * *

"Please, Mona, wake up. I'm sorry that I upset you." A hand strokes my long red hair. "Please wake up," he begs, his voice cutting through my empty thoughts. As my eyes slide open, one lone message enters my mind.

Scotty is a man. A very, very, very handsome man.

For some reason, I can't make any sense out of that statement.

"I must be dreaming," I woozily whisper, "you can't be Scotty. You can't."

"But I am," he whispers back, grasping my fingers and holding them tightly. "Here, my name is Griffin, but you can call me any name you want to."

His hand travels to my side, and I jump a little bit as he touches the mark near my hip. The strange thing about all this is that it feels completely natural to me. For him to be here. For us to be like this.

"I missed you so much, Mona," he smiles, a beautiful expression that leaves me spellbound, "it took every ounce of my strength to not shift into this form when I saw you yesterday. I thought I would never see you again. I was still trying to forget you. But then it all came back when I saw your face."

He leans towards me, and before I can react a tingle spreads throughout my entire body as his lips brush against my mark. I scoot away as soon as I realize what he did, a blush creeping upon my cheeks. "This is too much," I try to explain when he looks at me with questioning eyes, "this is too much for one day. I feel like my head is going to explode."

My head is not the only thing that is about to explode. My heart is as well, nearly bursting after the kiss he gave. He seems to sense this, crawling across the bed to me. "Now we can finally act like mates. I have waited so long for this... for you." He takes my arm and gently runs kisses up and down it. Shock temporarily overwhelms me as he pins me down, kissing my neck. He stops for a second, inches away from my mouth, as if he expects me to reach up and kiss him back.

"Scotty... uh, Griffin... don't you think this is a little fast?" I ask him, a little scared by his expression and behavior. He just looks at me, clueless.

"Fast? What do you mean by that?" he asks, his brown eyes creasing in confusion. "Do you not feel the attraction as well? We are mates, Mona."

"No, it is just... I'm a little conflicted right now." I sit up, leaning against the back of the bed. "I don't really know anything any more. I feel the attraction too. I mean, it would be impossible not to feel it. But it almost feels like there is something missing."

What is that missing quality? With Xavier, I don't feel quite like this, though the same attraction exists.

"Mona... that attraction is what binds us together. It is the eternal bond released by our werewolf forms... or dog forms."

"G-griffin," I stutter, "is that why you have brown eyes? You are a crossbreed?"

"Yes," he looks away, shame in his features. "I know I'm not deserving of you."

"At least you can shift," I complain, snorting then laughing to try and cover it up. "I don't even know if I have a werewolf form."

He suddenly grows stiff. "What?" he asks.

"I'm not a full werewolf," I explain, "I was originally meant to be converted to a Spier. However, throughout the conversion something went wrong, and apparently my conversion had failed. I was going to die. But Xavier came and gave me a few drops of his blood, and somehow I survived."

He remains motionless, thinking hard. "So you show the symptoms of both supernatural species?"

"Well, I changed in appearance, and my reflexes and strength improved. But I haven't shown any Spier abilities, besides the fact that I can see the shifters and heal the possessed."

"So you can't make a Spirit Spear," he said worriedly, "for any other person, that would be normal, but for you, that's very bad news. And what was the other thing you said you could-"

"Am I really going to die here?" I ask, touching his hand softly. He leans closer, kissing me on the forehead. Us being like this... it feels so comfortable and uncomfortable at the same time. I feel like a traitor.

"Not if I can help it," his kisses deepen, dancing across my skin. "But you will probably be removed from Pack 101, and they will be either exiled or terminated."

"What?! No, please, Griffin, don't let them," I beg, staring at him.

"There's not much I can do about that," he said softly, "it will be a stretch for me even to save you."

I think of their faces; Yi, Jake, Ray, Wes, and... Xavier. They sacrificed everything to save me. I was so important to them. How could I let them down like this?

How could I let... him down?

"Please," I say, pulling away my arm, "I can't right now."

"Why?" His adorable eyes search my soul. After I say nothing in response, he resumes his previous action, passion burning in his expression.

"Please!" I squeal as he continues, "Xavier wouldn't like-"

"What?" he asks angrily, stopping entirely. "Xavier? He's the other one who marked you, right? Who cares what he thinks? You belong to me."

I am frozen, considering my own feelings. Why did I say that? I suppose it was because I felt like this wasn't right. Like I was betraying Xavier. But am I really betraying him when he was the second one to mark me? Where should my allegiance lie?

"I was serious before," I urgently beg him, "I need some time to think before I go into brain overload. Please forgive me."

"I mean, I will always forgive you," Griffin replied, leaning back and lying on the edge of the bed, "but I am... angry. This is a strange feeling. It is like fire is choking me alive."

He looks at me with an inexplicable expression. "You should forget about him, Mona. He won't last long here. None of them will."

I bury myself under the covers, trying to escape the burning reality. I may not even see them again, and that is a hard thing to accept. This is too much to take in. Why does the fact that I might not see Xavier hurt so much?

When I finally recover, I slowly sit up. The first thing I notice is that Griffin is there, sleeping on the side of the bed in his dog form. His personality as a human is so similar to his dog personality. He is earnest and persistent, passionate and loyal. My mind flashes back to the time when we were inseparable. That time seems so far in the past, but it was a time of incredible happiness.

Griffin lifts his head, and I find that in this form I can't call him anything but Scotty. "Scotty, could you bring me to the rest of the pack?" I ask him softly. He shakes his head. "Could.. you try to save them?" I beg him, growing desperate. Scotty looks at me, then meltingly nods in response.

We sit there for a minute, then Scotty travels over to my side. He places a paw right above my chest, staring with unblinking eyes. This moment of seriousness passes, and he pounces on me, licking my entire face. I begin to laugh.

"Stop... stop.... STOP!!!" I yell as he covers my face in sticky saliva. He backs off, running to the door. I smile as he somehow manages to paw the door open, walking outside into the hallway. The happiness in the room vanishes, however, when the door bangs to a shut. Suddenly my previously desolate state of being returns, and I feel the urge to cry.

Somehow, the thought that I may survive this whole ordeal at the cost of my pack's deaths makes me so depressed. I might as well just die with them, with the number of times Xavier has saved me from certain death. I don't deserve to live any more than he does.

And there is also the fact that he is convinced that I hate him. The way he apologized to me last night displayed that. I want to explain to him before it is too late that I am not mad at him. Even now, it makes me hurt so much. I really don't understand myself anymore.

I lay on the bed, drifting into nothingness within the next few minutes.

* * *

During my time alone in my room, I try to create a spirit spear. Lying down on the floor, I close my eyes and try to imagine one. To imagine anything.

Although it has gotten easier to meditate, nothing happens even after hours of concentration. My eyes grow bloodshot and my body gets frenzied with anticipation. When is something finally going to happen? With every minute I am getting closer and closer to possible elimination by the council. No one has come to see me for two days, and the desperate nature of this whole situation is really starting to hit me. The horror of it at first was offset by the reappearance of Scotty, but now the fact that he's a freakin' man just adds more peculiarity to these circumstances. I have gotten sick of trying to figure this whole thing out. It's either I develop my skills, or I die. Unless I get a really good lawyer or something.

I haven't gotten any visions either, which is rather strange. I used to get them once every few days, but it has been almost a week since my last one. Only a few glimpses of this unknown world have skittered across my mind; most of dark forests, villages, and vast oceans. In all the scenes the same emotion appears—emptiness—which washes over the entire area like a flood. Not a single person is to be seen, not a sound to be heard. It leads me to wonder whether all of these glimpses and visions are just figments of my imagination, augmenting my deepest fears of becoming utterly alone.

For it is now a legitimate fear of mine, creeping upon me until it is impossible to ignore or avoid, making its timeless mark upon my form. Having met such crazy people, and having my life impacted in such a way really has affected me for the better or worse, depending on how I look at it. On one hand, I am now more vulnerable than I would like to be; I can now be hurt in ways that I couldn't before. On the other hand, however, I have been introduced to this warm feeling that I almost didn't know existed. It feels now like I am alive, and before like I wasn't living a true life. It makes me laugh to think now that the werewolves have brought me to death, then back to life.

But obviously now I can't fit in anywhere, which is why it is so important that I learn to create a spirit spear. I'm not a werewolf, Spier, or human being. I can heal the possessed but lack the basic abilities of any supernatural creature. I look the part, but I can't assimilate into any of those societies at this point.

Taking a pen from the desk beside me, I sit down and stare at a blank piece of paper. Laughingly I remember an aphorism and modify it to describe my situation perfectly. "Jack of all races," I whisper as I write, "master of none." Honestly, the council could kill me just for the fact that I'm an oddity.

Once I think about it, that's really all I ever was, even as a human. A laughingstock, caged in fear and criticism. But does being an oddity really warrant such chains?

I realize that I have been straying from the point, and try to focus on the matter at hand, which seems to be saving my sorry butt. Flipping over the page, I try to brainstorm ways to prove that I am not a werewolf and therefore undeserving of the punishments they wish to give. Any tests of strength would not work because the council would think I was merely holding back on my power. Demonstrations of my Spier abilities would clearly be impossible unless a possessed man or woman popped out of nowhere, which would be...

Hey, that's not a half-bad idea. I write it down on my piece of paper and label it "Game Plan". That's really all the proof I have that's in my favor, and though it's a long-shot, it's also a possibly redeeming move.

I settle on the floor, having put my piece of paper aside. Casting my eyes to the ceiling, I attempt to calm down and enter relaxation mode. As I predicted, it is pretty much impossible.

In spite of my nerves I eventually close my eyes, laying on the cold stone floor with my stomach to the ceiling. I take deep breaths, breathing in and out...

My heart jumps a million miles in the air as a key clicks in the lock. Oh crap. They're here.

Please not now!

The door swings open to reveal two armed guards, both staring at my strange position on the floor. Blushing, I scramble to my feet.

"The council has summoned you," the tall guard says, his brown hair covered by a strange hat made of metal. The other guard is short and stocky, with bright orange hair that lights up the entire room.

"I suppose I can't refuse to go," I laugh shakily, which reveals my inner nervousness as it escalates at a mile a minute. They shake their head in unison. I check my appearance in the mirror. I'm not dressed up or anything, but I feel that my clothes look half-way decent. And it's not like I need makeup... which always makes me feel weird because I never looked at myself with satisfaction before my conversion.

I follow the tall guard out of the room, while the short one trails behind. With each step my heart thumps faster, getting louder and louder until it is the only thing I hear. The short guard, though remaining silent, touches my back once. Through that touch I can feel his laughter. I didn't know my heart was that loud.

Oh well.

The tall guard leads me to these double doors that stretch almost twenty feet in height, inscribed with designs along the sides. Both of the guards stand on either side of me, swinging the doors open slowly. They look heavy; I wonder how they do it. Probably with their super strength that I lack.

The room is not as grandiose as I thought it was going to be, but it is impressive in an entirely different manner. Instead of shining with overindulgence and lavish sculptures and paintings, it reminds me somewhat of a fairy wonderland. Somewhat difficult to describe, the ceiling is made of leaves and vines and gigantic trees are all over the place. Small fountains are at the corners of the room, spilling into tiny ponds in which koi fish swim. Flowers are placed sporadically throughout the room and on top of a marble platform in the center is a pure white table and several elaborate chairs. There is no other furniture in the room.

Not like I imagined at all.

Seated at these chairs are stunningly handsome men and women, five in total. The only one I recognize is Ferrars, who is staring at me then looking away with a strange expression. As I approach them, I bow slightly, which causes them to stand in a display of respect. I don't know what I did to deserve even this, considering that they were probably going to kill me.

"Good morning, Mona," a deep voice erupts from the man closest to me. He has light chocolate skin and bright green eyes, dressed in a toga-like robe. "I am Markus."

He lifts a hand to touch the regal woman beside him. "This is Gizelda, and next to her is Cyrus, Ulysses, and Ferrars." Gizelda has olive skin and black hair, while Cyrus is exceptionally tall with pale skin and silver hair. Ulysses is slightly tanned with a long black ponytail, which contrasts with Ferrars's light hair and skin.

"Good morning," I reply, not knowing quite what to do. The short guard elbows me, and as I turn to look at him he makes a gesture with his hands. I mirror the gesture, which I realize was the one Markus made to me on my way in.

"Your conversion went splendidly well," Gizelda comments, scanning my face and body, "you are quite beautiful." Her statement feels almost like a cold assessment.

"Thank you... High One," I choke as the guard elbows me again, whispering the words.

"Sit down," Markus smiles, gesturing to a chair about ten feet from the white table. Cautiously, I travel over to it, checking for bombs or something like that before sitting in the chair.

"Her smell is simply magnificent," Ulysses comments with a smile. Ferrars says nothing, almost squirming in his seat. The other four launch into a conversation about my looks and smell. Soon the whole conversation shifted to how I would be a good asset to headquarters, mostly as a female spy.

"She would be a good mate or servant to one of the nobles," Markus notes, marking in a notepad in front of him. Ferrars looked at Markus urgently after he says this, all of the sudden invested in the conversation.

"Markus, she's mated already," he says, then suddenly stops and looks like he wants to cough what he said back into his throat. The other four completely stop and stare at him.

"And how would you know that?" Gizelda asks, raising an eyebrow. Ferrars says nothing in response.

"Mona, please show us your marking," Ulysses requests, and they all turn to stare at me. Hesitantly I show them the mark near my neck. I had covered it with facial makeup earlier, so I rub it off quickly.

"Well, that eliminates those options," Cyrus looks at the others, "we don't really have much of a choice now. I'm guessing she is mated to someone from her pack. If we exile the pack like we originally planned, she will be torn apart due to her bond."

Silence reigns in the room for a few seconds. Ulysses and Gizelda are nodding their heads in agreement. Pure dread enters me, shocking my entire body. They are going to terminate me.

"Show them your other marking, Mona," Ferrars commands, looking almost as disturbed as I am. A collective gasp rises in the room, as all the attention once again rivets towards me.

I shakily raise the corner of my shirt, revealing the small marking near my hip. "Is that really a marking, Ulysses?" Cyrus asks, "you know I can't see very well."

"Oh, it is," Ulysses remarks, staring hard at it. "Mona, when did you receive these marks? What talent are you?"

"I'm... not sure. I was not conscious for either," I reply, "and I do not have a talent."

"Surely you have a talent," Markus says, "even if it is just developing, every werewolf has one."

"She is a strange creature," Gizelda smiles rather coldly, "she seems very confused and misguiding. It would be best to terminate her, no matter how much of an asset she could potentially become."

It is at this point that I begin to seriously panic.

"Please, High Ones, I am not a werewolf! You must believe me!" Tears slip like raindrops from my features, and I stand up.

They look at me for a few seconds. "She is obviously a very confused creature," Gizelda repeats slowly.

"I promise, High Ones. I was never meant to have any characteristics of a werewolf, I-

"Bring in the rest of her pack," Gizelda orders, "maybe she will stop spouting nonsense if she sees them." The doors open again and one by one each member of the pack are led in. Danae is not among them, but it seems that they captured Ray. Yi is still nowhere to be found. I begin to cry even harder when I see Xavier's stunningly beautiful features covered in dirt and grime. His reaction is similar to my own.

"Gizelda, Mona is not speaking nonsense." The door bangs open again, and Griffin walks in. His hair glows along with his brown eyes, a smile on his features. He travels to my side, touching my shoulder once. "She is a Spier."

"Griffin, act as befitting your status," Cyrus sighs, "it is not your place to be defending her. It is obvious that she is a werewolf, and a unique one at that."

"But is it?" he responds, "she does not have super strength, eyesight, or speed. She does not possess a talent as well, and was carried over to Headquarters because she couldn't keep up. In addition, she also possesses an ability that we would regret terminating her for. She is an asset so valuable that throwing her away would be like throwing away one of you, even. Her pack has done nothing wrong."

"What is it, Griffin?" Gizelda asks impatiently, "get to the point."

"She can heal the possessed," he says triumphantly, by which point the entire council is laughing with incredulity. I am even more puzzled. How did he know that? He must have questioned Xavier or something.

"Good one, Griffin," Ferrars chuckles.

"Seriously, if you like her that much, you could have come up with something better than that," Ulysses says.

"She really can!" Xavier pleads, breaking from the line he had been forced to stay in. He walks forward, and the others do as well. "We saw it several times."

"Well, obviously you all "saw" it, considering that every one of you clearly has a great attachment to this woman," Gizelda snaps, "excuse us if we don't take your testimonies as evidence."

"Please give me a chance," I beg them, trying to smile through my tears, "I was a Seer since I was a little girl. Ray awakened me, but the conversion was going unsuccessfully so Xavier added some werewolf blood."

"So you are saying you are both werewolf and Spier?" Gizelda asks dryly. Obviously she is taking command of the conversation.

"Yes, High One." I nod my head.

"Okay, fine. Then you should be able to conjure a spirit spear for us."

Oh no. I look at Xavier, then back at the council, fear in my eyes. "I am still developing that skill." I lower my eyes.

"Then you have no proof," Markus says calmly.

We stare at each other as the council continues to converse in loud tones. "I'm doomed," I mouth to Xavier and the others. As he weakly smiles back, it is like a band-aid is ripped from an open sore, the pain swallowing me whole. It feels like everything shouldn't end this way. Like I would leave something unfinished if I was terminated now. Whether that something is mending my broken relationship with Xavier or not, I can't really tell.

"Council, do you really not remember her?" Griffin speaks up, interrupting the banter of the others. "It was only a few years ago that you considered her as a Candidate."

All movement stops in the room, even time seeming to halt.

"Surely... you don't mean that she is the one that died under your care," Gizelda boomed.

"Yes, I was assigned to her. I was there when she died in a car crash. However, I was also there when she came back to life, with eyes of bright green, crying about a dark creature that turned her father's eyes red."

I am frozen to the spot. This is a pretty fanciful tale, though a shamefully convincing one, that he is spinning.

Cyrus pounds his hands on the table as he rises to his feet in indignation. "You can't possibly tell us this now when over ten years ago you told us she was dead. You are lying to us."

"I am not lying! As your oldest and faithful son, I am not lying to you. What I speak is utter truth. Mona is the only living Candidate for the prophecy, and if you terminate her and the pack, we will all be condemned as fools for the rest of eternity."

Shock ripples through me as I realize he was the son that wasn't suitable to be the successor to the throne. All because he's a crossbreed.

"WHY did you lie to us, Griffin?" Ulysses thunders.

"Well, at the time, I thought that she deserved a life without us watching her every move. I observed that she had suffered great trauma at the hands of the Shifters, and you know that the Candidacy is affected by the Candidate's mental health. I thought our presence as well as the trauma of losing her parents would affect her for the worse. What if she caught me morphing one day? We couldn't hide from her forever. By that time I had already had some close calls. However, the most important reason why I had the courage to leave her at the orphanage and travel back to Headquarters was that I believed if she was truly the Candidate, she would somehow find her way back to us. And I was right."

"Son, I did not raise you to so blatantly lie like this," Cyrus says angrily.

"I am not lying," Griffin responds, just as frustrated.

"Griffin, either you are lying to us now, or you lied to us then. Either way that is a disgraceful act that we do not condone. However, if you are lying now, the consequences will be far worse. I must have your absolute assurance that you believe this to be true," Markus says calmly.

"I am not lying," Griffin states with such conviction that I would have believed him if he said that the world was made of marshmallows and lollipops.

"We will take your words into account," Gizelda responds, looking down at her paper. "However, we will need proof before we can be certain that Mona is a Candidate."

"Griffin, is one of the marks on Mona yours?" Ferrars asked him. Griffin's cool demeanor all but evaporates in seconds.

"Yes, I left a mark on her right before we parted ways," he replies slowly. Gizelda raises her eyebrows.

I cast a glance over at Xavier to see how he is taking this. He is literally shaking with anger, and the others are looking at him with curiosity. Ray catches my eye and shrugs.

"Which all but elevates our need to gather more evidence in order to accept this as truth," Gizelda says, "We still have not seen any of Mona's abilities as of yet-"

Suddenly everyone's nose perks up. I whisp in confusion as several of the guards begin to morph. Griffin grabs my arm. "Stay by me," he whispers, "I'll protect you."

"No, I'll protect you," Xavier shows up by my side. "Get lost, crossbreed," he scathingly insults Griffin.

"Be nice," I elbow him in the side, "he may have gotten us out of being killed." No matter how much I am entertained by his jealousy, I feel like Griffin will be hurt if I don't say anything.

Both of them squeeze my arm. "Would either of you tell me what is going on?"

"No other way to describe it except that it smells like puke mixed in with blood and terror in here," Griffin wrinkles his nose, "yeah, pretty sure it's a Shifter attack."

"I didn't know terror had a smell." If I wrinkle my nose enough, I can smell the hint of pure nastiness.

"Well it does. And it's getting closer," he replies, "seems like an insane number of them too."

"How did they get in?" Markus exclaims, "we have impenetrable walls around the Headquarters!" Of course, no one answers.

All of the werewolves are looking around anxiously. "Call a Spier!" Gizelda orders. Within seconds, three or four march in. All of them look like normal human beings, none particularly pretty or ugly.

Then the fear sets in.

Claws of icy coldness dig into my chest, chilling me to the bone. I can barely think as the fear chokes me, squeezing all the life out of my body. Griffin and Xavier's presence don't help at all... all I can feel is the sorrow, hurt and pain.

Then everything is black. To me, everything is dark and gloomy. I see glimpses of the empty forests, the lonesome castles, the large oceans, and everything begins to make sense. No wonder the world is empty.

They are all coming here.

The lights flash again as I see them—big and small, skinny and large—coming by the thousands into the room. I can't breathe as they crowd the floor and walls, stuffing the room with their dark energy.

"I should have known this was going to happen," I whisper softly.

"How, Mona, how?" Xavier asks, rubbing my hand. I saw the signs. I have no excuse. And now we are all going to die here. "How many are there, Mona?"

"Too many to count," I choke, "they are everywhere... their red eyes are all staring at me." I feel dizzy, and almost faint into Xavier's arms. I cannot take their red eyes.

Gizelda looks at me, and I can feel her desperate gaze. The Shifters are vanishing into trees and fountains, making the water turn to lava and the leaves into burning coal.

The Spiers step forward and begin murmuring strange chants. To my amazed eyes, enormous spears are formed, which they then throw with incredible accuracy through dozens of Shifters. As the spear stab each one they disappear, simply ceasing to exist. However, so many more are taking their place that they seem impossible to fight all at once.

"Mona, move!" Griffin pushes me out of the way as a mass of burning, tangled vines fall where I used to stand. For some reason, the raining vines and leaves remind me of the hail that beat upon me on the day I tried to commit suicide. How can the werewolves fight against something like this? They can only kill the host of the Shifter, and if the Shifter chooses not to take a host until it is in a position that makes it impossible to kill, then there is no way to defeat them.

Maybe I have looking at this from the wrong angle this entire time. I have always thought, kill the Shifters. Create a spear, so you can kill the Shifters. It is all I have been told by the werewolves, and maybe for them there really is no other way. But I am different. An oddity. I mean, look at my crazy ability to basically extract the Shifter from the host.

I guess the real dilemma I should consider is that if I am able to heal the possessed, how would I heal the possessor from itself?

My whole line of thought snaps as I suddenly just get it. Understanding flows through my entire being... from where, I have no clue. Without a word I break away from Griffin and Xavier, both of them yelling after me in alarm.

I travel up to the platform, where the High Ones are standing. "Please," I say once, and all five of them step off the platform. I am amazed at the power and authority laced within my voice.

I climb onto the chair, and from there onto the table. It is from this vantage point that I can see them all, thousands surrounding me. I can feel their emotions of fear and hurt, of confusion and terror. It threatens to swallow me whole, for it resembles the same pain that I have been shouldering all my life.

I am not like them. I do not only consist of pain and hurt, or even the desire for revenge. I am more.

I am different.

I start to open myself to the lost souls, projecting emotions of joy and hope upon them. I can see them shrink back in retaliation... just like I would in their position. I start to see myself in every one of them. How can I possibly heal these broken souls when I am not fully mended myself?

I start to think of the warmth within my heart, letting memories overwhelm me. Faces start to appear before me... my mother, father... and a familiar werewolf with bright blue hair. A bright emotion starts to leave me, an emotion that overpowers everything else. I smile in excitement. This is what the Shifters need. Love.

My emotions form wisps of air, which all come together to form a shape. Even I don't know what it looks like because of its enormity. But I can feel it. I can sense the warmth surrounding me, filling the room with energy and light.

The Shifters stare at the shape, their red eyes boring into the light with its darkness. After a second, they all begin to enter the shape, boarding it as if they were all in line to enter a cruise and embark on a magical journey.

Amazement still overwhelms me as every last one of the Shifters enter the shape. I can feel it tugging at me, and I let go hesitantly. The shape sails away, and as it does I can see that it truly does resemble a boat, flying through the sky as if it is the ocean. It takes a few seconds after the boat disappears for me to realize what I had done.

I stumble off the table, completely drained. As I fall, I murmur, "I sent them, I sent them..."

Out of the darkness, I hear someone ask, "where did you send them?"

I answer with a weak smile on my face. "I sent them home."

What. The. Crap.

My eyes open slowly, painfully, as if the movement itself hurts me. But it is the reality of life that I really wish to avoid.

The first thing I catch sight of after a moment of dizziness is a man with dark black hair. He is gazing at me warmly, smiling as I start to cough and sit up. "There there," he pats my hand softly, "not too fast."

"Who are you?" I ask him in the middle of my coughs.

He just looks at me, putting a large hand underneath my head. Gently he presses a switch, and the bed tilts into a sitting position. "I am Legarius," he answers me while reaching for a small cup of water. "Are you thirsty?"

My mind flashes back to the first night that I met Xavier, who had murmured the same words. Pain and loss strike as I search through the meager memories, trying to salvage the remnants of beauty that are left.

"Where's Xavier?" I ask him urgently, my heartbeat skyrocketing. Horror races through me at the recollection of the Council's words the day before. What if the entire pack is dead right now? What will I do with my shameful self?

"He is perfectly fine right now," Legarius replies as I grab his arm with a ferocity that surprises even me. "Who you should be worried about right now is yourself. Do you feel better?"

Do I? I hesitantly release Legarius's wrist and reach towards my own head. A terrible pain sweeps through me, and I groan. "It's like a migraine," I mutter, ripping my hand away. I don't need to be sick right now. I need to be helping my friends.

"It's okay though," I try to protest as Legarius reaches for a bottle of pills. "I really just need to see my pack. Please."

"Take this, and you can go see them as soon as you wake up," he assures me, holding the small yellow pill before my eyes. I look at it warily, as if it is an enemy.

"You promise?" I ask him as I take the pill and hold it in my hand. He nods, and I lift it to my lips slowly. Trying not to think about it, I hasten to throw it in my mouth, trying to swallow as quickly as possible. It barely hits my stomach before I start to notice the effects.

"Easy, princess," he laughs as I begin to see red, thrashing around like a bull in a china shop. Everything becomes dizzy again, and I moan.

"What kind of pill is this?" I berate him angrily. It is like fire in my insides, intensifying my migraine extremely. I soon find it hard to move, like I am frozen in place. He just continues to laugh as the sleepiness takes over, my eyelids slipping. I am barely conscious within seconds. I slip off into dreamland, vowing to kill Legarius as I go.

* * *

"She asked for me. Let me have a minute with her alone," a low voice argues.

"I don't know if we can let you do that. The Council never said anything about her meeting with her pack. You will have to have a consultation with them first. Just because she is off the hook doesn't mean you are."

"You heard it as plain and clear as I did. The Council gave her the power to do whatever she wants, except when she is ordered by one them. If she wants to meet with me, she can."

"I don't like this."

"You don't have to."

My eyes slip open for the second time, directed towards the source of the bickering. In the corner of my vision I spot Griffin and Xavier by the door of the hospital-like room I inhabit. They don't seem to notice me at all, arguing back and forth bitterly. Legarius is nowhere to be seen, luckily for him.

As I touch my head, I notice that the headache is gone entirely. That awful pill actually worked.

"She's awake." Xavier turns towards me, and I nearly faint at the sight. I didn't realize how much I have missed him. Griffin just looks at me angrily.

"You want to meet with him?" He asks, casting a glance with Xavier. "Surely you were just speaking out of delirium."

I sit up again, trying to figure out how to deal with this situation. Yes, I want to meet with Xavier. However, I don't want to make Griffin too mad. He saved my life, after all.

"I feel really tired," I lament, lying through my teeth, "but this hospital bed is so hard and uncomfortable."

"I'll take you to your room," Xavier says gently, coming over to my side. Griffin glares at him. "Don't you have a meeting to go to?" Xavier asks laughingly as Griffin increasingly acts like a dog ready to bite off someone's head.

"Yes, I do, actually. But I'm not leaving until I know Mona is going to be safe while I'm gone."

I reach to touch Griffin's arm. "I'll be safe. Trust me."

Still looking annoyed, he backs away, knowing he can't do much else. He can't bring me with him, after all.

"Don't hurt her," he snaps to Xavier and retreats through the open doorway. A little laugh escapes me as he angrily walks away.

Xavier walks up to me, scooping me into his arms. The warmth of his chest envelopes me, and I drink in the wonderful scent he possesses. Without a word passing between us, he carries me through the empty hallways.

When we finally reach the room I have stayed in, he crosses over to my bed and lays me down. He expectantly looks at me, and I look back, puzzled.

"Aren't you going to go to sleep?" He asks me impatiently, and I laugh.

"I only said that to get Griffin to stop nagging," I grin widely. Xavier groans, staring at me furiously.

"Mona, you make this so hard on me." His voice sounds strained as he looks away. "Just go to sleep like you said you would."

A few seconds of silence pass while I try to figure out what's wrong with him. He looks as if he is trying to restrain himself. Trying to force himself to be cold to me. His beautiful face is bent in concentration, then reducing to a stoic expression. Alarm enters my body.

He turns to go, and subconsciously I reach to grab his hand. "Please... please don't leave," I beg him.

He freezes, shivers running through both of our bodies. "Mona!" He nearly shouts in agitation, then rips away from me and almost runs to the door. He shuts it hastily, clicking the lock as well. Nervousness erupts within me as I survey his handsome form. I have never seen him look or act like this before.

He crosses back over to me, scanning my face, my body. I begin to feel even more nervous and self-conscious as I realize that not only am I clothed in a flimsy, see-through hospital gown over a tank top and shorts, but that we are totally alone. I am suddenly even more aware of him, of his attractiveness. Butterflies flutter in my stomach.

He leans over me, and my anticipation mounts. Without a word he reaches forward and takes the sleeve of the gown in his hand, ripping it off in

one fluid motion. I am so scared of him right now, but at the same time, I feel heart-wrenching desire. What is wrong with me? Have I caught another cold?

Is this the desire to "bond" that I heard the werewolves talk about? For it is consuming my every thought, my every wish.

I begin to grow delirious with need as he climbs onto the bed next to me, fingering the frayed edges of the gown at the top of my shoulders. His mischievous fingers dance onto my shoulder, sending sparks of heat through my body. He touches my fading bruise, anger and an unfathomable emotion in his gaze. "Did he touch you here?" He asks, sounding even more strangled than before. It takes me a second to register what he asked.

I hesitantly nod, remembering the way Griffin kissed my arm with a guilty conscience. He tries to control himself, but loses it altogether. I stare at him as his eyes grow dilated, and then back to their normal size.

I look with wonder and confusion as he tilts his head towards my arm. An uncontrollable delight consumes me as his soft lips brush against my bruise, then down my arm. How can he make me feel this way? There is no way to describe the hunger that enters me at this moment, lust arising like a tidal wave.

He rips off my other sleeve, then looks at me. I lose myself within his bright eyes, drunk on the pleasure I am now experiencing. "Did he touch you... here?" He lets one finger linger on my other arm. I nod quickly, urgently.

His kisses deepen as they cover my slender arm, and his breath begins to get even more agitated. A growl rumbles in his throat, almost like a wolf, and he holds the neck of my hospital gown and rips it. He flings it off me as if it nothing, and then his breath catches as he surveys me. "You are so beautiful," he whispers, and I am speechless. This tenderness is so intoxicating that I nearly drown within it.

His attention immediately snaps to my mating mark by my neck, and his head dips towards it. A small cry escapes me as he kisses the mark, which starts to glow and send waves of pleasure through my form.

His kisses are deepening to the point where I can barely stand it. "Please... Xavier, please," I beg, causing his eyes to light on fire. His hands are roaming over the edges of my body, and he kisses my collarbone.

With a hungry expression, he lifts the folds of my tank top, pushing it upwards so it exposed my stomach. His gaze darkens as he surveys the mark near my hip. "Did he touch you... there?" He gestures towards the mark. I just looked at him for a moment, then nodded. He immediately kisses my stomach, every one of his kisses surrounding the mark but none of them touching it. "This is the one part of you that belongs to him," he angrily states, "but nothing else will."

His hands run over my hips and his lips soon join in. There is a fire that consumes both of us, overwhelming our bodies, hearts, and reason. He is so careful with me, his caution almost annoying to me in some way. "Xavier," I whisper again, closing my eyes. When I open them again he is by my feet, holding one of my legs as he hastens to cover it in kisses. It is a wonderfully distracting feeling, but soon I am drawn to the fact that I somehow want more.

"I'm sure he touched you here," he points at each one of my toes, and casts me a glance so deep that it gives me the shivers. I'm pretty sure he didn't, but I nod anyway. Just as I expected, each one of his kisses make me yearn for more.

He stops for a minute, looking at me as he is lifting his head. I pout a little, annoyed both by the lack of kisses and by the idiot he has turned me into. I barely even recognize this side of me, this strange part of my being that aches for Xavier in ways that I don't even know of. However, I can't help myself, and I turn towards him and reach with one hand. He takes it, and suddenly he is almost on top of me before I realized he moved.

It is now that I notice his hunger that has intensified by so much since this whole thing started. He wants the same thing I want, and something tells me he knows exactly what that is.

His face is inches from mine, and both of his hands cup my face. "Did he kiss you here?" He looks at my eyes, and doesn't wait for a response as he kisses my eyelids, then my cheeks and nose. My lips burn, but he never touches them. With a smile his mouth reaches my ear and teeth nibble the edge with a gentleness that surprises me. Finally, he returns to my face, looking at my lips the same way that I'm looking at him. We are both so close... so incredibly close.

"Did he kiss you here?" We both know what he is talking about this time.

I stare at him for a minute, dazed by his closeness, and softly murmur, "no, Xavier."

"Good." He nods in satisfaction. "Then I will be the first and only one to taste this delicious part of you. To finally bond with you."

Excitement builds up as I eagerly close my eyes and tilt my face forward. His lips descend upon mine...

THUMP, THUMP!

We are both jolted out of our own world as a furious hand raps upon the heavy, soundproof doors. "Griffin," I mutter. Words can not describe how angry I feel at this moment. I feel... cheated.

"Act asleep," he whispers urgently, grabbing the fragments of my dress and throwing it in the garbage chute. He sweeps the covers over me and walks calmly to the door, opening it slowly.

Griffin is obviously furious, so I force my eyes to close and steady my breathing from a hundred miles per hour to a normal rate. "What do you want Griffin?" Xavier asks calmly.

"What did you do to her?" He yells.

"Calm down, Griffin. Don't be loud, she's sleeping."

There is silence for a minute, probably because he is trying to calm down. "Do you really have to lock the door?" He finally asks.

"Well, I'm imagine if someone like you barged in here without the door locked, she would have woken up easily. And she needs rest." His voice lowers, "Griffin, she's sleeping. How could I have done anything to her?"

"It is always folly to underestimate someone, and it certainly will be the death of me to underestimate you," he replies slowly. "Just know this. Even if she does not now, she will belong to me. And when that time comes, I would prefer it if you stayed away from her."

"If she ever does 'belong to you'," Xavier laughs, "I will do as you say."

There is silence, then loud footsteps. The door swings to a shut, and Xavier moves to my side. "I am obviously not welcome here," Xavier chuckles as he reaches my side, stroking my hair lightly.

It is time for me to stop acting like an idiot and start acting like the woman I am. I search within my brain for something to say. Something that will make him just as crazy as he makes me. Wow. This is difficult.

"You are always welcome right here," I pat the place next to me, then nearly kick myself. I am so bad at this.

Nevertheless, I still notice the hunger entering his gaze. It diminishes slightly as he laughs. "You are so funny, Mona. You make it so hard for me to resist you."

"You don't need to resist, Xavier," I whisper, looking into his eyes, "you really don't."

He stares at me for a moment, stone-faced. "Mona, that's not fair. You aren't supposed to say that."

"I can say what I want to say." I touch his face, slowly lowering it to mine as I finger one of his azure locks. My fingers dance across his face

eagerly.

"I have a lot of things to teach you," he laughs, "but looks like you have already mastered how to tempt a man." He smiles again, then suddenly delves towards me. Our lips meet in a startling union that shocks me to the bone. His kiss deepens and I respond almost violently, touching his face and hair. For some reason, I can't get enough of him in these few moments, and he is calmly dealing with me as if I am a child. He is the one who eventually breaks away from me, grinning widely. I have never known of such satisfaction and pleasure in my entire life, which I guess isn't saying too much.

If I knew his kisses were this good, I would have bonded with him earlier.

"Good bye, Mona. There will be more later." He winks at me, then leaves the room quietly. For many minutes after I am still holding two fingers to my lips, completely and utterly shocked by the wonderful feelings racing through my body and the tingle of his lips still dancing upon mine.

* * *

It is time for me to appear before the Council, and I am ashamed to admit that I am frightened. I have the feeling that this is the time that they will deliver my fate. Throughout this last week, I have been allowed time to recuperate in my room, and I have not seen any of the pack members or Griffin since the last time Xavier visited me.

I am perplexed at this disease I am catching. My skin still shivers at even the thought of his name, and even today I have been shamefully dreaming about him. I feel like even the sight of him will cause me to throw myself at his feet, begging once more for his touch. I have degraded myself by thinking about a man like him in this manner. I deserve the worst of tortures for acting like the worst of women.

I have heard of them; those women who lust for a man's touch, who would die for their chosen man. They always suffer from carrying this type of sickness, although they always claim that they are better because of it. I have never understood these women and children my age who profess to truly be in love, because it seems like a troublesome emotion that everyone would do better without. Of course, except when you are trying to heal a Shifter.

And now I have been reduced to this. I feel like saying a line from old-century poetry.

It has to be because of the bonding. Why the crap did I let him kiss me?

"Woe is me!" I exclaim dramatically, falling upon the bed. After a second of recollection, I jump back to my feet as if shocked by lightning. It is true—I really do have this disease—and even a touch upon the bed that both Xavier and I were in brings a wave of emotions that I would rather forget. I feel dizzy, sinking to my knees.

"Xavier, what have you done to me..." I moan softly, putting my head in my hands. I am corrupted forever as a result of just one of Xavier's touches.

A knock on the door interrupts my regretful thinking. Straightening to my feet, I hesitantly walk over to the door. Creaking it open, I soon am confronted with Griffin's enchanting face. Guilty attraction tugs at me, although it is slightly different from the need that washes over me whenever I think of Xavier. Smiling brightly, he reaches for my hand.

"I'm here to escort you to the meeting room," he says, looking devilishly handsome in dark pants and a black button down shirt. My hand burns in his grasp as he reaches and places a delicate kiss upon it. He really is sweet. I would be better off dreaming about someone like him.

For some reason, my hand burns in a bad way, almost as if to leave a black mark on my skin that will not disappear. I frown, rubbing at the spot as we walk into the hallway.

"I'm... sorry for blowing up on Xavier while you were recovering. I'm an awful person," he says sadly. I smile in response.

"I was never mad at you," I acknowledge softly.

"I was just extremely jealous, Mona." He looks at me, eyes of worry. "I lost you once... and I don't ever want to let go again." He seems so sincere that I can't help but believe him.

"Were you completely serious about everything you said the day I met with the Council?" I ask him honestly, surprised to find that I am not even frustrated at him. I feel like I should be mad, but the emotion doesn't come as I reach for it.

"That is exactly how it happened," he answers me with a little laugh. His auburn hair glows in the light from the gigantic windows stretching from wall to wall. Silence reigns for several minutes. It feels almost awkward to me, with Griffin trying to not even look at me as I think.

"All right, we are here."

I suddenly realize that we are standing right before the big wooden doors that I had seen once before. Consumed in my thoughts, I had not even realized that we were still walking. A twinge of sadness enters me. I would have enjoyed hearing stories from when I was young. When we were together.

"We can talk about whatever you wish later," he laughs and touches my arm softly. "I'm glad you got to think for a minute." The same burn as before occurs, shocking me immensely. I don't really understand this feeling, which consists of such attraction and mild repulsion.

The guards standing by the doors push them open slowly. Fear and sadness pounds in my heart as I survey the familiar room. It is covered in vines and budding flowers—almost exactly decorated in the same way it had been before the Shifter attack—and at the same table sits the entire Council. "Come in!" a voice booms, nearly frightening me out of my skin. "We have been waiting for you."

Markus stands up immediately as I approach, offering a heart-breaking smile. He gestures to me in a way that I have come to recognize, and I mirror the movement. "Have you recovered during this last week?" he asks genially.

"Yes, High One."

The other council members look impatient as pleasantries are exchanged. "We have been heavily discussing this matter over the past few days," Gizelda speaks finally of the issue everyone is desiring to hear about, "and we decided to inform you of your current situation and of new responsibilities and privileges that will come if you choose to accept the position we offer you."

All I can think about is the word position. Position? Are they going to force me to be in their werewolf army? I picture myself in a battlefield surrounded by sweaty, unfamiliar werewolves and shudder.

"Griffin mentioned that you were a Candidate before the Shifter attack. Do you know what he meant by that statement?" she asks me. I shake my head rather fiercely.

Please don't let it be something bad. Please don't tell me anything that will give me another heart attack.

"A Candidate is our term used to describe someone who is eligible to complete the prophecy that defines our existence. The prophecy has no name because of its vast importance to our race."

"I have read it before," I say, "although I didn't make much sense out of it."

"As you know, werewolves have a very keen sense of smell. They are even able to detect emotions and some can even read thoughts through the scents of others. In this way, we are able to detect a Candidate. At your birth, and the birth of several others like you, you released a smell that

every single werewolf recognizes, though even we cannot describe it. It is such a compelling and powerful aroma that we are instantly able to locate the baby from hundreds of miles away. However, this aroma vanishes within a few hours, and we lose track of the boy or girl if we do not have a werewolf trailing them. Usually the Shifters somehow kill them before they reach adolescent years, despite the protection we offer. Your Guardian, of course, was Griffin." Gizelda casts a slightly sickening glance at Griffin as he stands beside me. "And in case you were wondering, he wasn't supposed to mate with you. That's not normal for a Candidate and Guardian relationship."

Griffin blushes and shrugs helplessly as a tiny giggle escapes me.

"Several years ago, you were reported to be dead by Griffin, and therefore eluded our supervision for the rest of your childhood. We do not know all of the details, but your pack member with the blue hair told us he found you in the forest a few months ago. We are also led to believe that you displayed your powers to Pack 101 while in their company, correct?"

I nod slowly. This is confusing me.

"Your extraordinary power to control the shifters, even drawing them out of humans, has proven you to be the one special Candidate we have been looking for. Before now, such an ability was unheard of. The prophecy is very vague on this matter, but we see the truth very clearly, especially after the display you put on a week ago. You are not only the last living Candidate we know of, but the Chosen One."

"Chosen One? Is that my position?" I ask in alarm. What does a Chosen One do? Does the Chosen One have to lead an army?

Griffin notices my fear and laughs, slightly brushing against my arm. Sparks fly throughout my body.

"Not so fast," Cyrus laughs, "we have a proposition for you."

My heart races so fast I feel like it is going to explode. Strands of bright red hair fall into my eyes, but I am so frozen in place that I can't even brush them away.

"We invite you to live here, at Headquarters," Cyrus begins, "Where you will be given anything you ever desire. You will be able to learn how to master your skills under our extremely talented instructors, how to become so powerful that you are unstoppable, and most importantly, how to truly become one of us."

There is a pause for a minute while I try to register what he said. When realization hits me, I nearly fall to the floor. Did they say anything about an army? Because it sounds a lot like they want me to undertake military training. I'm really not good at that stuff.

"This is only the tip of the iceberg," Markus adds quickly after he notices my extremely pale face.

"In addition to these things, we would normally offer you the highly sought-after rank of being the heir to the throne's partner, but seeing that you have... complicated circumstances surrounding your mating, we thought it would be better to offer you something slightly different."

Please don't grant me leadership of a werewolf army.

"If you decide to stay, we will allow you to have Griffin as a partner and he shall obtain the rank of heir to the throne. We will also be willing to conduct a ritual known as Sharuken, which is a long and difficult process that will allow you to be freed of your second mating. We have used it only once before, but we are confident in its abilities to release you from all attraction, bonds, and any feelings of love you may hold towards your mate."

"WHAT?" Ferrars roars, jumping to his feet in anger. Griffin just looks at Cyrus in confusion.

But the thing that startles me the most is not the same thing that Ferrars and Griffin are surprised about. All of that other stuff has not even crossed my mind yet.

The dizziness expands to encompass my entire vision. I stumble and trip on air and hurtle towards the floor. This is not happening. They did not just say they could release me from him. That I could be freed from this awful, terrible disease.

I fight to escape reality once more as my head hits a hard surface, and succeed as the pain shocks me into unconsciousness.

The last thing that crosses my mind is the word *free*.

To Be or Not To Be... That is the Question

I have never been good at making decisions. Especially important ones. Especially ones that have the potential to end the entire existence of either the werewolf or Shifter race.

"Mona, dear, you seem to be swooning on us whenever you come in this room." A pearly, magical laugh travels towards my ears. Two guards hasten to my side, and although my eyes are closed, I can sense their heavy footsteps.

It is Griffin who gets to me first, his cold hands touching my arms lightly, and then brushing across my forehead. At first his touch is icy, then filled with a heat that brands me like an iron. A scream echoes through the room, and it takes a moment for me to realize that it is mine.

Each touch seems to be getting worse. I don't remember it hurting this bad before.

My eyes fly open and the first thing I see is Griffin's face, twisted with worry. "What is wrong, Mona?" he asks me softly.

I say nothing, reaching with one slender arm to touch my forehead. It burns. It burns like nothing I have ever felt before. A small cry escapes me.

"Is it your forehead? What are you feeling?" His beautiful brown eyes search me anxiously, peering somehow into the depths of my soul. His hand reaches up and alarm immediately enters my body. My arm suddenly is pushing him away, tears flowing from my face. What is this agony?

Griffin draws back in surprise, hurt in his eyes. I feel so disappointed. So guilty as he turns away.

"Please..." Stars are dancing before my eyes as I struggle to my feet. The two guards steady me as I start to wobble. "I'm f-fine. Where a-am I? What is-"

"Do you not remember anything?" Markus questions. I shake my head in response.

"Sorry, it is just..." Memories are swirling within my head. I grab my temples when I find that a hole seems to exist within my memories, a hole that somehow seems to correlate with the spot where Griffin touched me. I angrily grasp for it back, and faded wisps start to return. It takes a minute for me to finally recover everything that had happened. "Free," I murmur, falling back into a chair that the guards had retrieved.

"Sharuken seems to give you quite the shock," Gizelda comments, "I know it is an experimental procedure, but we feel quite confident that it will deliver the desired results."

Random thoughts are distracting me, making it difficult for me to listen to the Council. Xavier's face keeps appearing before me, his green eyes staring into my soul. I try to think of what he would tell me right now, and the imaginary Xavier's expression morphs into a face of pure despair.

Xavier melts my heart with one look as he begs, my mind flashing to that one night at the hotel. "Just please, let us be anything but this! You can treat me like dirt, or a child, for anything from you is better than nothing at all. I can be a plaything to you if you wish, as long as I am something!"

"Please... don't do this to me!"

I nearly fall off the chair when I realize that I accidentally spoke the last plea aloud. It is as if I am finally returning to reality, only now remembering that I am with the Council and they can hear my every word. Subconsciously I clutch my head in my hands and start to cry. I can't get rid of the mental image of Xavier's face as he asks for forgiveness.

"Pardon me?" Gizelda asks with a clear tone of disapproval.

"I... I, I..." I struggle to regain my senses. "I cannot follow through with the procedure, High One."

Griffin turns to stare at me, icily surveying my discomfort. "And why is that?" he asks so softly that I barely realize he is actually speaking. I turn a deep shade of scarlet red. This is it. This is crunch time.

"I just... can't," I mumble, looking away from Griffin. Away from everyone.

This disease is destroying me. Even now I am lusting for Xavier's touch, and honestly, it feels like I would die without it. I just know I can't go through the procedure with a condition like this.

After a shocked silence, Cyrus narrows his eyes. I glance at him warily. "We understand you have some feelings for your past mate," he begins, "and we regret that you have fallen into such a predicament. Such a situation would not be wished upon anyone... especially any of our own. However, you must understand that upon your shoulders rests the destiny of the werewolf race. You are so crucial to our mission... our purpose as werewolves. This is why it is so important that you accept our offer. We are not acting in our own best interest, but in the best interest of our entire race."

"We implore you to consider our offer," Markus speaks firmly.

Griffin steps closer to me, though his eyes are on the Council. "She needs time. Allow her some time to think." He speaks with the regal authority of a king, but I can tell he is nervous.

Ferrars looks slightly relieved, most likely at the chance that he may keep his current position. "She does need time. I agree," he says quickly.

The Council discuss among themselves whether to allow me more time. I try not to overhear them, although it is difficult not to. Seriously. I am about to have a temper tantrum. If they don't give me any time...

"We will deliver an ultimatum tomorrow at noon," Cyrus finally says, his words nearly scaring me out of my skin. "You may leave now."

So now I have less than a day to decide whether to help the werewolf race and lose Xavier in the process or abandon it entirely. Certainly seems like a lose-lose situation.

I can only wonder what Xavier's real reaction would be if he was here. And I also can't help but ask myself why I care so much.

Griffin touches the small of my back with his hand, and it doesn't hurt because of the layer of cloth. I breathe a sigh of relief. I hate that I feel like this, but there is not much I can do. I had no clue that this bond between Xavier and I would become such a curse.

He tentatively leads me outside of the meeting room, acting as if I was made of glass. "What's wrong with you?" he asks angrily, as soon as we leave the room. His face is twisted in anger and confusion. I stare back at him with the same expression.

He glares at me, then turns away briefly. When he looks back, he is somewhat subdued. More like the Griffin... the Scotty I know.

"I don't know..." I guiltily glance at him, then at my outstretched hands. Whipping my head around, I search for anyone, anyone besides Griffin.

As a guard leaves the meeting room, I pounce. Running to him, I place one hand on his. He jumps away as if I set him on fire. "I'm sorry, Chosen One! Did I offend you?" He asks in anguish, caressing his hand and kneeling before me.

My hand doesn't burn in the slightest, and I stare at it in curiosity. In fact, a warm tingle spreads through my body and makes me smile.

"Mona. It's Mona." I bend beside him, looking into his emerald green eyes. "Did my touch hurt you?" I feel sorry for him because of the shock and alarm I can detect in his eyes.

"No, Chosen One," he responds softly, "but nobles never touch me. I'm sorry for acting in a detestable manner."

"I'm not a noble. And I am Mona! I don't want you to call me by any other name! And stop apologizing!" I hate to see such a handsome guy kneel before me in such a manner. I don't deserve this measure of respect.

"I apologize." He bows his head, and then tentatively rises to his feet. He disappears within seconds, narrowly managing to avoid my anger. He completely ignored me.

Forgetting about the guard within seconds, I turn back to Griffin, ashen with the realization that it is only him.

"It is only your touch I cannot bear," I whisper, staring up into his eyes. He looks back in horror.

"What can you possibly mean by that?" He asks, subconsciously reaching towards my arm. I snap it away, ashamedly glancing at the ground. I can't tell him. I can't tell him of this awful disease that has robbed my every desire, hope, and stray thought.

I say nothing, guiltily looking around me. After a second of hopeless deliberation, my thoughts turn to the one who started all this. The one that made me look like an idiot in the meeting room.

"I have to see him. I have to talk to him." I shake my head, and then deliberately turn away from Griffin for the millionth time. "I'll find that guard. He will tell me where he is."

"Where who is?" Griffin asks, his voice escalating in anger, "Mona, you better tell me right now who you are talking about!" He stalks after me as I travel in the direction of some nearby guards.

It is then that I realize that surely... surely Griffin would know. I stop and look into his brown eyes pleadingly.

"Please, Griffin, please... take me to Xavier." His eyes seem to light on fire when he hears me, and he seems to snarl underneath his breath.

"So it is really all about him, isn't it?" He asks sarcastically. "You can't even touch me, but you moan about him constantly? What has he done that I haven't? I have protected you from day one—"

"No, Griffin! You don't understand!"

Well neither do I, but that is beside the point.

"Well then, enlighten me." He crosses his arms over his chest. His eyes drill holes through mine. I'm not getting out of this one.

Tears start to fall from my eyes. "It's the... it's the..."

He softens as he watches my meltdown for a few seconds. "What is it, sweetheart?"

The endearment stings as I start to fall before him. He catches me on the way down, touching my arm and waist. Instantly I burn as if on fire, screaming loudly. He shifts his hands so that a layer of cloth separates us instantly, and the relief slowly comes. I cannot control the sobs, no matter how hard I try.

He holds me for a while, and I temporarily forget myself in his embrace. I forget about my tainted body, my horrible afflictions. It feels like I have almost regained a missing piece of myself.

But of course, it only lasts for a moment.

"I'm cursed, Griffin," I whisper, staring blankly upwards. "I... need to talk to Xavier about the curse."

"But Mona... didn't you hear?" He asks quietly, steadying me.

"Hear what?"

Silence enters the room for a few seconds while Griffin seems to ponder exactly how to phrase his next words.

"He's gone."

~ Xavier ~

I pace the room, worry creasing my brow. "What am I supposed to do, Ray?" I ask a figure huddling in the corner of the room. The bundle of fur shakes its head, and then wearily turns to lie on the cold floor.

It has been two long days since I have seen Mona, and each second has been like an eternity. If I think really hard, I can still remember her lips upon mine. It feels so good for a minute, but then I remember that I am never going to see her again.

The second Mona stepped upon the table to send the shifters away... I knew that the Council would never give her back. Maybe Mona didn't notice, but I saw the glimmer of excitement in Cyrus's face. He is such a sly old dog... wanting to get his dirty paws on the only good thing that happened to the werewolf race in hundreds of years. The others had a similar expression, but none compared to his.

I want to pitch a fit about "finding her first" and all that, but turns out I didn't even do that. Some guy beat me to the punch and I didn't even know it. In addition, he stole her heart as easily as it took me to fall in love with her. Although I guess her heart didn't belong to me anyway. It sure changes things, looking at the situation like this. I never thought myself to be a thief, but turns out I'm in jail for a reason, if not the one they put me in here for.

I finger the bars of the cell, made out of a strange metal that cannot be bent by werewolves. Trust me, I tried. We are not getting out of this place without help from the outside.

What I really hate about being locked in here is that I'm truly helpless. It makes me think of all the other times when I have been like this. The list stretches on and on, though most recently Mona's awakening stirred a similar reaction in my chest. It really hurts... not being able to save the people I love.

Does Mona really need saving? I sit down, placing my head in my hands in frustration. I suppose she is safe here. More than she ever was with me. It seems like every time she was near me she would land in a near death experience.

Griffin looks like a more capable guy than I am, although I would like to think of myself as more handsome. Of course, it isn't true, and we couldn't be any more different. He looks more humanlike than I, without the green eyes and crazy hair. I can only hope Mona finds my bizarre looks more appealing. This is probably all I have left, if even that, over Griffin.

"Ray, seriously, help me." I look back at the furry bundle, and it moves slightly to bare its teeth. I give him an exasperated look, and he shifts into his beast form.

"What do you want?!" He looks at me in frustration. "You know there is nothing either of us can do." His body continues to change into a human form, and I temporarily freeze to watch him. His curious method of shifting always manages to amaze me. He is the only werewolf I know of that can stop halfway between werewolf and human for a prolonged period of time. The incredible control he has fits in perfectly with his Beast talent. Usually Beast talents lose control over themselves when they shift, but Ray never loses his temper without a reason.

"I need a plan. A plan that can get us out of this cell." I start to pace back and forth along the bars. "I need to save Mona."

"You aren't getting Mona back," Jake shrugs, lounging in another corner of the cell. "You know that. Just give up." He looks more worn out than the rest of us, with bags underneath his eyes and a dreary glare. He has also been the one most active in trying to think up a plan with me. I know he is pretty fond of Mona and loathes losing her like I do, but seems like he has finally faced the awful facts.

"Come on, Xavier, we both know brainstorming is not going to work very well. We have tried it for about a day and a half and my head is about to explode," Wes complains, lying on a wooden bench. I think we are all pretty much sick of each other by now.

"I'm not asking you. We all know you aren't much help," I snap back, leaning my head against the bars. The golden airhead in our group certainly fits the blond jokes we throw at him every now and then.

Ever since bonding, I at least gather satisfaction from the fact that she will feel some measure of regret if she casts me away. It hurts that it is turning out like this, but a sadistic part of me is happy that she now fully belongs to me. The Council can't separate our bond. All I need to do is

somehow convince me, and perhaps she needs me, and perhaps she can convince the Council to let me stay with her.

That plan may be harder than I thought to achieve, considering that I am stuck down in the dungeon. It isn't that bad of a place, our cell having four beds and a decent bathroom. The floor and walls seem to be made of solid rock and the room is decorated sparsely. It reminds me of the hotel we stayed at, except the doors have bars.

"Ray, what have you been doing?" Jake asks Ray while he surveys a small hole in the wall. "Have you been trying to drill through the walls?"

"You have any better suggestions?" He asks in response, and then shows all of us a thin, sharp nail. "I found this stuck in the wall yesterday."

"Like that will do any good," I mutter, falling onto my hard bed and staring at the ceiling. I miss her. I miss her more than I would ever be willing to admit.

"Hey, I did manage to make a few holes in the wall," Ray protests, showing us the dot-sized pinpricks scattered in one brick. "I was hoping to loosen this brick and then work my way back. Surely we could get to the wall from here and then fight our way out."

I narrow my eyes at the holes. "That doesn't even look like it goes through the entire brick. You may have made it halfway."

"I'm working on it!" he huffs, and I laugh.

"How long are you planning on doing that? A year?" Wes jokingly asks. Ray blushes, although it is hard to tell because he is shifting at the same time. Obviously he is done talking to us.

Ray, now a gigantic wolf, continues to hold the nail in his teeth and push it into the rock. I turn my head away from him in hopelessness. We are doomed.

Once I think about it, technically this is all Ray's fault. If he hadn't Awakened her, we never would have gotten in this mess. Too delirious and angry to second-guess myself, I launch into a series of thoughts and accusations against Ray in my mind. I have nothing better to do.

Just when I wonder how exactly I am going to murder Ray when we get out of here, a pair of footsteps interrupts my gleeful thinking. Intrigued, I turn to the man coming towards the bars. It doesn't take long for me to turn back away in disgust.

Griffin doesn't smile as he steps up to the bars, inches from my face. As I try to stay calm, I notice that today he looks like a phoenix—bright with the emotion of either fury or excitement—with his red hair and animated expression.

"What are you doing here?" Jake asks resignedly after I refuse to address Griffin. "Come here to gloat?"

"Well, I was supposed to come down here to inform you all that you will be either exiled or exterminated this Saturday, but I'm sure that is a little bit depressing for all of you at the moment... so I will try to start out with some good news."

We all look at him dryly as he makes a big show out of trying to think of something.

"Yeah, yeah we get it," I huff, "nothing good for us delinquents. I mean, we only found the human destined to save our entire werewolf race and basically delivered her into your greedy hands."

"Now, now, not so fast." He laughs, "You seem to forget that you actually were trying to keep her away from us when we caught you."

"Only because we were afraid of something like this happening to us."

"Look, don't get angry at me. I'm only the messenger," he cautions, taking a step back from the bars as my face grows red. "It's Mona. It's all because of her. You can blame her for all the problems you get into from now on."

"You know I can't do that," I shake my head, looking at the floor. Somewhat subduing myself, I look up at him. "What do you stand to gain from all this?"

"Well, the Council says they will give me back my birthright if Mona agrees to stay at headquarters. As if she has a choice." He pauses, looking right into my eyes. "But I don't care about that. That is not what's important to me."

"What is important to you, Griffin?" All four of us nail him with an iron gaze. He seems to be growing a bit uncomfortable, squirming slightly.

"Her," he nearly chokes, before straightening and trying to eye us coldly. "Everything about her... I want to myself. I do have selfish motives, but are they truly different from yours? All I want is to protect her and love her as a mate should."

He is right. I am really no different than him. Why am I acting all high and mighty?

He steps closer to the bars, closer to my face. "Xavier, I don't hate you. I'm actually grateful to you for the love and kindness you gave her, because even though she doesn't admit it, she has certainly been affected for the better. You also saved her life several times, from what I have heard, and that makes me respect you more than anyone else at Headquarters. I know you're a good guy. Maybe a little resentful... but I would be too in your position. Please believe me... try to understand."

"Then surely, if you really felt that way, you would get us out of here," I say, basically flabbergasted by his confession. It certainly seemed like he hated me.

The strangest thing of all is that I do understand. Though I don't want to.

"Well, that is an interesting point. Why don't I get you out of here?" He laughs. "If only it were that simple."

"Sometimes, it is."

"First off, I don't have the power to let you go. Secondly, even if I did let you go, I would be worried that you would go off and do something stupid. Just out of curiosity, what would you do if I got you out?"

"Save Mona," I say fiercely. I don't like playing games.

"Yeah... right. See, that qualifies as something stupid. It isn't in my best interest for you to do that, and once you think about it, it isn't in yours either. What are you going to do when you save Mona?"

"Don't tell me what's in my best interest or not," I growl, and he takes another step back.

"Answer the question, Xavier. Don't be difficult."

"I suppose, run from you. And the rest of the Council." I don't really know what I would do. That's a thought-provoking question, which brings me back to the central question I asked myself a few minutes before. I start to drown in my doubt, struggling to stay above the water.

"You know you can't run for long. And inwardly, you know Mona is safer here than she ever was with you."

I feel as if I have been kicked in the gut. I want to shout at Griffin for saying such lies, but then I remember that I basically admitted the same things to myself earlier. I'm not stupid, no matter how obstinate I want to remain at this point.

"You know, we haven't even addressed Mona's feelings here," he says slowly, carefully. "I never planned to get into this big discussion with you, but while we are here, might as well cover the most important issue here as well."

"I love her. And I know she feels at least a little love towards me in return."

"I know you do. But the problem here is not what you think." He nods his head slightly, "she holds too much affection for you. You may have been better off if she hated your guts."

My hands grip the bars, holding them so tightly that my knuckles turn stark white. "What do you mean by that?"

"The Council is not going to let you live, you know. They absolutely cannot allow you to be with Mona. And this only makes things harder for her."

"How come?!"

"They need someone they can control, Xavier, and you are a very strong werewolf who has banded the rules time and time again without reaping the consequences. They are afraid of an uprising. If you were allowed to be with Mona, members of our community would start to look up to you, not the Council. That was the first thing they realized while discussing this issue, for their minds are all focused on power. They wish to keep their power at any cost."

I am nearly frozen with shock. I never thought myself to be a threat to the Council. In fact, I never meant to break any of the rules in the first place. How could they possibly think I was trying to... hoard Mona for some kind of rebellion?

"I'm easier to control," Griffin says softly, looking at his feet. "I'm a shameful crossbreed who happens to be born in a position of power. They can rip away my status and give it back to me on a silver platter. I can't be much more of a puppet than I am now. Even my father thinks of me only as a tool to be used."

Yes. You do have a nice sob story. I get it. You are so unfortunate to be stuck with Mona. It is really quite a shame.

"But what about Mona, Griffin?" I ask in frustration. "Why is it harder for her?"

"Well, think about it. The Council is faced with quite the dilemma here. They can't just pry you two apart, because they know Mona will be seriously messed up as a result. They can't keep you two together, because of the reasons I mentioned earlier. It helps matters a little bit because I am also her mate, but doesn't eliminate the issue by far. She obviously likes you very much and makes this problem impossible to ignore. If only they had a way to make Mona forget all about you, to forget this whole escapade with your pack so she and I can be together..."

"No." Jake instantly says, snapping up from his seat. "They won't."

"They can't." Wes protests almost in unison. Everyone turns to me to see my own reaction.

"Sharuken?" I ask, my whole body trembling. They wouldn't dare.

"They will... with or without Mona's permission. They are making it seem like she has a choice, but she really doesn't."

I am about to explode with anger. They seriously are not going to do this to me. To us.

"But anyway, we are getting off topic. What I wanted to tell you was that you need to accept it and move on. It will make everything better for the two of you. Just try to forget about each other."

"That's impossible! You know I—"

"I know. I probably understand you more than anyone." Griffin looks straight at me, stepping so close that I can feel each strained breath. "I hate this. I hate having to say this to you."

Silence echoes through the hall as I stare at him in disbelief.

"Maybe, if you wish, the Council could perform the ritual upon you as well—"

"No. No. I couldn't," I fiercely turn away, "I... never want to forget her."

"That's what I thought," Griffin smiles slightly, almost wistfully, in satisfaction. "I like you, Xavier. You are the sort of wolf I aspire to be like."

"I don't like you." I snap, though inwardly wondering at the lack of arrogance on his face. He won. He gets her for the rest of eternity. How come he is acting so nice to me?

"Try to think of it this way. The Council consists of arrogant, greedy werewolves, but they do have some basis in morality. Mona isn't going to live a life of servitude. She will have all the riches she could ever desire, as well as extraordinary honors and privileges. In addition, she will be trained in her Spier abilities to fulfill the prophecy and our race's destiny. What more could you want for her?"

"Happiness. I wish for her to be happy."

"I'll do my best. I can't guarantee that she will be, but I promise I will try to make her the happiest woman in the world." All of us almost laugh at Griffin's expression, full of intensity and fervor.

"If you can make her happy, by all means... do it," I choke softly, my face twisted with hidden mirth. He glares at me, obviously noticing our barely-hidden chuckles.

Mona? Happy? What a joke. It's impossible. She isn't exactly easy to please, to say the least.

"Well," he looks at his watch awkwardly, "Looks like I'm needed in a few minutes in the meeting room. I'll come back later and tell you the verdict. They are trying to decide what their final proposition to Mona will be."

I watch him start to walk away with a resignation that shocks me. Everything he said makes perfect sense. There is really no point in trying to save Mona.

Griffin stops for a second, and then swivels around to face me. "I'm sorry," he whispers, then quickly retreats up the narrow stairs at the end of the hallway.

Why did things have to end up like this? Now even a cowardly crossbreed is feeling... pity towards me. I feel like the lowest of werewolves—a criminal. Now that my fighting spirit has been sucked away, nothing is left except a big, gaping hole in my heart.

"Hey, I finished another hole!" Ray shouts, showing us proudly the new dot he had made. I shake my head in dismay.

"Xavier, what are you going to do?" Jake asks me in low tones, the serious one of the bunch. He calmly takes in my misshapen appearance as a tear starts to fall slowly from my eye. Embarrassed, I brush it away.

"I don't know, Jake. I just don't know anymore."

"Mona seems to be getting along pretty well with Griffin," Ray comments obnoxiously. The others start to glare at him but he doesn't notice, delirious from the long hours in a dark cell. "She seems like she will be fine here."

"Seems so." I reluctantly admit, though anger is building within me. Ray is really getting on my nerves today. He always knows the best ways in which to annoy me.

"He seems to act like a real mate. Someone who is responsible and caring. I think you can rest easy, Xavier."

"And I wasn't?!" I exclaim, starting to shift into my wolf form. Wes and Jake start to laugh, for reasons unknown. This has happened so many times today.

"Uh... do I have to answer that?"

I pounce on him mid-shift, biting his ear and clawing his fur. He yowls in pain as I start to draw blood. We growl at each other as he rips away and completes the shift, now a wolf that is larger than I.

The fight continues for several minutes, mostly consisting of risky moves and stupid decisions. I knew I shouldn't have gone for his tail, and I did it anyway, leaving my back open for attack. I really need to brush up on fighting tactics in this form.

"Guys..." A familiar voice interrupts our tussle, and we instantly stop. A slinky form materializes outside of the cell, leaning against the back wall.

"Yi!" we basically shout in unison. He looks around anxiously then turns back to us with one finger on his lips.

"I'm here to bust you guys out of this cell. Danae's posing as one of the maids here at headquarters but it won't last for long. She is getting so many wrinkles that she needs a trip to the laundromat."

"Where have you been?" I ask him, completely shifted back to human form. He smiles and winks.

"They never captured me at the mansion. Seems that they forgot I even belonged to the pack. Funny how much a Stealth talent can manage, huh?"

"How did you get in here?" Jake queries.

"The front door," he winks, "It is the greatest experience, walking around and not even having one cute girl wink at me. So liberating."

"I still don't get how you did it. That's impossible. They must have noticed you."

"Details, details. We will get to them later." Yi yawns, and then pulls out a slender key. "I got this from the red-head that just left."

"Griffin? So you have been in here the whole time?" I ask in annoyance, "Why didn't you tell us?"

"How much fun would that be? And it's only been a few minutes. He walked out, I walked in. And he had his key dangling from his belt loop as if he wanted it to be stolen. I could have sworn I saw him grin on the way out."

That sly dog—quite literally. I can't help but like him now, no matter how aggravated I am at my present situation.

"So like Jake asked, what are you going to do?" Yi asks me slowly. "Are you going to stay here and try to save Mona? Or are you going to leave with the rest of us?"

"Wait. All of you are going to leave?" I turn and look at the other pack members. They all make weird expressions that I can't possibly decipher.

"We want to support you Xavier. But we all think it is a lost cause... a lost cause that is going to get us all killed. Griffin explained the situation pretty well." Jake explains. He looks guilty... as he should.

"I just can't," I whisper, "I can't give up on her."

I remain silent while Yi glides over to the door, placing a key in the lock. There is a click as it turns, and the bars are finally open. I am finally free.

"You have a choice. You can either come with us now, or you can stay here and fight for her. But I promise you... if we leave, we are not coming back. This is your one and only chance."

Everyone stands and starts to exit the cell. Yi, however, comes in and sits by me on the wooden bench. He tries his best to look comforting, and fails miserably.

"I saw Mona in her room. She looked happy. I really do hate this for you, Xavier, but we will help in any way we can. If you truly want to fight, I'm sure we can convince the others to try."

I am barely listening to Yi, immersed in a tidal wave of memories; Mona's smiling face after I saved her in the forest, her adorable expression of annoyance that I had come to know so well... her look of pure elation after the first kiss we shared. I can't bear this. I can't lose her.

Mona grins at me as I give her steak. She yells at me in indignation after I kiss her cheek. And somewhere, in the back of my mind, she sleeps in Rays arms, soaking wet in a large fountain.

That's right... I almost forgot about that incident. I was so keen on getting her back, so eager to get on her good side that the reason why I got mad at her slipped my mind. Even though I am not mad at her in the slightest now, the main message hits me like one of Ray's punches in the stomach.

She doesn't need you. She doesn't need you like you need her.

This is the final straw. I sever the last remaining bond with my emotions and stand up like a robot. I have no hard feelings towards her, but I have to let her go.

She was never mine to begin with.

No wonder she never felt the attachment I did. No wonder she never loved me in return. Even though Griffin said otherwise.

She was never mine.

The last tear I plan on shedding in a long time escapes my eye as I firmly take the first step outside of the cell door. It is over... forever.

I only wish I could say good bye.

~ Mona ~

I stare at Griffin in disbelief. "What?"

"He's gone. He disappeared from his cell a few days ago. We have been trying to find him and the rest of his pack, but they are nowhere to be found. Yi, your friend, is a very clever Stealth talent. He must have helped them escape." He sees my tears before they start to fall and pulls me close. "I'm sorry Mona. I wish you didn't have to deal with this. You don't deserve it."

"I wanted to talk to him." I say, still frozen by the news Griffin delivered. "I wanted to see him again."

"I know you did." He squeezes me tight, though careful to avoid touching my skin. The true impact of his words seems to hit me at this moment.

He left me.

He abandoned me.

Pain blossoms in my chest, swallowing me entirely. Am I even a person anymore? What am I? All I can see is pain... hurt, sorrow, and betrayal.

I should have run after him when he tried to leave last week. I should have held on to him and never let him go. And now he's... gone. Leaving me with this awful disease that makes me feel such desire.

I am choking from lack of air, for it feels like he has taken away my willingness to breathe along with my heart. It is strange to think—that he has stolen my heart—but in this state of insanity it is easier to believe.

All I really know right now is that I need him, for reasons that are unclear. I need him like no one else I have ever met before.

I hate this feeling of dependence, but it overtakes my body until it is impossible to deny. And now I can never see him again... feel his warm lips, or hear his musical laugh. I miss it all, every single obnoxious, insolent part of him that makes him so special.

This pain.

"Please help me," I start to sob, hanging onto Griffin like I am never going to let go. I accidentally make contact with his skin, and the pain causes me to rip apart from him. I stumble across the floor, holding my arm where I had touched Griffin. A large red mark stretches across it.

I can't deal with this anymore.

I try to wait until the pain subsides, wait until I gain some semblance of sanity. "I will do it." I choke, softly spitting out the cursed words. How I wish I didn't have to say them... but I must escape.

"Do what?" Griffin gently asks, his voice full of concern. It seems to be the tone of voice he always uses with me lately.

"Anything. Anything that gets rid of the pain. Sharuken, I think they called it."

"Mona, are you sure?"

I lean on the stone wall, not quite sure what is happening. I think the Council has gathered around me from the sound of the heavy cloaks that are swishing across the floor. I know this is it. I can't take my words back.

I think of Xavier, of the happy times we experienced together. Of the joyous feelings in my heart that I have anxiously tried to suppress. It all

means so much to me. I don't want to lose it.

But, I don't want to experience this. Nothing amounts to the anguish of having a heart ripped apart and left in pieces. I... don't want to be hurt in this manner. I must become stronger.

"Yes."

One's Dream, Another's Nightmare

I have honestly tried to change myself.

It has been difficult, of course. I have been struggling to prevent myself from snapping at my teachers, but the way they chastise me about my lack of progress over the last few days has really gotten on my nerves.

It isn't like I haven't been in the garden for countless hours, forcing my restless mind to meditate just like the rude Spier master suggested. It isn't like I haven't been poring over the books on basic werewolf etiquette that Lady Miranda had commanded me to read. And most of all, it isn't like I haven't participated in the daily assignment of scouring the prophecy that I am supposed to be a crucial part of about a million times. I hate Analysis class the most.

That is the worst. I hate looking for things that just aren't there.

I'm not really sure what Mr. Vigilance is hoping I will find. He has told me to do everything; from sweeping my thumb over every letter in the original text to sleeping with a copy of the prophecy beneath my head. Supposedly I have been, as the old baldy would say, "blessed with a superior insight that could lead to a greater understanding concerning the details of my mission if applied in the correct manner." Or something like that. I stopped listening to him after the very first day. For that matter, I stopped listening to pretty much everybody.

So it probably is my fault that I haven't learned anything of substance since I began these cursed tutoring sessions. I think my teachers aren't used to a student that just can't learn and progress, so that's why they are going crazy. I am sure to them I seem like a normal kid, with nothing to set me apart from anyone else.

But honestly. I did try. I'm still trying.

It is just difficult when Mr. Vigilance is breathing over my neck, his angry face too close for comfort.

"Mona, do you even understand the point of this class? It is not all fun and games, you know."

I sigh, fingering the rugged parchment upon which is written that awful paragraph that supposedly defines my life. "I never considered this class to be fun and games, Mr. Vigilance." That much was true. Very true.

"Then have you not been studying the document? Tell me at least one thing that you learned since yesterday."

He twists around to the front of the table where I sit, glaring at me like a ferocious animal. Admittedly, Mr. Vigilance is rather handsome. Everyone around here pretty much is. I have almost gotten sick of the attractive facial features, the long, glowing hair, and the perfect bodies that surround me daily. It is as if each of us looks like a china doll, living in our own little world that is ethereal to me even now. Mr. Vigilance is probably one of the least handsome werewolves I have seen, with a light gray buzz cut, sharp, pointed looks, and an athletic body. His muscles are nothing compared to some of the frightening Hulk look-a-likes prowling around the premises. I have seen a few that really put the green monster to shame.

It is strange how my perception has changed over these last few days. Comparing men's muscles with such impartiality and indifference... I must be going crazy. This place is a madhouse.

Mr. Vigilance's green eyes glow as he joins me in surveying the document, mistaking my boredom for intense concentration.

"What do you see, Chosen One?" He whispers, his voice tinged with barely contained excitement.

"I see paper." I decide to humor him, holding my hand above the document. At the movement, he nearly jumps up and down, frenzy with anticipation and excitement. "I see..."

"What is it?!" He asks, his eyes nearly popping out of their sockets. I never imagined that a werewolf could manage to make an unattractive face, but he just proved me wrong.

"I see a ghost," I hastily choke, scrambling for something enlightening to say. I said the same thing yesterday... and today he will probably not be satisfied. I can tell by the way his eyes slightly dim as he looks straight at me.

"Surely there's more," he says, grasping the edges of the table. His knuckles turn white, and cracks start to blossom within the furniture. I look up at him with a pointed glare, and he seems to realize what he is doing. He releases the hold on the table and starts fiddling with his sleeves.

"There is a wolf." My eyes slip to a close, the exhaustion from the past few nights starting to get to me. For some reason, I have not gotten more than a few hours of frequently interrupted sleep since I decided to go through the stupid Sharuken ritual. Every time I try to rest, I am awakened by the same horrible nightmare. There is no escape. At least not for me.

Even now, the familiar vision is appearing before my eyes. Dark foliage and towering trees surround my form as I suddenly am transported to a deep forest, with no way back.

I look around, searching for someone. Anyone. However, the only things here to keep me company are the mosquitos, spiders, and other disgusting bugs. For a minute, I observe one of the gigantic arachnids as it weaves a spectacular web a few feet away from my face. Of course, that doesn't last long.

The emotion of hopelessness constricts my heart, my breathing heavy and forced. I feel lost. Completely alone... and completely helpless.

How am I supposed to take care of myself in such a dark, scary place? I don't even know if I can start a fire by myself, let alone gather food.

I sit by the trunk of a tree for a short while, exhausted for no reason at all. Against my will, my eyes start to slip to a close, and everything becomes hazy.

No. Not this time.

I snap to attention, fighting the overwhelming fatigue. Shakily standing up, I edge over to the small cluster of bushes in front of me. I don't know how I knew. But as I plucked a small, purple berry from the bush, I just felt certain that this was exactly what I needed.

I plop one after the other into my mouth, savoring the sweetness for only seconds between bites. For some reason, I cannot stop eating them. My hands keep moving towards my face while filled with berries. They are strange, unfamiliar hands that are withered and worn.

The tiredness comes again, and this time it is impossible to overcome. Sleep caresses my body, weaving his hands across my arms and legs until I am filled with him. Drunken with sleep.

Get up. Keep fighting.

The protest is squelched by Sleep as he captures it between his fingertips, squeezing the words tightly until they cease to exist. Before long, he breathes lightly in my ear, his work completed. He has convinced my consciousness to take a stroll with him, leaving only my body behind.

Somehow this feels so wrong.

I float to my feet, staring at my forsaken body. After a few seconds of silence, I take a step closer to the body. An arm takes mine before I get any closer, and I drown in Sleep's unwavering gaze. Swiveling me around on my heel, he whispers sweet nothings in my ear that makes me blush and giggle like a senseless preteen. Not even a hint of doubt remains in my mind. He smiles like an angel, sweeping me off into the night with a

gracefulness that causes me to never get back.

Get up! You are about to miss your chance!

I groan, holding my belly subconsciously as my consciousness starts to return. From a love-filled night, my consciousness is giggling once more and waving at the elusive figure standing a few feet away. She watches him as he walks back into the darkness, obviously forlorn about her time with him being cut short. With a sigh, she comes back to me, releasing me from Sleep's bindings. My eyes fly open, and a full wave of nausea hits me hard. I choke, the air leaving my lungs. The pain worsens in my stomach and I keel over. What is this madness? What is wrong with me?

The pain doesn't stop, crippling me until I am only a heap upon the ground. My breathing is strained and heavy, and I am unable to think. I look at my feet, and then around me in a desperate search for water. There seems to be a pond about ten feet from me, but it seems like miles away in my terrible state. Something had to be causing this.

My frantic search for water continues, this state of delirium toying with me until I can hardly stand it. My eyes land upon a small berry which had somehow made its way over to my side. The hunger immediately roars to life, making my stomach ache even more. I moan in pain as my face grows white.

The berries.

Those awful berries.

I cannot stop myself from retching, and afterwards I stare at the purple junk, splattered across the wretched ground, that had come from my mouth. Carefully I edge away, slowly but surely, in my stunted position. With a fate like this, I might be better off quickly dying from some sort of injury or disease. Looks like I am going to be suffering for a very long time.

This is what happens when I trust my gut. Never... never again.

I feel myself about to throw up again, the nausea building within me. The agony is unrelenting.

Don't give up. Almost here.

But I forget all that when I hear the footsteps.

My heart stops as not one, not two, but several footsteps troop through the forest. They seem to be coming at an alarmingly fast rate, too fast for me to even comprehend. The blood leaves my brain as before I know it, they are about to either pass me or run over me.

It is strange, but I seem to sense the quiet footsteps instead of hear them. The ground pounds with their arrival, the birds fly away in a hurry, and the other animals run and hide. They know it too. They know someone, or something, is coming.

I struggle to look up, looking like a chicken in the process. Scanning the area, I hope to catch a glimpse of the mysterious creatures. An image stirs in my mind, an image of these creatures. Somehow, the blurry thought cannot seem to focus. I have forgotten something.

A whoosh occurs to my left, and out of the corner of my eye I see five figures. I blink, and they are gone. Just like that. I still can feel them, their retreating footsteps as they continue on their journey. What a strange sight.

And then it is over.

The pain returns as quickly as it disappeared. I edge towards the tree in order to lean against it, but in my haste forgot about the muddy puddle that was to my right. I gasp as the cold wetness splashes against my arms, and seconds later I realize I am thoroughly soaked in brown water. A feeling of hopelessness enters me and I realize that I am completely helpless. Helpless and ready to die in order to escape the pain.

What are you saying?!

I shake myself mentally. I am not a coward, I think angrily to myself, I am better than this. My body starts to tremble as I place my hands on the ledge next to the puddle. Hopefully I can drag myself out of the shallow water.

The pain, however, is absolutely mind-boggling. Every movement I make amplifies the hurt, and I can't help but let out a scream. My hands release the ledge and I fall further towards the center of the puddle. I start to cry, the salty tears slipping down my cheeks like a waterfall. It only seems to make the aching worse, but it's the only thing I can do.

My blood turns cold as a hand appears in my view.

Anger overwhelms me as I survey it, observing the delicate hand with an interest that confuses me. It is only a normal hand, but somehow in my view it has morphed into the hand of an angel. A hand that means everything. I was not afraid of that hand, though maybe of the person... or thing possessing it. It was my deliverer, my savior.

I follow the line of the connecting arm with my eyes, noting the delicate wrist that followed, along with the lean, strong muscles. Definitely masculine.

A strange musk dances towards my nose, and sensuously plays with my senses before leaving me defenseless. A scent I know all too well... or do I? The memories are frayed at the edges, seemingly ruined beyond repair.

I wonder out of curiosity why I am not freaking out right now at the strange apparition of a hand just when I needed one most. Instantly I realize that it must be because my mind has not yet caught up to my overwhelmed senses, mostly because of the fogginess that has settled over my thoughts like a blanket. A little laugh escapes me, a strange, throaty laugh. It was not mine. Or was it...

My eyes reach the man's body, and I can tell already that he is very attractive. His muscles are not gigantic, but I never desired anything like that in a man, anyway. I like the skinnier, well-balanced men. Of course... not that I care.

It takes me a while to remember his face, my eyes crawling over every part of him. It is like wine for the eyes, so intoxicating and beautiful. But eventually I cannot resist the lure of his smile, a smile I know he is wearing for some strange reason, and reluctantly lift my gaze.

His eyes are like emeralds, sparkling with amusement. His hair is like the ocean, blue as the sea. But I do not dwell on either of those features long.

That one smile instantly brings my mind up to speed.

Subconsciously at the sight of that smile I back away, further into the puddle. He looks so familiar, as if I have known him for a long while. Maybe even forever. I squirm with discomfiture as I notice the amusement that is prevalent at the corners of his too-wide smile. He is laughing at me. This much I can tell.

It seems strange, because as the chuckles are escaping his mouth, I do not hear the pearly sound. What a beautiful sound it must be, I muse, a beautiful laugh to match a beautiful man.

He says some words to me, words that flit by my head without a second glance. I frown and stiffen slightly at the way the reverberations seem to escape me, dancing out of my grasp with ease.

The familiar man stops laughing as he stares down at me, his hand still outstretched. It must be awkward for him to hold out his hand so long. I should probably take it and save him the trouble of keeping it in the air.

But instead, I stiffen even further, leaning into the puddle. He frowns and takes a step forward, his foot splashing into the water. My heart beats faster as he lifts his other foot and puts it down in the puddle so that they are both soaked.

I instinctively recoil as he crouches down by my side. Muttering something I can't understand under his breath, he reaches with both arms towards me. A squeal escapes me. A squeal that I cannot hear.

A new wave of understanding washes over me. I am deaf. I must be.

This revelation shocks me. How can I just discover something like this? What has happened to my memories? Am I going crazy?

What is my name?

The question chills me to the bone. I realize... that I don't know the answer.

The man seems to be forming a word on his lips, a word I cannot hear but can somehow see with the way he is exaggerating it. He seems to be saying the word "please".

My lip juts out obstinately and I cross my arms against my chest in response. He looks at me and starts to laugh. I can imagine it, the beautiful sounds echoing in my heart. I wish I could experience it for myself.

He hesitantly brings his hands out again after a long, contented silence. With a guarded expression, I allow him to sweep his hands under me. Before I know it, he has pulled me into his arms, picking me up as he steps out of the puddle.

In his comforting embrace, I forget everything.

Except, of course, the pain, which comes like a thief in the night to steal away my happiness. Tears well up in the corner of my eye as it launches an assault against me again.

The man mumbles something that looks like "What's wrong?". Subconsciously I clutch at his arm until my aged knuckles turn stark white. He starts walking over to the pond as his eyes scour mine. I gesture to my stomach wildly, hoping he will get the message. Surprisingly, his nose wrinkles in response.

"Time... of the month?" I think he asks, over-exaggerating every word so I can understand. Color rushes to my cheeks. I am as red as a tomato. Furiously I shake my head.

"S...sorry," he says slowly, finally looking up. The pond is beautiful and glassy, beckoning to me with its icy fingers. As if he read my mind, he steps into the pond with me. The coldness embraces my skin as he practically dumps me in the water.

I cannot prevent a laugh as the water touches my skin, suddenly overjoyed for no reason at all. The pain retreats again, temporarily, as his smile makes everything just a little bit brighter.

"You... remind... me," He struggles to say, "of... a... girl."

A girl! Impatience clouds my mind. What kind of girl? A great friend? A lover?

I try to banish these rebellious things from my mind. These thoughts are only causing trouble for everyone.

He must see the question in my eyes, for he continues on slowly. "She... was... c-covered... in... mud... too."

I have nothing to say. Nothing I wouldn't want to say. Only meager feelings of jealousy are left in my heart. I want to say that I desire to keep my guardian angel all to myself. But I can't.

For that is what he must be. My angel, sent down from Heaven to protect me.

The thought brings a small smile to my lips, which leads to a wider smile on the handsome man's face. He reaches out, dips his hand in the water, and rubs against my cheek with one, rough thumb. And the strangest thing is, I really want him to do it again. For the moment to never end.

And he does, bringing his other thumb to my other cheek, rubbing his hands against my skin. It burns. It burns like nothing I have ever experienced before.

It takes me a second to realize that he is trying to wash the dirt and grime off of me. A carefully veiled excitement begins to occur in my mind. I want to see how far this goes. The real question is, how far is he willing to go?

Obviously not very far, because within moments his warm arms are around me again, and he is lifting me out of the water. His embrace is so warm, so comforting. I could stay like this forever.

But it doesn't, and he lays me back beside the tall oak trees. I look at the ground, suddenly feeling embarrassed.

When I look back up, he is ready. "Do... you... believe... in... true... love?"

Interesting question.

I go with the safe answer. "Yes." It feels weird to know the word passed my mouth even though I was unable to hear it.

"I... don't." He gritted his teeth, messing with the bottom of his shirt. His mouth may say one thing, but his eyes tell a different story. I find myself intrigued. Has someone already taught this man what true love is?

A shiver ripples through my body as a blast of cold air brushes against me. He notices instantly, and takes his shirt off. He has a tank top of some kind underneath, but I am still instantly affected. My breathing grows hitched, betraying my interest to the all-too-observant man.

"Take... this...use... it." He says, and then goes to examine the berry bush. Plucking one berry from the bush, he shows it to me. "Did... you... eat..."

I nod hastily. As he does this, the pain returns once more. I feel myself slumping in agony.

Within a flash, he is by my side. "Just... be... careful... do... not..." He begins, then angrily mutters under his breath. I blink, and when my eyes flutter open, he is gone.

What the crap?

But within a second he is back, carrying a small knapsack. My heart practically sighs in relief at his reappearance, now that I know he hasn't abandoned me.

He fiddles with the drawstrings, opening the bag and silently handing me a bottle of water. I take it eagerly and screw the cap open. He turns his attention away from my animalistic display, lifting a notepad out of the sack. A pen shortly follows.

I pause in my frenzied gulps as he begins to write. Watching him, I notice he has beautiful handwriting. Just like the rest of him. To be expected I guess. Surely a man like him cannot be this perfect. He must have some fault.

Ah, I remind myself carefully, but he is a guardian angel. He was sent for me.

You don't really believe that, do you?

"Here." He hands me the notepad, upon which is written the words "HOW TO TREAT YOUR ILLNESS". Below it is instructions in taking some sort of pill. What is this nonsense?

He smiles at my confusion, and then opens the knapsack again. Carefully he draws out a bottle of pills. "It's... for... the... berries."

I frown and reach for the notepad. "How do you have something like this in your knapsack?" I write. He reads and answers my question before I finish my next sentence. "We... prepare... for... everything." He grins at me and my heart does a funny leap. What is wrong with me?

"Ok," I say awkwardly, still feeling strange about the sounds leaving my mouth. It seems like I remember a time when this strange lack of hearing

was not an issue.

He starts to write in the notepad again. It doesn't take him very long.

"I have to go. You will be in danger if I take you with me or stay with you any longer. The soldiers are after me. Please understand. I wish I could help more than I already have. Just please, pay attention to the instructions. I really hope I could have talked with you longer." I read underneath his shoulder, the words upside down. He glances at me and shoves over the note, standing up in the process. The notepad falls from his grasp onto my lap.

He stops as if to pick it up, and then decides not to. He starts to turn away from me, and I strangely feel sad. "You... keep... it." The man looks over his shoulder with that wonderful grin of his.

"Have... everything." He throws the knapsack over his shoulder, and then disappears almost immediately. I can sense the footsteps once more.

Good bye.

An eerie calm settles over me. I feel perfectly at peace with the world, satisfied with all it has offered me. Heaven did send me my own guardian angel, after all.

I finger the notepad tentatively. What do I want to write? How will I like to fill these pages before the pain comes back?

Images flash in my head, images that are all blurry. No, that just will not do. I cannot make a picture out of blurry. It simply isn't possible.

Leafing through the few sketches in the front of the pad for inspiration, I stop on the portrait of a young, pretty girl. For some reason it strikes me, seemingly familiar to my eyes.

Exactly like my guardian angel.

A name whips out of nowhere, stunning me almost like another round of pain. Tears start to fall as the realization hits me. Mona. Mona is my name.

And his? I ask myself.

My memory grows clearer as the moon begins to soar in the wide sky. Xavier. That's it.

"Xavier," I whisper softly, tasting the word on my tongue. I have to repeat it once more, treating it like a rare delicacy.

"Xavier... why?" I ask the sky, not caring if my ears don't pick up the words. Maybe if I was louder, they would.

"Xavier, please don't leave me!"

Two, strong hands grab my side as I start to shake, clutching the sides of my desk. The world around me blurs, and quickly morphs into a classroom filled with empty desks. I am back in my prison.

"Mona, please calm down," Mr. Vigilance says softly, "it is fine now. You are back."

Tears are running down my face in rivers. He is right. I am safe.

Yet I cannot stop the tears from flowing.

"What did you see?" he asks, and the chills start to race down my back. I really did see Xavier. He is alive, and running from me.

I wanted to ask him why. I wanted to beg him to stay. But I never had the chance. And now he is gone forever.

I have had this dream countless times, but never before has it gone so far. The last time it happened was yesterday in bed, and ended right after I went to sleep. It is as if I finally unlocked the true story, and it scares me immensely.

"I saw a massive Shifter attack," I choke out a lie, "they stormed the cities, too many for us to count. They all came back and multiplied, revived by some strange force. We could not handle them. Every one of us died." I try to speak evenly, but I end up squeaking out every other word. A half-lie, of course. I had a vision like that the other day.

Mr. Vigilance raises a slender, perfect eyebrow. "Is that everything? Do you feel like this is some sort of premonition? Does this apply to the prophecy in any way?"

Oh... right, right. I forgot. This is Analysis class.

"Uh, no sir." I finger the edges of the paper. "What do you think?"

He puffs up like some big elephant. I have given him the chance to talk, and he knows it. "Well... maybe..." He edges over to the chalkboard as he thinks.

Great. What have I gotten into?

An hour later, I struggle out of that class, nearly exhausted. That man has the ability to suck the life out of me, leaving absolutely nothing left. He droned on for at least thirty minutes without stopping about the possible meanings of my dream. Well, this time I brought it upon myself. I should be ashamed.

Now to get out of my etiquette class.

I edge over to the room where Lady Miranda was tending to some papers cluttered across her desk. "Excuse me, Lady Miranda?" I ask, making my voice as sickly sweet as I possibly can. She seems to be nicer when I talk this way.

"Mona? Is that you?" She looks up, her features spell-binding. Her emerald eyes contrast with flawless ivory skin and dark red lips, along with a swan-like neck and a graceful body. To me, she is like an icy goddess.

"Yes, Lady Miranda." I curtsy clumsily, and I think I see amusement tug at the corner of her closed mouth. "I am feeling rather unwell today, and would like to use the bathroom. May I?"

She stares at me evenly. I begin to feel squirm, traces of red reaching my cheeks.

"I suppose so." She throws her hands up like it couldn't be helped. That was one thing about Lady Miranda. She was a drama queen. "But only—"

"Thanks!" I say eagerly, and then zoom off without a second thought. I know I will be reprimanded later, but I don't care at all. It is worth everything to be free, if only for a couple of moments.

I hope Lady Miranda doesn't notice that I didn't turn to the left in order to go to the bathroom.

I exit the premises, swinging a door open so that I am standing in the backyard. Searching my mind for the place I had seen before, I wrinkle my nose in order to catch a scent. Any scent.

There are so many out here: daffodils, lilacs, frogs, and other creatures. But I know what I am looking for. When the hint of the right aroma reaches me, I grab on to it and never let go.

"Chosen One?" A voice calls in the distance. I mutter angrily under my breath. Move, Mona, move!

I run to the edge of the tall walls and jump as high as I can. Using my hands, I grab onto a small ledge, which I used to propel myself over. I have practiced this many times since I found the strange irregularity days ago. It serves as my ticket out, if need be. Although of course, it wouldn't really

tree me from the prison, but I can temporarily get away. As long as the guards don't see me.

Starting to hear shouts from far away, I try not to focus on it too much. I must hold on to that faded scent. It carries me farther in the forest, deeper than I previously thought.

I hope I don't get lost.

I finally reach the familiar clearing, where the pond is only a few feet away. My eyes scan over the muddy pond, the deathly berries, and finally, the figure bundled against the tree.

The woman's face is worn and weary, with many wrinkles upon her face. I can tell she used to be very pretty. She has a heart-shaped face and a slightly pointy nose.

She is scrunched up in the fetal position, her face bent in pain. I see the knapsack off to the side, the discarded water bottle, and the full bottle of pills. Oh, I see. She hasn't been following the instructions.

There is dried up blood around the area, almost as if she was coughing it up earlier. It doesn't look like she has any outward injuries.

"Okay, lady, let's get you out of here." I hoist her up in my arms slowly, and she is surprisingly light. Her eyes flutter open, and in that time I see piercing blue eyes stare straight into my soul. I am struck by the hopelessness I see within them, and then the fierce determination.

With a ferocity that is hard for even me to detect, she wraps her arms around my neck and begins to squeeze. Surprisingly, it hurts really bad for a lady who has barely any strength left.

"Please," I emphasize, choking under her hold, "release... me... here... to... help."

She studies my lips, trying to read the words that fell off my tongue. Her eyes narrow in suspicion, but reason takes over and she loosens her grip slightly. I gasp for air.

Looking around her, she reaches for the notepad, which was lying on the ground. I bent down and picked it up, handing it to her with interest. She flips through the pages as I begin the walk back, as if searching for something.

I hear a murmur, almost like a strange warble, coming from the lady as she finds the picture she is looking for. "You," she mouths silently, pointing to the portrait of me on the back of one page. My eyes crinkle with laughter.

"Me," I nod, and then start to run as fast as I can with the bundle in my arms. I am surprised that she weighs so little to me, but maybe it is the result of that strength training I have been forced to participate in. I am always the weakest one there, but maybe even I have improved.

Her eyes widen as I go into full speed, and subconsciously she clutches at my shirt. I have to get back as quickly as I can before the guards race after me and catch a whiff of Xavier's scent. I cannot let them get that far into the forest.

A strange thought occurs to me. I could have left the lady and raced in Xavier's direction. I could have caught his scent. Maybe even catch up with him.

Why didn't I?

Well, I suppose it's worth it anyway, I think to myself. At least I get to save someone out of my stupidity. And really, that's probably what I would have done anyway if I had thought of this plan earlier. My presence with Xavier would have endangered him more than if I leave him alone. Disheartening as it is, it is still cold, hard reality.

And there is also the fact that he was the one that ran from me in the first place.

A strange squeezing in my chest brings me back to the present. I had barely realized that we have reached the wall until now. Crap, I forgot.

How am I going to get over this wall now? It isn't like I can throw her over.

"What is that in your arms, Mona? What have you been doing?" A figure comes from the side of the walls, probably where the gate is. I gasp, nearly dropping the woman. I didn't expect anyone to be out here.

But of course, it is Lady Miranda who decides to follow me outside the gates. Her eyebrows are arched in the air and her tone is full of fury. "What happened to going to the bathroom?"

I am going to die.

Instead of responding to her, I gently try to place the woman's feet on the ground. A guard comes around the other side in curiosity, and I quickly gesture for him to come over. He looks at me and the lady in confusion.

"Can you take care of this lady? She ate some poisonous berries... they were red, and small, and-"

"Metaberries?" he asks suddenly. He seems like he knows what he is talking about.

"Uh... yeah. Sure. Metaberries."

"I will take care of her, Chosen One." The guard reaches out an arm to hold the woman up. She doesn't protest, allowing him to support her weight. It seems like she can walk, though awkwardly. At the moment she must not be in dire pain.

"Please see that she gets a job in Headquarters!" I call after him urgently. He lifts up one hand in parting, and then they disappear around the side of the walls. It is then that I notice that the notepad, once more, is on the ground. The pages are flipped to a picture I have never seen before. Tears well up as I see the fine lines, the bright eyes and smooth skin. Xavier. She had drawn Xavier.

"You have a lot of explaining to do," Lady Miranda huffs, by my side in seconds. Using her arm, she firmly guides me over to the gateway. My few minutes of freedom are over.

All the while, I clutch the notepad close to my chest. Somehow I am unable to keep the tears from falling.

This is going to be a long week.

Days later, I am still just as dumb as I was the moment I started taking these awful classes. I think Lady Miranda has had me thrown out more than three times, and Mr. Vigilance has turned each class into a "brainstorming" period where he basically lectures the entire time over the possible meanings of my dream. Not the real dream, of course, so it wasn't even slightly interesting.

The only times when I enjoy myself would have to be when Griffin is by my side. He visits me for lunch and always makes me laugh so that I choke on my bland PB&Js. He is becoming my best friend, understanding and caring about me more than anyone else in this boring place. I am starting to think that having him as my only mate wouldn't be quite as bad.

Walking towards the garden where I eat my lunch, I spot him leaning against the statue near the doors. He smiles when he turns to look at me, a smile so unguarded that it makes my heart flutter. He quickly strikes a pose, kneeling in front of the statue's outstretched sword with a wounded expression.

I start to laugh, running over to him. "Watch out!" I yell, "You are going to get hurt!" I leap in the air and push him out of the way. We crash into the wall, his body shielding me from any damage. I look into his brown eyes with relief. He seems to be the most human-like person here, and I love that more than anything.

"Get... up," Griffin groans, trying to push himself off the floor. He looks hurt, but the wrinkle in his eyes betrays the truth.

"What were you thinking, getting in front of that soldier?!" I roll off of him, shaking him by the shoulders. "You could have died!"

"Would you miss me?" He winks, slowly standing up.

"Yes. I would miss you so much," I say sarcastically, drawing out my syllables. Afterwards, I yawn, and his grin reappears.

"Are you bored with me already, Chosen One?" he teases, and I punch him in the arm. He knows I hate it when he calls me that.

Offering me his arm, he leads me out into the garden. The nervous butterflies return as we walk, upsetting my stomach.

"Are you ready?" He whispers in my ear, a low sound that makes me shiver. I know exactly what he is talking about.

"Ready as I will ever be, I guess." I look towards the walls, away from him. Griffin frowns a little.

"I know this must be nerve-wracking. What are you worried about?" he asks, leading me to the benches underneath the tall willow tree. Flowers surround us as we sit down, and I open my lunch bag.

"I'm not sure. It is just this uneasy feeling I have. I don't know if I am ready." I grab my sandwich, staring at it silently. The delectable scent reaches my nose, and I nearly gag.

"I'm sure you are more ready than you think."

"Or maybe you have more confidence in me than you should."

A minute passes with no words. I quietly put my sandwich up and he starts to eat his own. It is a comfortable silence, a silence I can bear. With Griffin, I always feel at ease.

"If you want, Mona, we can do it now. Get it over with. I know that the Council has had it ready for ages," Griffin comments nonchalantly over a mouthful of BLT. "They just wanted to wait until you decided to come. Of course, the deadline is tonight, but you could have—"

"Really?" I ask, a little more eager than I should be. I have been dreading this ritual for days, unable to keep the nervousness from swallowing up all of my thoughts. "Let's do it, then."

I marvel at how I spoke of this matter so calmly. The way I said it was about the equivalent of "let's play ball!" or "let's eat some cake!". I guess it is just the overwhelming desire for everything to just be over. To forget... him, to move on with my life.

"Griffin, wait for me, will you?" I ask, standing up quickly, "I have to do something, and then we can go." He nods, and takes another gigantic bite of his sandwich. Turning from him, I head over to the fountain around thirty feet away.

For a minute, I stare at the glassy water, my reflection wavy in the ripples across the surface. Hesitantly I put my hand in my pocket and pull out a tiny slip of paper. Unfolding it, I look at the striking portrait once again. My thumb smudged the edge of his face, and I quickly shift it away.

I returned the notepad to the old lady, whose name is Cassie, by secret. I snuck into her new room and left it on her bed. However, I could not part with this picture no matter how hard I tried. I eventually tore it out, stealing away the precious lady's guardian angel.

But now, it is time.

My heart twists in pain violently as I raise my thumbs to the top of the picture and carefully bring them out in opposite directions. The tearing sound makes my eyes start to water, and before I know it, the deed is done. My heart is ripped in two pieces just as easily as the paper was.

Now the job gets much harder.

Let go.

I squeeze each piece of the paper tightly in my fists. It seems as if my body will not obey my mind's commands.

Let go.

Finally one hand opens, and the paper flies until it lands on the blue water. It floats for a while, and then the water swallows it up until it is shriveled and the face is destroyed.

Only one piece left.

Although it may seem like a small matter, at this moment it seems like the world depends on this one action. My grip slowly loosens in the other hand, sweat appearing on my palm. I never imagined that this would become so hard.

Let go.

The paper flies in the same direction that the other did, and soon shrivels in the same manner. Strangely, it feels as if I have been temporarily released... almost energized at its completion. Not exactly what I expected.

With energy I didn't know I possessed, I walk over to Griffin, who probably saw the entire incident. "Okay," I say firmly, "I am ready."

I finally let go.

We reach the entrance of a small room after a short while, having traveled slowly but surely. It seems to be in the heart of headquarters, several flights of stairs underground. It is kind of creepy, knowing that with every step I am taking I am getting closer to becoming a brand new person.

It is hard to imagine what I will be like when it is over. Will my personality change to what it was before I met... him? Will I keep everything but my memories?

Griffin keeps trying to explain the process of the ritual, but I get distracted by the curious designs that are dancing across the walls of this hallway. There are no other doors besides the one at the very end, which is rather strange. The door itself is huge, decorated with similar designs around the edges. The whole layout of Headquarters confuses me. It is rather like a castle upside down, with a single, plain floor above ground and many more beautiful floors below.

We enter through the door, and I am surprised by the simplicity of it all. There is nothing in it besides a few chairs, a desk and cabinets, and a small bed. It rather resembles a normal hospital room, and even that seems more homely than this one. It is very different from everything else I have seen on this floor.

An old, yet striking lady is murmuring to herself, seemingly stirring together a strange concoction in a large mixing bowl. She is dressed in all black and has beady eyes, with dark hair that stretches to her lower back. If I didn't know better, I'd think that I have just seen a witch.

"Mona, meet our herbalist, Marsha." Griffin smiles at her, and I extend my hand cautiously. She turns to look at me, stares at my hand for a minute, and then turns away.

My cheeks burn as I hastily drop my hand to my side. Griffin doesn't seem to notice my embarrassment, acting as if she hadn't just snubbed me in front of him. "She will be taking care of the ritual, Mona. You have nothing to worry about. She is the best of the best."

He obviously expects me to be eased by this knowledge. Honestly, it upsets me even more. This lady looks like she could kill me. Not only kill me, but not care about it in the slightest.

"Leave." A small croak comes from Marsha, and we both take a step back. "I must deal with her alone."

Marsha. What a witchy name.

Griffin shakes his head. "I'm sorry Marsha, but the Council said—"

"I do not care what the Council said!" She shakes her head definitely, her voice cracking on every other word. "I am doing them a favor right now,

and they know it.”

Griffin stares at me pleadingly. “Yeah, yeah, I get it,” I mutter underneath my breath, “go wait outside.” Smiling, he pats me on the head and walks out of the door.

“I’ll be right here! Call if you need me!” He throws over his shoulder, and then the door shuts with a frightening CLANG!!

Now I am alone with this scary witch-lady. I knew I never should have gone along with this.

She gestures to the bed, and I quickly scramble upon it. The energy I had before is completely gone. How did I lose my confidence so quickly?

“Mona, I am going to have to ask you to relax,” she says calmly over her shoulder, “I can feel your teeth chattering like footsteps on a rainy day.”

What? What did that analogy have to do with anything?

She finishes her mixture, and then takes a cup out of the cabinet and pours some of the concoction into it. “Parsley, Gingerberries, Red Snaps, Fargleweed, Cabbage, and Tawniberries. Pretty normal ingredients, except for the Gingerberries, until swirled together for thirty minutes, boiled for ten minutes, and then allowed to fester for three days. Now it serves as a concoction that is so potent you cannot drink but a sip before the agony overtakes you. It is the first step to ridding yourself of your mate.” After explaining, she takes a dropper and dips it in the cup. I am only thinking of one thing.

Gingerberries?

GINGERBERRIES?

“Secondly,” she continues, “I have to take another thick mixture, using extremely rare ingredients, and spread it across the mating mark you wish to remove. I have been informed that this mark is near your neck.” Stepping over to me, she places the dropper on a small bedside table and went to get something else.

“Afterwards, I will use Fargleweed to soothe your evaporating mating mark and the pain in your chest. However, it may continue regardless for hours. Even if you are hurting after I am through with this step, I must give you the elixir or it will never be complete. This is the potion that messes with your mind, fiddling with your memories and truly making you forget him.”

“Let’s get on with it then,” I mutter, lying back against the single pillow. “Bring on the pain.”

She smiles, a wicked smile that chills me to the bone. “As you wish.”

A few minutes pass as she arranges things on the table. I spend time thinking about what I was going to lose. Throughout this process, will I lose myself? Why did I even agree to do this?

Oh yeah. The pain.

That is so funny to me, and I start to laugh. So in order to escape from the pain, I must drink something that gives me pain. What a messed up world.

Marsha arches an eyebrow, and I shrug. “I’m weird,” I offer as an explanation. I’m sure she thinks I’m crazy now.

I think she is ready, for she is picking up the dropper. “Open up, Mona.” Obediently I do as she asks, closing my eyes in the process. The word why keeps flitting through my thoughts.

Why, why, why, why, WHY?

A small droplet of liquid hits my tongue, and I begin to scream. It seems as if my body is on fire, lit into flames by that one single spark. She was right. The pain really does overtake you.

I can feel Marsha’s hands on me, forcibly holding me down. Strange bindings are suddenly around my feet and arms. Anger at her sears me like a red-hot iron. What the crap was I thinking when I agreed to do this?

Crashes r heard outside, along with shouting and other strange noises. I barely notice, mainly because I am busy writhing in pain.

“Not too much longer dearie,” Marsha cackles, her aged hands spreading a gooey paste around my neck. At about this time, an even larger crash occurs, and I can hear Griffin yelling, “Guards! GUARDS!”

I think Marsha has messed up for some reason, because now I can feel the paste on my shirt and jeans. Some of it gets on my belly and sides because my shirt had ridden up slightly. The burn intensifies when this happens, and I am unable to stop from screaming again.

“What are you doing to her?” A voice anxiously asks, a voice that is familiar to me. “What are you doing to Mona?!”

Marsha doesn’t say anything from the silence that follows, and then croaks in my ear. “Drink this.” A cup touches my lips and a sweet liquid slides into my mouth. Not much, though, but something knocks the cup from my lips.

“Stop!” Another voice yells, and fighting ensues. I finally decide to open my eyes, to figure out what is going on.

A face hovers above me, streaked with moisture. It takes a minute for my eyes to focus, but then I realize it is him. My body starts to shake and stars dance in my vision. “Mona, it’s me,” the familiar voice whispers, “Xavier. I came back.”

A strange exhilaration fills my body. He... he came back. For me. Somehow it is impossible to believe.

“I may not ever see you again,” he whispers, “because the guards are coming this way to kill us. But I had to see you just one more time. I love you. I can’t live without you.”

My heart nearly explodes.

Through all the burning pain, I focus on my one desire that rises above the others; the urge to escape... with Xavier, with Griffin, with everyone. Somehow, I needed to save them all. Even if I die in the process.

Places appear before me randomly. The werewolf mansion. My orphanage. My school. Strange valleys, and creeks, and towering mountains that I have never seen before.

Another vision settles before me, a vision of dark rivers and forests, vast oceans and dark grey skies. There.

I reach for it, grasping for the place that has haunted my dreams since the very first Shifter attack. The others cannot reach us there. We will be safe.

In my strange state of delirium, I run and catch it in my hands, and then stare at it, expecting something. Anything.

And then something happens.

The light from the place grows, consuming my hand, my arms, and my body. It sucks up everything, until nothing is left. Surely I have gone mad. What have I done?

My consciousness leaves me as I finally pass out, due to the agonizing pain.

What a nightmare.

To Rise Like A Phoenix

I feel nothing. I am nothing.

The voices build up inside of me until they are overwhelming, beating like the ceaseless echo of a drum. There is no worth to my soul. I should just die now and let God condemn me forevermore.

I can feel the heat rushing to my face as these words cross my mind, the redness swallowing my cheeks. There is no lucidity to these words, no reason whatsoever. I doubt that I could ever explain these logical fallacies.

All I know is that these thoughts cannot be true. There is nothing that words can do to bring me down. The wickedness must end now. No weaknesses will be accepted.

A sound erupts to my right, and a battle immediately begins.

My eyes flicker open, and the harsh sights berate me like the side of a sharp sword. Immediately I jump to my feet as focus returns, trying to survey my potential opponent. Surely it knows that it would not be able to catch me off guard. Though I suppose if it thought it could, this underestimation would serve as an advantage.

I look at the unfamiliar creature before me, a small girl who looks barely over the age of five. My eyes narrow at this strange development. What wily tricks enemies try to play... donning disguises that would make me hesitant to strike.

Quickly I reach to my belt, grasping for a sword or weapon of some kind. To my dismay, nothing is there besides air. Alarm only enters my mind for a second, and then I race towards a tall and intimidating tree to rip off a weighty branch. This will have to do.

The creature tries to say something, but I refuse to let any words slip out of its tiny mouth. I leap forward as it forms the words, covering her mouth with my hands. Terror dances across her eyes as she stills with my movement, seemingly stunned with shock.

What petty tricks. Does she really think that I will fall for a gimmick like that? Vulnerability is only a façade, manipulated by the strong and embraced by the weak.

With lightning-quick movements, I raise my tree branch slightly above her and hit the top of her head lightly. With a body like this, only a tap should be enough to knock the creature out until I decide what to do with it.

Of course I am right, as the eyes of the child slip to a close almost immediately. Only now do I allow myself a smile, pleased with the manner in which I handled this incident.

The smile vanishes as a larger man appears from the cluster of trees a few feet away. He looks at me, and then the girl, his startling green eyes widening in shock.

"Mona, what have you done?"

What in the name of...

"Who are you?" I put my hands in the air, trying to gain some time. Slowly I stand up, stepping over the little girl. "How do you know my name?" I try not to let fright and confusion dictate my thoughts. Survival comes first.

He steps into the sunlight with one graceful, sweeping movement. The first thing I notice is his sparkling blue hair, almost blinding me in the sunlight. Strange recollections start to hit me like a ton of bricks.

"Do you not recognize me?" He asks, and I can sense hurt in his voice. Strangely, I do, no matter how much that surprises me. Memory after memory resurfaces with a speed that unnerves me.

"Xavier." The word leaves my mouth, leaving me surprised and confused. How did I know that? How did I know him?

The man tries to form his next words, and fails. After a few seconds, he tries again.

"Mona, why did you knock out Danae?"

I start backing away immediately. Now more memories are coming back, and I don't like the things I remember. Danae. My only friend that is a woman, and she isn't even human. What the crap have I become? Surely all of these bizarre memories are not real.

"Speak to me," he says, his voice commanding and prompting an immediate response. I start to reply, then immediately stop myself. I do not need to answer to this man.

I abruptly turn on my heel and run as fast as I can. Trying to stay calm, I think over this matter as I bolt through trees and underbrush. What could Xavier possibly want with me? How can I escape this unfamiliar monster with a name that I somehow know?

Darting to the side as I feel footsteps behind me, I know immediately that running is pointless. He can track my scent like a hound dog and if he caught up to me this quickly; he must also be much faster.

"Mona!" He calls, to no response. He may kill me now, but he is not getting anything out of me. Within seconds he is right behind me, his breath brushing against the back of my neck.

I don't acknowledge him even as he stops me, putting his arms around my torso with a speed and strength that surprises me. It is only when he picks me up that I begin to get extremely annoyed. "Put me down," I say calmly, trying to mask my irritation. "You have no right to be treating me like this. Just leave me alone. You don't know me."

"I think I do, considering that you are my mate. I think I know almost all of you." A handsome smile appears on his face as his sinewy arms tighten around me, keeping me in place. Humiliation finally breaks through my wall of steel, and I can feel my face turning cherry red. I know what he is talking about.

"Screw this. Screw you." I mutter under my breath, trying to banish these terrible thoughts from my head. However, at his snarky words, I cannot forget the recollection of his lips as they had danced across my body.

So this was the man that had turned me into a weakling.

* * *

"She refuses to accept that I am her mate," Xavier explains to another annoyingly handsome man with slanted eyes, "she is completely different than before."

"Well, I mean, they did perform the Sharuken ritual on her," his companion replies... Yi, I think his name is.

"The old hag never finished! I think." He protests rather feebly.

"I honestly don't understand why you had to tie her up. Surely she is not that dumb to think she can escape from us, weird amnesia problem or not."

"You don't understand, Yi. She is acting crazy."

"I doubt it. More than likely, you are the one who is acting crazy."

"Oh yeah? Well, you go talk to her then," Xavier huffs with a note of frustration.

"I think I will."

The willowy werewolf stands up and saunters over to me, smiling wildly. I feel the urge to punch him in the face, but I can't do anything with these bonds that are so tight that they nearly cut my skin. "Hey, Mona. What's up?"

"Nothing much, Yi. Just minding my own business." I do not smile or frown. It is best not to let anything slip.

"So... uh..." He looks disconcerted by my response, a little confused. "You say you aren't mates with Xavier?"

"Yes." Honestly, that is the only thing I don't really understand out of all of this. This mate business. I don't understand this nonsense coming out of their mouth. Yes, I willingly allowed myself to be kissed by him and to let myself fall for his antics, but mates? I'm not even sure I know what that means. This Sharuken stuff is confusing me as well.

"I think I can prove that you are mates with him," Yi smiles comfortingly. Not that I need to be comforted. I need a way out of this mess.

"Shoot."

"Could you show us your neck?"

Now I know these perverts are insane.

"Good idea, Yi!" Xavier said loudly, "I didn't think of that."

"That's because you are dumb, Xavier." Yi replies, deadpan. He turns his attention back to me. "There should be a mating mark, there near your neck. Do you remember when you tried to kill yourself in the forest?"

"Yes. That was a moment of temporary weakness. Don't expect anything shameful like that from me again."

The two both look at me as if I have said something weird. "Uh, okay." Yi speaks first, rather dubiously. "Well, Xavier saved you and mated with you that night."

"I don't know what you are talking about. He just saved me, and that was it." I am surprised at the way I am able to stay so cool and collected, considering that these captors of mine are making such untrue accusations.

"Just show us your neck," Yi demands exasperatingly. "Please."

Annoyingly I tug down the neckline of my rugged t-shirt, showing a small expanse of white skin. I haven't always had creamy and smooth skin, but no blemishes have been on this body of mine since I became a Spier. "See? You guys are insane."

Yi turns away, looking at Xavier with a shrug. "I guess they really did pull it off."

A dark shadow crosses Xavier's face. He looks away.

"Mind letting me out of these bonds anytime soon?" I ask them slowly, "I don't really deserve to be treated like a criminal." Of course, the two both ignore me.

Thanks a lot.

A small figure enters my vision, coming towards me from the edge of the clearing. "Mona, you gave me quite the shiner," she laughs. It is a beautiful laugh, full of femininity and self-assurance. Blue and black marks her forehead with an intensity that causes me to gasp.

"But I only tapped your forehead.. I don't understand how..."

"I think you underestimate your strength, Mona. It felt like a freight train was being dropped on my head. Lucky for you, you didn't get to see the bloody wounds before they healed a few hours ago. It was bad."

I suppose I didn't really spend much time examining the effects of my attack before Xavier distracted me.

"I apologize," I say awkwardly, looking off to the side and narrowing my eyes. For some reason, I feel strange and uncomfortable. I know these people, but they have become strangers.

And most of all, my past self has become a stranger to me. These memories simply don't make sense. How could I let myself become so vulnerable? How pitiful of a life have I been living up until this point?

Xavier stands up, glances at me solemnly, and walks away. I feel a shameful tug at my heart.

"I understand that you probably don't know how to react right now," Danae begins, "even though I don't understand the particulars of your internal struggle." I roll my eyes, though secretly interested. "My advice to you would be to always go with your heart. No matter what."

"Thanks," I smile sardonically, then laugh for the first time since I have become... different. "I will keep that in mind."

She turns without smiling, walking away back into the forest. I look around at the area, seeing the tall trees and dark gray skies. The smell of sulfur is barely prevalent, and the ground is covered in dark vines and dirt. It is if I am just now truly noticing my surroundings.

"Hey guys? Uh... where are we?"

"We were hoping you could answer that," Xavier says in response, and my blood runs cold.

Suddenly, the air chills my heart and the alien emotion of fear caresses my form, whispering into my ear. My body begins to shake uncontrollably.

And then everything went black.

I know this feeling. I know it more than anyone.

"Everyone! Out of the way!" I yell, then furiously bend my head to my bindings. There is no way I can get out of these bone breaking ropes without some sort of sharp object. And it is getting closer by the minute.

As the cold embraces me with an intensity that is overwhelming, I suddenly am drawn to thoughts of a lance, elegant and strong with a sharp, pointy end. Almost instantaneously, my muscles clench, and the bonds fall like water from my shivering skin.

And the beautiful lance is in my hand.

I lose myself in my instinct, my eyes grow hard and I take a step backwards. My senses seem to be heightened and my reasoning has evaporated. They are so close.

Ghoulis creatures appear from the trees into the clearing, slowly moving towards me. In a flash, Xavier runs in front of me, shielding me from them. "Mona, please let me handle this," he pleads, and his warm body in front of mine sends chills through mine. My breath becomes even shorter as I realize that I am affected by this strange act. This is impossible. I... can't accept this.

"Out of the way, Xavier," I impatiently push him, and he seems to be so stunned that he almost falls to the ground beside me. Trying not to waste time, I run towards the Shifters, one word echoing through my mind. One word that seems to drain me, but seems to be instinct in that it possesses me entirely.

I lift my lance and throw with precision. Almost instantaneously it pierces two of the Shifters, and a horrible cry consumes the air. I am almost frozen from the chills that sound sends through my body. It is the cry of pain, of heartache... of pure terror.

I must stay strong. I cannot let this affect me.

I throw the lance again and again, and the small group of Shifters decrease in number with each attempt. Each new cry seems to join the

collective, increasing in intensity and power. However, I never stop, and a few seconds later the last Shifter is hit. They are gone now.

They can't hurt me.

I turn and look behind my shoulder, where Xavier is standing, staring at me like I was a stranger. Yi's expression is similar. Hastily my eyes snap away from them, away from the incredulity in their expression. I only did what was necessary. I only wanted for them to leave me alone.

I raise a hand to my face, and only then do I notice the flood of tears.

* * *

"So what's the plan?" I ask after a long stretch of silence. The fire crackles beside me, sparks flying in the air.

Empty gazes meet mine.

"I guess we should focus on trying to figure out where we are," Xavier finally replies, his voice low and gruff. "Maybe we should just travel until we see people who can tell us."

"This place seems rather rural, out in the middle of nowhere," I comment, "we could be days away from any sort of civilization."

"Wait a second," Yi says, and we look at him. "I think the far more pressing matter at this moment is what to do about you."

"What? Are you insane?" I narrow my eyes.

It is strange that they are looking at me like this. It is almost as if they are expecting me to explode at any minute, or vanish into thin air. I'm not a ghost!

"You just killed those Shifters, Mona. I don't know if you are yourself anymore. It seems like your entire personality has changed."

"Of course I am myself," I scoff. The fire warms my skin as I rock back and forth, hugging my knees. They don't seem to believe me.

"Where did you take us, Mona?" Xavier asks me gently, his hand moving to rest on mine. Strangely familiar warmth spreads throughout my body. It takes a minute for me to realize what he said.

"Take us? You mean I took you somewhere?" I snap my hand away, although a guilty, lingering blush remains. Danae makes eye contact with me and grins knowingly. I feel the sudden need to slap her.

"You must have. The last memory I had before all this was when we were in that strange chamber at headquarters. Do you remember that?"

These people are going crazy.

"That's not what happened. Griffin was taking me to a new part of the castle when you guys showed up and..." I put my head in my hands. "I don't know."

"You are missing some very important pieces of the puzzle, Mona," Xavier smiles, an action that brings red to my face. He thinks I am a fool. These people are making up events that never happened in order to embarrass and confuse me.

I glare at him, and his bright smile fades.

"Maybe it is not just us stranded in this place," Danae comments, "maybe some of the others are here too."

"You can't worry about the others unless you find them on the way," I reply almost forcefully, "as of now the focus should be on getting food for survival. All I have seen so far is strange, shriveled-up berries and miles of tall trees. Everything here seems dead."

"I disagree," Xavier narrows his eyes at me, "I feel like worrying about the others is absolutely essential."

"I'm not saying worrying about them is not important, but that survival is more important," I snap, standing up. The cool, harsh wind beats at my skin.

"Mona..." Xavier looks at me with a gaze that makes me want to punch him in the face. "Please be reasonable."

"Xavier, you can't search for anyone if you die of starvation. And as of now, you have no idea who you are looking for."

"Wait, what do you mean by you? Shouldn't you be saying we?"

"Oh, sorry. My bad." I try to act like it is no big deal, but now I can see that this is going to be difficult. If the careful substitution of you for we was recognized, they will definitely have an easier time keeping me here, just like a prisoner, even though I don't want to get involved in their drama. These people are maniacs and it would be suicide to keep up with guys if they are only interested in saving their friends instead of saving themselves.

Without another word, I stalk off, heading into the deep forest. I can still hear voices behind me, and when I cross a few trees I pause.

"She is almost exactly like she was before I saved her in the forest," Xavier's voice echoes, "even though she remembers most of the events that happened afterwards."

"I wouldn't lose hope with her just yet," Yi responds, then a heavy silence fills the air. I listen for another second, but nothing happens. I heard enough anyways, I guess.

Racing farther into the forest, I find a large tree not far from the clearing. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a small, dark shadow leaning against the tree.

A Shifter.

I try to figure out what the creature is doing and why it is here. The cold embraces me, and the dark feelings that usually come after such an encounter are very minimized. For some reason, I am not afraid.

I don't see the red eyes, so the Shifter must be resting in some way. It seems strange to me, that Shifters need to sleep like every other creature.

Without the red eyes, it looks almost peaceful.

I sit down where I am, peering at the monster. It is white, but you can easily see the ground through its body. Almost subconsciously a small dagger, seemingly made from the same material as the lance, appears in my hand. I stare at it for a minute, amazed at how easily I am able to conjure weapons when I was unable to before arriving in this strange new world.

I edge closer, careful to minimize any sounds. This is my chance. It can't get any easier than this.

However, I hesitate before striking the Shifter. Something about this is not right.

How come so many Shifters have appeared out in the open, without seeking to possess any inanimate objects? How come everything in this area is dead, dark and devoid of any type of civilization?

I gasp as the eyes of the Shifter suddenly appear in its body, my father flashing before my eyes. Except this time, these eyes are filled with a different sort of emotion, beyond anger, pain, and hopelessness.

Pure terror radiates from the creature beside me.

Startled by confusion, I launch forward with the dagger stretched outwards. Immediately my face hits the ground with a resounding thud. My consciousness seems to fade in and out as I try to get myself off the ground, my brain pushing for survival while my brain is begging for time to recover. I forcefully push myself up, and then to my feet after a few seconds of near-paralyzation. Immediately I search for a red glow, a red

anything that would indicate whereabouts of the Shifter.

Shock crosses my mind as I see nothing besides the same bleak, dreary landscape.

The Shifter... ran away.

Truly frozen this time around, I fall against the tree. The dark stench of sulfur wafts towards my nose, suspending all thought and movement. This can't be happening. Shifters don't run away.

"Mona!" A voice calls out, and suddenly a body is by my side. "Did you see a Shifter? I smell one."

"Not now, Xavier," I say weakly, sliding to the rough, dirty ground. "You shouldn't even be talking to me."

I only turn to look at him after he stubbornly sits beside me. His green eyes stare into mine, and I shiver. I am a horrible human being.

"You can't possibly mean that," Xavier's face stretches into a slow smile, almost laughing at my words. "Mona, I know you have been through a lot, and I'm—"

"No, Xavier," I snap, then frustratedly put my head in my hands. The wind bites at our bodies. "You don't understand."

Tears start to well up in my eyes. Out of the corner of my eye, Xavier's hand reaches towards my shoulder.

"I sent us all to hell."

The hand stops, then retreats from my vision.

* * *

I made sure to sleep near the trees, as far away from the others as possible without being deemed suspicious. Xavier was the first to fall, then Danae's eyes quickly closed, then Yi started snoring like a freight train. Ah, how I love loud snoring.

I wait a few minutes, lying flat on my back and staring straight into the sky. Not a star is up there, only true black, the same black that covers this entire landscape. I have not seen true, natural light from the sky since we came here.

There is always a mist, a deep fog spreading across the sky and forest. It doesn't seem like this place ever receives rain or any sort of irregular weather. If it is the same place as my dream, it is always going to look like this. Which would be explainable, if this place is in fact the land of the dead.

I never imagined Hell to be quite like this. I have always thought of a world of fire and endless smoke and screams of terror, and this world seems anti-climatic in comparison. Instead of horror, there is only... nothing. Only the Shifters.

I still feel bad for bringing the others to this place. But something has to be done. I can't stay with a group bent upon certain death.

Slowing edging to my feet as Yi snores once more, I creep towards the cluster of trees by the clearing. If even a single branch snaps, it's over.

I take one step, and then another. My heart starts to constrict in a weird way as I start to vanish into the mass of the deep, dark forest. I try to quell my pounding heart, for it beats so loudly that it nearly makes the ground shake. I don't understand why I am so nervous.

I am only doing what is necessary to save myself. It is better when I am alone.

Trying to steer my thoughts away from the group I just left, I focus on the path ahead. Filled with sharp rocks and sticks, there is a huge chance of me falling, even though I haven't been very clumsy at all over the past day. Narrowly avoiding a tree branch as my speed increases, my legs start to pick up in speed. I must get further and further away, so far that they can't possibly catch up to me.

Ever since I have gotten here, nothing has felt right. It is like a single chord played wrong in a beautiful melody. Even as I run, it seems like instead of getting farther away from the terrible feelings, I am running straight towards them. Yet my legs continue to beat on the same path, as if nothing now can turn them away.

I probably wouldn't feel so nervous if my heart wasn't still beating loud enough to wake the dead.

My stomach growls and small beads of sweat appear on my forehead. I am growing more and more exhausted, my throat parched and my vision shaky. Who knows how long I have been running, how long I have even been here. In this place, time runs together, twisting and weaving, frolicking around its inhabitants.

This must be a dream. It has to be.

That is the reason why none of this makes sense. Why I keep having memories that I don't understand. Why everything is so out of the ordinary.

I'm having another dream of the dark world, but this time, I am the star. The only question is; how do I wake myself up?

The running never ends, but my consciousness starts to stumble a little bit. My eyelids slip down, then struggle to its former position. My stomach screams in agony, and only luck prevents its cries from echoing throughout the forest. I must find a way out of this dream before I die.

Only trees surround me, almost the exact same trees surrounding me when I left. Everything here looks the same, which makes me question whether I have been running in circles or not.

I can't be. I've been traveling in a straight line.

But this place continues to play with my brain, and out of the corner of my eye I spot a small irregularity, something that doesn't fit with everything I have seen so far. It is a well of some sort, old and misshapen, but to me the symbol of deliverance. Wells... hold water.

I instinctively change my direction for the first time, swerving to avoid tree after tree. I continue to get closer and closer, but it almost seems to be traveling farther and farther away. Maybe I am just getting fooled by this dream world. I blink my eyes in confusion.

When I look again, it is still there.

My pace slows, and for the first time the well looks like I am actually getting closer to it. Excited, I furiously zoom towards it, towards the hope of life-giving water.

Please, let there be water.

My eyes slip once more, then a heavy force pounds the breath out of me as I slam into it, obviously not looking where I am going. "Ugh!" I gasp for breath, my arms touching the object to try and keep myself steady. "I guess I really am exhausted for banging into a tree," I mutter, trying to concentrate on getting rid of the shaking that is reverberating around my body.

"Last time I checked, I wasn't a tree," a slightly familiar voice travels to my ear, and instantly I start to scream, kicking the talking tree and trying to pull my hands away. However, we seem to be locked in some sort of strange embrace, and both the tree and I lose our balance as we too bang into something hard, then topple almost in midair.

Wait. We are in midair.

My senses go out of control as the world constantly shifts in my eyes, a blur of insanity that I can't possibly understand. It lasts for a second or two, then I just tightly close my eyes and hope this will be over soon. I hope this madness will stop.

And then there is a thud, then the overwhelming, incredible pain begins. My arm hits the ground—I think—and I feel the bone crack. My legs already seem broken. I don't think I have ever taken such a tumble, especially by banging into a talking tree.

My eyes slide open, slowly and hesitantly, to survey my surroundings. The first thing I notice is the moisture surrounding my arms and legs. The

second thing I notice is circular walls stretching upwards as far as the eye can see.

The third thing I notice is a red-haired being lying opposite me, his knee and neck bent at awkward angles. His eyes are closed, and he seems to be faintly breathing.

"Griffin?" The name easily floats from my lips, startling even me.

There is no response.

What... just happened?

Something Smells Fishy

I stare at the body beside me, wondering what on earth I should do.

The red-haired man looks like a gangly puppet; bent, broken, and lifeless. His breathing has almost stopped entirely, and his face is a strange shade of purple. How do you revive a dead person? Should I just leave him and try to escape?

For some reason, I can't cast him aside. I creep closer, looking at his bloodied head and body. It seems like his head hit the side of this well pretty hard. At least I think we fell in the well.

He looks familiar to me, just like the other strange werewolves I saw since I landed in this strange place. There is something about him that I just can't place.

I raise my hand to his shoulders and head, twisting his body so that he is lying on my bruised legs. Carefully examining his face and hair, I notice a gigantic gash stretching across the back of his skull. It doesn't seem to be healing like a normal werewolf wound would. In fact, none of my bruises or cuts seem to be healing either.

I tear my long-sleeved shirt and press it against his gash, tightly binding it as much as I can. His breathing slowly becomes more regular and steady, and a strange emotion lifts my spirits. He is alive. I don't have a dead person on my hands.

The rest of his body is bruised and his knee is turning at an awkward angle. I slowly try to raise his pants above his knee, being careful not to be too rough with his clothing. A gasp escapes me as black and blue dances from his ankle to his knee, at which point the knee doesn't even look like one anymore. It's an explosion of color—which I assume is probably not a good thing.

I let my finger skim across the top of the bruises, which probably wasn't a good decision judging from the whimpers and yelps escaping the man's dry and crusted lips. His voice is hoarse and strained, so I lean over to the pool of water in the corner and scoop some into my hands. "Open your mouth," I whisper to him, hoping he will understand.

It takes a few seconds, but slowly he obliges me, though wincing in the process. I let some of the water drop into his mouth, and he swallows it greedily.

The well is close to empty, but still meager puddles of liquid are scattered around our prison. I wonder what has happened in this world, because this is the very first time I have even seen water since our arrival. Although if my visions are correct...

"Mona?" A tiny whisper escapes the red-haired man's mouth, and his arm slowly lifts up in a somehow angelic gesture. "Where... where are you?"

I nearly jump all the way across the well at his words, the chills suddenly creeping up and down my back. Every hair stands on edge as I grow scared to hold him, but scared to let him go. His eyes have been closed ever since I first met him, so there is no way he could know my name.

Or... is there?

Out of impulse and a bitter frustration, I lean towards the beautiful stranger's ear. "She's dead," I whisper in a biting tone, the words embracing his ear in a sickening caress. "You will never see that weakling of a creature ever again." The most horrible thing about my words is that I don't believe them with every portion of my being. There is some part of me that refuses to accept that these people I keep encountering aren't worth any of my time.

He shakes a little bit, still leaning against my body. I draw back in alarm as his arm brushes against my own. "... don't believe that. Because she is right here." At first I don't hear him at all, because his voice is so low. But his deep tones are so intoxicating that he pulls me in, forcing me closer and closer until I am caught in his sticky web.

"How would you know that?" I ask nervously, unable to turn my face away from his. His eyelids start to flutter and in shock I nearly hit his face with the back of my hand.

To my dismay, his eyes fly open and they sweep over my face and our surroundings. His gaze is powerful and authoritative, yet I sense a vulnerability about him that is somewhat endearing.

"You're funny, Mona." He smiles tentatively, probably straining inside with the motion. "Nice joke." His acknowledgment makes me feel empty and heartless inside. He seems to have so many false expectations of me, expectations that I simply cannot fulfill.

"It... isn't a joke," I respond dubiously, suspicious of even myself. His smile disappears instantly, and his eyes roughly close, like a child that has just been told that Santa Claus isn't real.

I check the bindings around his head to make sure they are tight and putting pressure on his wound. Moving to shift his weight so that he is leaning against the wall, I notice the red dancing around my own arm. The bruises and blood covering my elbow are almost as bad as Griffin's knee. I guess before I never noticed the pain when I used my left hand because the strange red-haired man consumed all of my thoughts.

"Where is this place?" He asks while trying to push himself farther up against the wall.

"It must be hell," I comment softly to myself while examining my arm, "otherwise both of our injuries would be healed by now. It's been a good fifteen minutes since we landed in here. I think." As expected, he hears me and once again his eyes fly open.

"Surely you are kidding." His body shakes slightly.

"No. Well, yes. Partly." I lean against the side of the well and sigh. "It doesn't make too much of a difference where we are anyways."

Silence stretches between us as he thinks about who-knows-what. His hands keep curling and uncurling before his eyes, and touching the water at his side. I take this minute to examine him, trying to figure out how I know his name. Griffin is handsome, almost annoyingly so, with fiery hair and dark brown eyes. The endless chocolate pools morph into a beady black as his brow furrows in concentration.

I watch in fascination as his right hand grows fur and claws, the wrist and arm rippling with new muscle. And then, just as easily, the transformation reverses and he is back to normal. "I never imagined hell to be like this... that I would be pushed into a well with you for all eternity so we can die again and again," He mumbles, "I always thought I was at least a decent person... this must be my punishment for leaving you when you were a child. I guess it's too late now—"

"No," I correct him, the hint of a smile at my lips, "I'm pretty sure we aren't dead. This isn't really the result of a punishment, but a traffic collision."

"But... you said it was hell!"

"I'm pretty sure this is the world I have been seeing in my visions for quite a while now. Months, actually."

"What in the name of..." He rubs his head in frustration, "the last thing I remember was Xavier and the others busting in and crashing the Sharuken ritual."

There it is again. I must be surrounded by lunatics.

"I have no idea what you are talking about. There was no Sharuken ritual. You and those other werewolves are creeping me out," I sharply correct him, using bitterness to mask my confusion. It seems like I am the only one without these crucial memories, and I'm not sure I want to know why that is.

His frustration increases, and he sticks his head in the bandage. The bandage all but falls off, and I crawl over to him to fix it. "Mona, I don't mean to be impolite..." he asks softly as I concentrate on tying the knot, "but did that old hag remove the mating mark on your stomach as well?"

"I don't have a mating mark on my stomach. Never had one," I scoff, ignoring the throbbing in my elbow. I barely notice he is moving until he catches my elbow and holds it tightly.

"Don't strain yourself," he whispers, "neither your body or your mind. The hag's ritual was probably not completed when... uh... all this happened. Your remaining memories will come back to you and your injuries will heal, all with time." I shake my arm away, but then hold it with my other arm.

"I don't remember anything about how I got us here," I begin with confusion, "but I know all of my visions of this place are exactly what I have been seeing since we arrived. The grey death that covers this place like a heavy fog is so distinct I would recognize it anywhere. I know for a fact that no humans live here, and that this place isn't on earth."

Griffin says nothing, just staring at me as if he is trying to decipher a puzzle.

"I saw a Shifter here just lying against a tree, with no cares in the world. Without the red eyes!" I exclaim, and he nearly falls onto the wet floor.

"I've been smelling them too," he chokes, "everywhere I turn. This really must be hell, otherwise we wouldn't have landed in a Shifter's nest."

"That's it!" I grimly smile with exhaustion, "that's what this place is. A spirit world of some sort, the world of the Shifters. We've only seen them in our home, and now we get to see them in their natural habitat."

Griffin looks exhausted now, his brain probably overwhelmed from all the information it has received. He stares at me for a few seconds, and then he slumps against the side again. This time, he stays there for quite a while. It takes me a minute to realize he has fallen asleep.

I look around the well, and then give up on thinking. I must be going crazy, otherwise I wouldn't entertain such ludicrous thoughts. A Shifter habitat?

Might as well get some sleep myself and let this craziness leave my head.

* * *

For the first time, there is rain.

It pounds on the stone walls, swirling around the spires and turrets. It caresses the clear windows, dripping off each stone like blood. It must be God's wrath, come to us in the form of liquid terror... a symbol of worse things to come.

He turns away, distraught from the never-ending sight of rivers pouring from above, washing the land with change. Never before has he experienced such fear, shaking through his soul with an overwhelming intensity. The old is being toppled, the regime coming to an end. But it is difficult for him to grasp—the "end".

End only exists in the relation to the beginning, omega to the alpha, and there is no beginning here. There is only the "is", the simple state of being that stretches farther than the eye can see. No one knows when it started; it just was—was, and is, and always will be.

The continuous roar of the darkening clouds as it hastens to take the land beats upon him until he can take it no more. The tsunami of fate is gathering, preparing a tidal wave that will deliver the final blow, wreaking eternal havoc in the process. It is impossible to accept that the is could become the was, that the continuum could be disrupted.

At the very least, he cannot sit and watch as the destruction envelops this world. He tries to remember that he isn't powerless. He can control the destruction, wield it to his liking. This isn't something that is impossible to avoid.

If only they could find them. For this... this would make all the difference.

The last grains of sand trickle down the glass walls and tumble towards certain death.

* * *

The first thing I hear is a horrific scream, cutting through the air and fog with an intensity that swallows the silence, only leaving the nameless dread in my heart.

"Mona!" Someone is by my side, shaking my shoulders. My hands shake, nails digging into my attacker's body. A deep, strangled noise brings me to full consciousness, and my eyes fly open.

"Griffin?" As the figure before me comes into focus, I remember my circumstances and release my grip. A strange wheezing noise follows, and the red-head clutches his throat. "What happened?" I ask, alarmed. He doesn't answer immediately, still gasping a little bit before removing his hands from his neck.

"Well, all I know is that one minute I am asleep, the next you are screaming your head off and trying to strangle me," He mutters, shaking his hands. "I will say, you have a pretty good grip."

"I'm sorry." I stare at him, then at my own hands. "I don't know what came over me." So, that was my scream.

"Well, good thing you got out of it before you killed me," Griffin laughs, a dry, hoarse sound that shocks me. He notices as well, and gathers some water in his hand. As the liquid trickles into his mouth, I start to recall the vivid pictures that had been dancing throughout my head.

"I had a very vivid dream," I start talking, mainly to myself. "But even though it was so crystal clear at the time, now I can hardly make sense of anything. I think it had to do with where we are, and what we are supposed to do now that we are here." I twist in my position. "I think it had something to do with rain."

There is silence for a while, Griffin scrubbing his shoe and I raking through fractured memories.

"I wish I had dreams like that," he finally says, "I only dream about sheep and bunny rabbits and flowers. Or nothing at all." Griffin tilts his head towards the sky, and I do the same. The sky is near impossible to see with the fog lying just above the well, but there is a strange beauty in it—watching the mist swirl around the round opening, as if performing a dance just for us.

"I wonder if they will ever find us," I murmur absently while counting the bricks lining the top of the well.

Griffin turns his head to stare at me. "They?" He probes, and I look back at him.

"Yeah, you know... Yi, Danae, Xavier... I was escaping from them when I bumped into you," I explain, "I wonder if they would even look." The mist seems to intensify as I speak, almost opaque in appearance. I doubt anyone would be able to spot the well from here, and we can't make any signals because we are about twenty-five feet from the surface.

"Why in the world would you try to escape?" He asks in alarm. Instantly my mind flashes to past events, and I mentally slap myself in the face. It wasn't very strategic to flee from them, now that I look back in hindsight; I think what most propelled me to do so in the first place was Xavier and the discomfort his presence made me feel.

"I'm not sure," I avoid Griffin's piercing gaze, "I think the most important reason why is because I like it better when I am alone."

I try to ignore the trembles that are erupting deep within my heart.

"Mona," He says softly, "Xavier will always come and look for you. I mean, he broke into Headquarters like a mad man to stop the ritual."

Frustration sizzles between us, reverberating around the well.

"What the crap is the Sharuken ritual?!" I bark, tired once and for all of hearing this nonsense. "Why am I the one being left out here?" I barely notice the tear budding at the corner of my eye until it runs down my face. Scolding myself for acting like an emotional idiot, I lie back against the wall again and close my eyes. Crying over such a matter is silly. Crying over anything is silly.

"It's... nothing, Mona. Nothing you should worry about," Griffin answers, his eyes shifting upwards again.

"No, Griffin." I turn and place my hand on his shoulder. "I need to know, so I may understand." My hand shakes as I realize my immediate familiarity with this man, and the easiness with which I touched him. This behavior cannot be explained or excused unless I can have this last piece of the puzzle.

I remove my hand as he sits and stares, probably trying to figure out how to phrase his next words. The cold of the endless night wraps around my form, chilling me to the bone.

"I will," he finally agrees, "but you have to tell me something else first." Hesitantly he inches over until his shoulder almost touches mine. I can feel his closeness all too well, and the shivers begin again. He notices, and reaches over to cover my hand with his own. The warmth pulsates from his skin into mine, and everything, if only for a second, just feels right.

"Tell me everything." His intoxicating whisper dances into my ears, disarming my senses. "Tell me all that has happened to you since I left you at that horrible orphanage."

It is with these words that the past comes to life, scorching my consciousness with burning brands. The dark room. The loneliness. The arrogance.

The hopelessness.

"W-why?" I choke, swallowing deeply. My throat scratches, burning with thirst.

"Because just as much as you do... I want to understand."

And just like that, I begin the story. I start, and then the story takes hold of both me and my words. It twists and weaves, pulling out phrases like notes in a single melody. The melody is larger than me, larger than life, stretching over countless minutes and hours. Hours, minutes... who dares to try and measure at times like this? Time is of no substance here, for the emotions and feelings should not be restrained by such a factor.

There is a moment when the heart is raw, scrubbed bare of the layers that restrict it. It could last a second, it could last an eternity. And in that moment, whether you will it or not, anyone and everyone is able to view your innermost soul in all its innocence. There is no defense. The slightest movement can knock you to your knees, deal the final, crushing blow.

A single droplet lands on my forehead, dripping down my face and knocking me out of my stupor.

Wordlessly I lift a single finger to touch the water, and then bring it back to eye level.

"Mona, what is it?" A dark voice shocks me, and I jump nearly ten feet out of my skin. Griffin. I had forgotten that he was here with me.

"Oh! Oh, nothing. It's just—did you feel that?" I feel the walls building just as quickly as they fell; the shaking starts, the jumping nerves. How could I ever let myself crumble so easily?

"Feel what?" He looks at me, and then at the sky. His eyes are dark, scarily so, with his face clouded in some sort of depression. "I think there may be a small rain shower coming our way."

It hurts.

"No, no," I mutter, "well, yes. Rain. But that isn't what I'm talking about."

It pounds at my head, my sanity.

"Mona, please just tell me."

"It's the... the voices! Don't tell me you don't hear them." I try to close my ears, but it bursts through anyways, scaring me with its ferocity. "It is so loud."

"It's just us in here," Griffin tries to soothe me, "there are no voices besides yours and mine."

My eyesight blurs, but I can vaguely make out spheres of light bouncing around the well. They seem to be the source of the noise. Even more bizarre, the crushing noise I hear is of my own voice—spinning my story, my web of secrets—echoed back to me in the most chilling way possible.

He catches me as I collapse, my mind overwhelmed by the voices. "Mona, hang in there," he tries to comfort me. The voices only grow louder in intensity.

"I knew it," he mutters, "This is all my fault. I need to get her out of here, get here some food." I can barely hear him, but at the words my stomach clenches in pain. My throat yearns for liquid.

I can hear Griffin's shouts, though distant, ringing around the area. The droplets of water multiply, but I can barely feel them running down my skin, soaking my hair. It is really raining now—raining bullets of burning fire that are doubling by the second. The cold grows worse, but also numbing, slightly alleviating the ceaseless murmurs.

I gather the strength to look up, my eyes cleared up slightly. There they are again, the spheres of light barely larger than a dime but spellbinding in its brightness. The roar of the storm seems to add to my sanity, though the very fact that I am seeing such things takes away from it. When will things ever be normal? If Fate has determined to kill me, let it happen now so that all this can just be over. Nothing has been resolved, and Griffin has not fulfilled his side of the bargain, but nothing would make me happier than to have some shred of stability. Even if that stability is death.

And then the impossible happens.

"Griffin! It's... it's a Shifter! Right above our heads!" I scream, clutching at his arm. Although later the scream almost seems unwarranted, with the way it just peers over the edge of the well, silent and unmoving. Its beady eyes pulsate a dying red, devoid of ferocity or strength.

"I sense it," Griffin says in a low, throaty whisper. I do not look at him, scared to break my contact with the Shifter above. The Shifter has the power to kill us both, for we are trapped like goldfish in a bowl.

The wind blows more and fiercely, the rain falling almost to the point where one drop is imperceptible from the other, a continuous stream of water pouring from above. It soaks our clothing, our bodies, and the bottom of the well to the point where it feels like we will never be dry again.

My hand curls around an arrow, silver and with a point so sharp that it could split a hair. The accompanying bow starts to materialize by my side, slowed by the chills echoing in my body. It takes me a moment to remember that my left arm is broken, so that I would not be able to shoot the arrow anyways. I wonder if I would even have the strength, for in addition to my physical weakness, something in my heart keeps protesting at the use of such weapons. Something keeps telling me this isn't the answer.

It continues to stare at me, but something about its red eyes does not seem as threatening as it should. The feeling reminds me of when I encountered a Shifter resting against a tree not very long ago. It looks almost helpless, almost like the victim, especially when its eyes are not

burning with hate.

I watch in wonder as the small spheres of light start to rise, the voices growing louder but even still being drowned out by the rain. It is magical, the way it proceeds towards the Shifter. It is impossible not to wonder what the spheres are, and what the Shifter plans to do with it.

It is difficult to see, with the rain slapping my face, but I see the spheres hover before the Shifter. The Shifter shifts its attention to the spheres, and when its eyes move the spheres instantly move as well, as if gravitated to its gaze. Bewilderment is the only emotion crossing my mind as the spheres simply disappear, as if entering the Shifter through its eyes.

"Mona, are you okay?" Griffin asks with worry. "What are you staring at? What is it doing?"

I don't answer him for a minute, rubbing my eyes to smear away the rainwater. When I look back up, it's just the Shifter again. It is staring straight at me.

The eyes now are brighter, but not bright with the emotions I am so familiar with. They seem filled with sorrow and pain, the same feelings that the voices were expressing. Did... the Shifter just swallow my voice and feelings?

I wonder if this is a manifestation of my own insanity or the fact that I am seeing with more clarity than ever before.

"Look at the bottom of the well. If this rain doesn't stop soon, we might be..." Griffin's words snap me out of contact with the Shifter and I instantly realize the source of his worries.

"What are we going to do?" The water is at our knees, and quickly rising. It starts to swallow the bottom of our thin jackets, and I snap to my feet in response. The chills are even greater, swallowing me entirely.

Griffin stands up as well, his arms shaking almost as much as mine. I can see his knee about to give out, so I run over to support him. We are inches away, but his presence does not comfort me as much as it probably should.

"I will try to use one of my Spiers," I offer, a dagger starting to appear in my scratched hands. "We can use it to get out of here."

"Mona, the only person able to see your Spier is you," Griffin replies, "I wouldn't be able to use it. I think it doesn't work on physical objects anyway."

I mentally slap myself in the face as my hand reaches with the dagger to try and stab the walls. Of course, it doesn't work, my hand banging into the smooth bricks instead. "If only there was something to grab onto," I mutter, scanning the sides again and again for a ledge of some sort. For anything.

But of course, with our luck, we are being held prison in a very well-made well.

"Mona, I just want to tell you that I am sorry," He looks me right in the eye, his face bent with darkness and remorse.

"And I don't accept your apology," I reply absently, scanning the floor and the rapidly rising water. I spare a glance to the top of the well, where surprisingly the Shifter has disappeared, leaving us to die in its wake. I mean, it's not like I expected it to save us, but at the same time the fact that it just left without doing anything at all leaves me feeling rather empty inside. At least it could have tried to attack us, because then there would be something. Something besides this.

"You should. It would make me feel a lot better about our imminent deaths," Griffin mutters, to my amusement.

"Who said we were going to die?" I laugh through the cold. "You shouldn't be sorry, for none of this is your fault."

"But it is." He rubs his head in dismay. "From what you have just told me... if only I had realized before now..."

"Realized what?" I ask with concern. He looks really stressed out, and his attitude is bringing me back to reality as well. There isn't going to be a prince with his white horse who is going to magically save us. This will really be our last words.

"I never knew that-" A thunderclap erupts in the night, stinging our ears with its ferocity. We stop and look at each other, instantly alarmed.

"Lightning," I murmur breathlessly. Instantly a bright light floods our vision for less than a millisecond, as if to echo my observation. The water is up to our waists, and rising higher. It feels like I am in a swimming pool, with the walls so high that I cannot escape it. And this storm is only going to get worse.

"Griffin," I take his arm, "we must die laughing. So tell me a joke." I throw aside my lack of memories and questioning of our relationship.

Death experience? I laugh inwardly. It should be called the bonding experience. I feel like I've known Griffin now for an entire lifetime.

"What?" He seems confused, so I punch his shoulder in joviality.

"Tell me a joke! I want to hear one!" I urge him.

"But I'm the worst joke teller in this universe."

"No, I'm pretty sure I am. So you go first."

"Well, what happens if a wolf falls in the washing machine?"

"Uh, I have no clue."

"He becomes a wash and werewolf." He then makes a BA-DUM-CHA sound with his mouth and breaks out into a wide smile. He must know he made the worst joke ever known to mankind, otherwise he wouldn't be so proud.

Even though it's stupid, I find myself laughing anyway. Laughing until the tears fall, falling like the rainwater washing my face and arms. Crying until it is impossible to stop, impossible to forget about what's in store for us.

Griffin's soaking hands surround my body—while choking up with either tears or laughter himself—although he'd probably admit to neither. Laughing or crying, to me there is no difference at all. They both result from that small part of your heart that produces the deepest of your emotions, that makes you human and separates you from the animals. There is such magnificence and attraction in the manifestation of those feelings, but vulnerability accompanies its fragile beauty.

I embrace the beauty, reveling in it as the tears turn into diamonds before our eyes, rich with despair and utter hopelessness. As the diamonds splash into our own personal death capsule, it seems to make everything seem even more bleak, yet even more beautiful. I don't understand why, or even how.

The water is up to our waists, and the real panic intensifies to a whole new level. I am constantly shifting between giggling and bawling in a crazy way that probably shouldn't ever be tried at home.

"Griffin, I hope you know how to swim," I whisper genially, trying to rub my hand up and down his arm to generate warmth. Nothing happens, unfortunately.

"I'm sorry," he mumbles, "I don't know if I can with this leg. It's killing me."

"It... it was a joke, Griffin. Well, it would be good if you could, but—"

"Luckily for you two, I can," A deep, commanding voice erupts from above, shocking us out of our weird embrace. It takes me a second to gather myself, and then with a stony expression, I finally look up.

No. Freaking. Way.

Living in the Land of the Dead

This can't keep happening to me. My emotions are seriously getting out of whack.

I don't know how many times I've accepted my death in the last few months and somehow lived to see the next day. The first few times, I just thought it was luck. Ok, I'm saved, what a miracle.

But the reality is, I've soon come to realize, this stupid idiot is seriously the best guardian angel out there. His timing is impeccable too. He couldn't find us five minutes ago when we weren't practically swimming in our prison, when we weren't laughing and crying like idiots. No, he has to come dashing in on his white horse when I'm bracing myself to meet Satan. Or God. Or both.

"Nice of you to show up," I mutter underneath my breath, feeling more than a little bitter at both the timing of his appearance and the emotions flaring up within me.

"It is nice, isn't it?" Xavier's voice rings back, and I expressionlessly turn my head towards the water furiously climbing towards my nose, my cheeks hot. Thunder echoes throughout the land, reverberating within our death chamber with astounding ferocity.

"Any day now!" I yell in response, unable to veil the terror I am experiencing. I curse myself, the world, and everything. This would be the time to give a last-minute prayer, but I don't even know what to pray for.

"Mona!" Griffin looks at me, clearly concerned judging by the look in his eyes. An arm snakes around my waist, another reaching above the water to stroke my hair. "This will be the last..." He begins, staring me straight in the eyes with some fathomless expression I couldn't even begin to understand. The last of his words are drowned in the screams of the wind, and I start coughing as the water enters my mouth and even my nose.

I guess it doesn't matter if Xavier is here or not anymore.

"Xavier will save us," Griffin cooed, his voice close to my ear, but all I hear is the screams, the building up of emotions that consumes both me and this entire area. I can feel it—although it is really hard to describe using only words—a myriad of sensations acting as a gravitation, pulling anything and everything towards this one place. All I can think, and for almost no logical reason at all, is that they are *coming*.

Accompanying this is a sense of futility, and even...pointlessness. What am I here for? What is the purpose of my life, if I come this far to die now in one of the most anticlimactic way possible? I wish I could turn back time, to just before I knocked into Griffin, to just before I hit Danae in the head, to just before I brought these innocent people into my world.

I say *my world* because the death accompanying every leaf, every single breath of air in this wretched place mirrors my own heart, and soon, my body in its entirety. And I know I will never have the chance to get it back again.

"Mona!" A voice screams in the distance, getting farther and farther away as I sink into the abyss, not knowing what is coming next. Strangely, I feel better than I have in a long time. Not because of the dwindling hope of life, but of the worry and the confusion that is evaporating into thin air. I close my eyes.

"Mona!"

* * *

"What... what happened? Why am I alive?" I sputter and cough, water spilling onto the dark green grass. My body turns to the side as I start to choke. Two hands touch my body, holding me upright.

"It's alright. You are okay now." The hands wrap around my legs and back, and I feel a rush of air as I am lifted into the air. I try to see what is going on, but the rain pounding on my face and the difficulty with which I am taking my breaths prevents me from doing so.

Tears start slipping down my cheeks as sniffles accompany my chokes. "Why..." I gasp, again and again, as bright flashes of light persistently invade my vision.

"Mona, you didn't really think I'd let you go so easily, did you?"

At this, I force my eyes to open all the way, and the first thing I see is a lock of blue hair, glistening as the water dances down in waterfalls. Subconsciously, my hand reaches up to touch it, watching the way it shines in the light of the storm.

"We need to leave, guys," a different voice erupts, and my attention is shaken.

"...Ray?" I ask weakly. There he is—I can't really make out his face as he approaches, but there is no mistaking that voice. How in the world did he get here?

"Mona," he says in a low whisper, "look out and see if there are Shifters in the area. I can smell them...but this whole wretched place smells like them, so it is hard to judge."

"Ray, you're asking too much of her right now." The hands around me tighten. "I mean, look at her! We need to find shelter as soon as possible."

My attention shifts to the world around me, and goose bumps immediately appear on my arms. I can't help but shiver, which only leads Xavier to squeeze me closer to his chest. "Lean on me," he whispers, his voice almost spellbinding, "Don't worry about anything. I will keep you safe."

"Xavier," I look up, staring into his glowing eyes, "we are...surrounded." I watch as his eyes widen, distracted by the beauty of his pupils.

"Where are they?" he growls in an almost indiscernible murmur. Ray runs back to the group of people standing by the well; I can see Danae, Yi, and Griffin backed up against it.

I can't help—at least that is what I say to myself—but snuggle close to Xavier's broad chest as I respond. "Everywhere."

For they truly are, surrounding the clearing in incredible numbers. The scene is just as I pictured, and I think I know what they want.

"Let me down," I say quietly.

Xavier's eyes widen. "Never," he asserts firmly.

"Please," I respond in the same monotone.

"You'll run away." He squeezes his eyes shut, and his hands tighter.

I bring my hand to his face, gently tilting it towards my mouth. As if a spell has just been cast, I say something I never imagined would come out of me. Ever. "I'll never leave you again, so don't worry."

Xavier seems shocked, as I expected him to be, so I use this opportunity to slip out of his grasp and start walking towards the well. As I do so, I wonder how exactly I am going to address this, especially with the rain that refuses to let up and the weakness of my demeanor. At the same time, I try to ban these thoughts from my mind and try to just *feel* instead.

It is strange, really, because the Shifters are not moving at all, almost as if they are barred from entering the clearing. Or maybe...they are scared.

I face them all, water pouring down my nose and chin, imploring with resolve I didn't know I had. "Please," I say softly, but it soon becomes more than a word. It grows beyond that, beyond me and anything I could ever hope to accomplish. I can feel the desperation emanate off that single word,

observe the word fade away from the ear but grow in its delivery. And as I watch in amazement, everything seems to rise from the well.

I could see everything, every emotion collectively coming together to form a strange essence that kept rising higher and higher. It is shining bright to combat the darkness, a life that embraces the land of the dead.

A smile graces my lips as suddenly the collectiveness dissipates, almost flying at lightning speeds towards all edges of the clearings. I can see the Shifters getting visibly brighter, as if they themselves have received a breath of life. Very slowly they start to disappear, vanishing into the depths of the trees.

It is then that I wake up from the spell and collapse on the ground. There is a series of footsteps, and then warm hands lifting me from the ground. Another hand wipes the mud off my face. "What's wrong with her? Collapsing all the time, it's ridiculous," Yi snorts, and I realize he is the one touching me.

"I guess I'm just a light headed person." I open my eyes and stare at him with the most intimidating glare I can muster. His own eyes widen, and he backs away. The water washes the mud away, but I am still covered in dirt. "I'm sorry you have to carry me, Xavier."

"Why?" He asks, the hint of a smile on his features.

"I'm dirty."

"Do you really think I care?" His laugh echoes throughout the land.

"Well..." I hesitate, staring at his face. He's so... pretty when he laughs.

What am I thinking?

"Don't answer that," he says quickly, as if he is afraid of my response. "Are they gone now?"

"Yes, but we probably need to seek cover. This rain is not going to let up any time soon."

"What did you do to them?" A small voice asks, and I look down to see a small toddler. I can't prevent a smile from crossing my lips.

"I guess we can always tell time with Danae," I joke, sensing Xavier's eyes on me.

"I'm see-ri-us," she whines, making me laugh even harder. I never get used to seeing her this young.

"I'll explain later," I respond calmly. I don't even fully understand myself about this world or how to explain anything I have experienced so far.

"Are you... back to normal?" she asks quietly. I ponder the meaning of her question. Is there even a normal anymore? What does she mean by the word?

"About as normal I will ever be, I guess."

"That's great." She smiles, and I am blinded by flashing teeth. I start to feel uncomfortable looking at her optimistic face.

"We should probably get going," I turn away to talk to Xavier, "You can put me down now."

"No," he smiles mischievously, making my heart flutter incomprehensibly. Sometimes I just can't understand myself.

"Um, really, it's okay. I can walk."

"Let me take care of you, Mona. You can't fool me again." I stare at his chest as he starts running, the others probably following right behind him. Feelings are coursing through me, confusing me to no end. Why do I feel like I want to touch him? Why do I even care at all?

It is as if I can't reign myself in any longer. I imagine stroking his neck, unable to look away from his face as he stares ahead. This lack of control throws me off guard, and it seems to only happen when I am around him.

This may be something I just need to get out of my system. Regardless of how I got this strange desire, maybe some indulgence would satisfy me quickly and end this desire once and for all.

That's it. He affects me just because I'm attracted to him. There isn't any real feeling involved, besides this burning need I'm experiencing.

I loosen up, leaning my head against his chest, nuzzled against his body. I'm going to ride this one out, and only afterwards will I take my prescribed dose before leaving them. And this time, I am never coming back.

I can't help but feel as if I am lying to myself, but soon become lost in the thoughts of the future.

"Mona," Xavier's low whisper dances to my ears.

"No... five more minutes," I stretch my arms out with my eyes still closed, grabbing something and squeezing really hard. "I'm comfortable here."

"Mona, you're choking me." My eyes snap open, and I quickly loosen my grip on his neck. Xavier seems amused, causing a blush to spread across my cheeks. My mouth opens and closes, almost like a goldfish. Mentally I scold myself for not coming up with a suitable response.

"You're so cute," Xavier smiles, and then slowly brings me to the ground. I suddenly notice that the rain is not pounding on me anymore, and the ground isn't wet, either.

"Where are we?" I choke. My stomach growls as I survey my surroundings. Is this...

"It's an alcove in the side of a mountain," he looks up and away from me, "it's small, but it'll do." He lights a flashlight and sets it in the corner.

"Where are the others?"

"There are series of caves and little alcoves in the mountains around us, and since none was big for all of us to sleep in together, we split up. The others are staying in a slightly bigger one a couple of miles away." He smiles, and then digs around in his backpack. I watch his strong fingers as he pulls out a very strange-looking object. It is covered in sharp thorns and is about the size of a pear. "You must be hungry," he smiles, giving it to me.

"Um, thanks." I say quietly, surveying the fruit cautiously. "How do I eat it?"

"Oh," he laughs, "I forgot that you wouldn't know how to." His long eyelashes suddenly flutter beside my eyes as his face grows close to mine. "You grab the top of the fruit, this stem, and one of these long thorns, pulling them away from each other as hard as you can." His biceps are strained as he rips apart the fruit's shell, leaving some blue thing in the middle of it.

"Are you even listening to me?" Turning to me exasperatedly after a few seconds of no response, he looks at me with concern. I watch the contours of his face—how his expression morphs from one to the other and how every movement just seems so tantalizing.

"I'm hungry..." I stare at him, almost as if in a trance, reaching one hand out towards his face. It is then that I suddenly realize what I am doing and pull back. *There is no need to act like a freak, Mona. That is not how you seduce someone... even if you wanted to.*

My hand suddenly turns and reaches for the blue object instead. As if to wash away my embarrassment, I stuff it in my mouth all at once, measuring the flavor of the fruit. It is unbearably tangy, leading me to almost spit it out all at once.

"Mona, what's wrong with you?" Xavier leans in, his arms wrapping around my body to support me from almost falling over.

"I'm... sorry," I apologize, taking one agonizing swallow. It makes me shudder, burning all the way to my stomach.

"It's these clothes," Xavier mutters, touching the wet fabric of my shirt. "That's what's wrong." He rummaged within his small backpack, looking for something.

He's right that my clothes are soaked, but that isn't the problem at all.

"I have a few extra t-shirts," he pulls out some clothing and lays it on the ground. "I'll build a fire, and you change."

"Change?" Subconsciously I back against the stone wall, my expression of alarm. "Here?" There is no secluded section of this little alcove, with not much between the inward walls and the pouring rain.

"Would you rather do it outside?" He stares at me piercingly, a smirk on the edge of his lips.

"Uh...uh..."

"Well, get to it. I won't look." He turns and looks in his backpack again, swearing as he does so. "If only I had my knapsack..."

I reach over and grab a large t shirt, and then scamper to the wall. "Face the other way," I squeak as he suddenly turns to gather some dry sticks from the alcove. He looks at me in amusement.

"Okay, if you insist." Smiling, he slowly turns to face the rain. I can almost sense the laughter emanating from his being, laughter that almost sends steam out of my ears. *Calm down, Mona. It's okay.*

I quickly undress, probably faster than I ever have in my entire life. My undergarments are soaked too, so I remove them as well and put on the huge t shirt. It swallows me up, but it isn't very thick. It's dry though, which is a huge plus.

Xavier turns around without waiting for me to say so, and his first glance is at the clothes I left on the floor. "Hey!" I exclaim indignantly, but he wordlessly crosses over and takes my wet garments without even looking at me.

"Everything, huh..." he murmurs, and then starts to laugh inexplicably. Sitting down by his little pile of sticks, he casts his first glance at me with that same smile on his face. "My clothes look good on you."

I blush, turning beet red as I gesture to him wildly. "What about you? Your clothes are wet!"

His smile grows even wider. I'm sick of seeing it in some ways, and in others intrigued by how far it could possibly stretch.

"I suppose it is my turn." He stands up, and almost simultaneously pulls his shirt over his head. My breath sucks in at the sight of his upper body, and I am unable to look away no matter how hard I try. He casts a glance over to me, and winks.

I can't stand it. These feelings of...lust that are turning me into a mere animal. A beast, even.

He turns away and starts rubbing two large sticks together furiously. It takes only seconds before sparks fly and the fire is built. The clothes are laid out close to the fire, since there is no way to hang it from above.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" I ask, my voice unusually high. At this, he faces me again, smiling like a devil.

"I figured we could use the rest of the shirts as blankets. It's a little chilly out here, is it not?"

At his words I shiver unintentionally, and he extends one finger towards me. "Come closer," he says in a tantalizing manner. As if frozen, I just stare at him. "I have food." He obviously can sense my hesitation.

For some reason, the only thing on my mind is him, no matter how much I wish otherwise. The sight of his strong muscles is embedded in my thoughts, barring me from basic actions such as...sitting. Or talking.

Chills run down my back.

He sighs, and pulls another small fruit from his bag. "Don't make me come and get you." Pulling the fruit's shell, he waves the treat towards my face.

Almost robotically, I walk over to his side and slide onto the floor. "Good girl," he smiles, patting my head. My hand automatically raises to knock his hand off, but the warm feeling that accompanies his gesture causes it to stop right before doing so.

He starts laughing again. Why is this crazy kid in such a good mood? I've never seen someone laugh so much in such a short amount of time. "What's up? You've decided to be nice to me today?" he teases, flicking my forehead with his finger. It stings really badly, and I give him the worst glare I can come up with.

"That wasn't the plan," I mutter, reaching for the fruit as my stomach emits a particularly embarrassing growl that echoes within the cave. My expression twists into anger as he pulls his arm out of my reach.

"Let me feed you," he says quietly, splitting the fruit with his hands. It looks almost like an orange, with the way he could separate it easily into sections. I try to ignore my own face, which has betrayed me by turning beet red once more.

"Where did you get this stuff?" I asked while scooting against the wall. He mirrors my action while holding the luscious treat. I can't take his gaze—it's honestly the scariest and most intriguing thing I have ever experienced.

I really just want to go jump back into that well. Anything is better than this humiliation.

"We found several bushes scattered across the forest, all with different types of fruit growing. At first, we thought they were all dead, but it was just the abnormal shape of the fruit that threw us off. But hey, don't try and distract me." He leans in, our thighs almost touching. "Open your mouth." The fruit dangles in front of my nose.

"You're insane if you think I'm gonna...Oomph!" I suddenly can't speak as Xavier shoves a piece into my mouth. The tangy flavor sends shudders throughout my body.

"Now, that wasn't that hard, was it?" He keeps grinning, watching my expressions. "I just love teasing you."

"I hate you," I snap at him after I hurriedly swallow it.

"You're so cute," he responds genially, rubbing his hand through my hair and traveling downwards to trace the back of my neck. "Even if you don't know it yet, you're mine." His low, throaty whispers send goose bumps down my arms. I don't understand why my body seems to be telling me again and again that he isn't lying.

"N-never," I stutter, leaning even farther away. When I look back, I see him completely turned away, looking in his backpack once again. Confusion enters me as a strange feeling of unsatisfaction clouds my thoughts. "I don't even know why you t-think t-that." I stand up roughly, planning on escaping while I still can.

"You said it yourself." He comes up with his best imitative voice. "I'll never leave you again!" he copies me, over exaggerating my diction.

"It was the only way I could get you to let me down." I shrug, trying to hide my shakiness. My face is a seemingly permanent shade of red.

"Doesn't matter if you meant it, I'm taking it for what it is." He suddenly whips out a thin rope and before I can blink he grabs my ankle. My eyebrows knit in fury, the blood rushing to my head.

"What. Are. You. Doing?!" I growl menacingly, trying to step away. His hold is too strong, however, and now not only do I feel like an idiot, but I also feel like a dog.

"I don't care if you lost your memories, I don't care how you feel about me or Griffin," he declares grandly, all the while focused on my ankle. "I'm taking you for myself."

"I'm not something to be owned," I snap, jerking my ankle as hard as I can. It does no good, his vise-like grip restrictive in the worst way possible.

"Keep still, Mona," he commands, his voice strict and authoritative. I find myself unable to defy him when his words have such an imposing timbre. This hold he has on me—horrific on so many levels—seems to be all-encompassing and absolute. I wonder how this has happened to me, and whether these lost memories hold the key to the madness.

A scratchy material rubs against my feet as Xavier's hands suddenly start to fly with immeasurable rapidity and finesse. Unconcerned, I stare

into the depths of the golden flames, drawing back in surprise as Xavier's eyes peer back from the midst of the burning embers.

In alarm, I glance at Xavier, who is at my feet, doing something I can't see due to his big blue head blocking the way. I must be crazy, just seeing things I shouldn't even be thinking about.

My gaze snaps back up to the fire, and this time I don't see anything. A visible sigh of relief leaves my body as I lean heavily against the wall. It's alright. I'm just crazy.

"What's wrong?" Xavier asks calmly as he puts the finishing touches on whatever he's doing to my ankle. I peer down at my feet and see his elaborate knot by which he tied the two of our legs together.

"Really, Xavier? Really?"

"It's the only way to show you I'm serious. And I don't want you to be getting any silly ideas." He defends himself with more grace than I expected, and then grabs my ankle with sudden ferocity. I find myself losing my balance, about to topple from where I am standing. My t shirt almost starts ballooning out, so I grab the ends furiously with my hands. Xavier's arm touches my back, stabilizing me easily. "I'm sorry, did I catch you off guard?" He asks lazily, smiling at me brightly and then returning his attention to my foot.

"It's your freakin' fault I almost fell! I couldn't stabilize myself normally because, I don't know, my foot was tied up?!" I could feel the rage building, as if waiting for the imminent explosion. Everything was frustrating me; our situation, my strange fascination, and feelings that should never, ever resurface.

He says nothing in response, and if I didn't know better, I'd think he didn't hear me. But that isn't possible.

The flashlight flickers and diminishes slowly in intensity. Soon it is only the glow of the small fire, which itself is dwindling due to the blowing rain, that illuminates the small alcove.

"I wonder when the sun will come up," I say wonderingly, staring into the formless, cloudy void that is our night. Right now the low fog seems almost immeasurable, stretching across miles and miles of the visible skyline. What is this place? If it is a spirit world of some kind, how are we even going to survive here? This land is depleted, either naturally or otherwise, of the basic resources we need to keep going.

Xavier murmurs something, his words so unintelligible that even I can't understand him. "Speak up," I prod, looking down at him awkwardly. Chills race up and down my legs as he started tracing his finger across my ankle.

"I don't want to repeat myself." I try my best not to be distracted by the constant movement of his fingertips, spinning an intricate web with each and every touch. Somehow both irked and enraptured, I'm frozen in place as he explores the contours of my ankle and calf.

"You are my sun," he says quietly, his face still turned downwards. Is that... a little red on his cheeks? "I'm lost without you."

I am crushed with desire as his long fingers trail higher, around my kneecap and lower thigh. Slowly I lower myself to the ground, unable to maintain my awkward position any longer. My fists clench at my side, and I cautiously push on the wall as I try not to trip over the rope. It is pretty long, but not long enough so that I can move properly.

His hands leave my moving feet and snaked around my waist, pulling me down with more speed than intended. I land with a definitive thud, though strangely unhurt. Looking around, I realize that I am captured within his arms, with no way out.

"Let me go," I say nervously, trying to prevent my blushing cheeks from getting even brighter in color. My thoughts naturally wandered to the strength of his arms, and the warmth that emanates from his torso. The safety I feel in his arms both ease and disconcert me.

The only thing I can hear is Xavier's low, curiously heavy breathing as his sinewy arms squeeze almost all the life out of my body. "You should... finish eating," he whispers softly. "I think you need some rest."

As soon as he says this, I realize just how tired I really am. "I'm not really all that hungry," I say cautiously, all the while peering at the rest of the blue fruit on his knapsack. "I'll just sleep now."

"You have to get your nutrition, Mona," Xavier insists, reaching for the fruit and handing it to me. "Here, we have only a few hours of sleep. "I'd like to feed you some more, but your droopy eyes tell me that you need to get to sleep as fast as you can."

"As if I'd even let you feed me after how rude you've been," I mutter as I grab the fruit, swallowing it almost immediately.

"That's not a way to treat your savior," he teases, making my blood boil. I try to escape once more, shifting my body so that my feet pressed against the floor. "Whoa, did I tell you that you could get up?" He asks, pulling me towards him with irresistible force.

"Xavier!" I can feel myself melting, and this realization frightens me more than anything else. "You said I could get some sleep!"

"Well, I guess so. But I didn't approve your moving, so there is really no helping it. I may have to keep you a minute longer." He shows no signs of giving in.

"What's the point of this?"

"No reason at all. Just my selfish desire..." I turn and see his face, his eyes squeezing shut. "I just want to believe."

"Believe what?" I ask, half-mesmerized by the closeness of his facial features and his abnormally long eyelashes. As he opens his eyes again, I am lost in the sweet meadows of his eyes, with no hope of regaining my sanity.

He doesn't answer me, staring outside solemnly. I turn back around, leaning into his embrace. We sit in silence, observing the gradual decrease in thunder as the storm travels farther and farther away. Even though I am in one of the strangest circumstances I have ever experienced in my lifetime, I don't feel very nervous or scared any more.

"Let's rest," Xavier finally says, and gently releases his hold on me. A strange sense of loss swells in my chest.

He quickly grabs the t shirts and lays them upon me. "Use this as a pillow." The knapsack is shoved into my arms. Within seconds, I'm officially ready for bed.

"Okay, before we go to sleep," he says slowly, "solemnly swear that you are not going to try to murder me in my sleep and run away."

I stare at him unblinkingly in response. That's probably the most viable option for me if I plan to get out of all this mess. But something tells me that not only do I not have the means to do so, I also couldn't bring myself to kill him no matter how hard I tried.

He watches my unblinking face, and then grumbles to himself as he slides to the hard ground. His back is facing me, yet his hair is close enough to touch.

Close enough to touch.

In fright I turn away from the tempting hair, lying with my back to the ground. There is a sudden crackle from the corner of the cave as the flashlight flickers to its death.

Now that it is just us, the dying fire, and the total darkness, I feel alone on the cold floor, shivering in the ferocity of the wind. My eyes slip to a close, but all I can feel is restlessness, keeping me from staying still and focusing on what's important. Which is sleeping. Of course.

As I stare at the ceiling, a pair of jeweled emeralds appear before me. They float, following ever move I make. This may be the scariest thing I have ever seen in my life, and not simply because of the suddenness of its appearance.

The jewels morph, frighteningly transforming into a set of hypnotizing eyes. Oh crap. No. I can't take this. Not him again.

I twist and turn, as if trying to hide from this horrifying reality. It stares me in the face—quite literally—and I can't help but feel uncomfortable and

even nauseated about this. What I truly can't understand is why I don't... why I *can't* hate this big loaf sleeping next to me.

There's something different about him; something I cannot place but also cannot ignore. His mere presence has caused a strange sickness to take over my body, huge quantities of irreversible damage inflicted as a result. I have lost my mental health and good judgment; all because of a stupid boy.

I ponder my plausible cure for the illness that plagues me. If I can only indulge in these illegal desires, fulfillment will lead to a permanent release from the curse. I have no reasoning for this, no logical evidence that this will be the case. But I need to free myself from these chains, no matter the cost.

But it's better to show restraint. Maybe training myself to ignore these animalistic impulses will help more than giving in to this emotional nonsense. I always thought I had a better-than-average control over my impulses—well, at least until I entered this new world.

I cast a tentative glance at his broad back, my eyes sweeping over the golden expanse of smooth, flawless skin. It's just... a physical fascination. Magnetizing attraction that pulls me in with such force that it is absolutely impossible to deny.

I can't.

I tilt my body to the side, biting my lip. I can taste the bitterness of blood.

I can't.

My eyes squeeze shut as I beg myself to not sink this low. *Don't do it, Mona. Be stronger.*

But... I really want to.

What the heck. Might as well try Plan A before sticking to Plan B.

Before I can stop myself, my finger lashes out and brushes the top of his shoulder. There is a rustling as Xavier shifts his body to face me. I could tell he wasn't sleeping because of the quickness of his movements without any hesitation. His face is slightly contorted for some reason, from what I can make out.

"What is it, Mona?" He whispers, and that alone is enough to set me on edge. I gape at him, my mind wiped clean as a slate. I didn't really plan out what I was supposed to do after I finally touched him. How do I properly seduce a man? For once, I wished I had some form of experience and wasn't an antisocial freak.

He brushes my hair away from my face in one sweeping motion. "Do you have something you need?" My brain, as if jumpstarted by his words, kicks not only back into action, but into overdrive.

"You," I whisper, staring into his eyes. It is as if the logical part of my brain has taken the backseat, watching the events unfold with a mixture of amusement and horror.

"What?" His eyes widen, and his dwindling hand jerks back into the air. I catch his hand in my own, feeling like a completely different person and scolding myself for my audacity.

"I don't know why," I whisper, feeling the warmth of his hand, hoping my endeavors aren't a little over the top. "But I want you, Xavier."

I grabbed his shoulder and jerked myself towards him, as if afraid of his imminent answer. The first thing I capture is his lips, moving so naturally it feels like déjà vu. Why is it that I feel like this has happened before?

I taste his lips, the salty sweet warmth spreading throughout my body in ways that are so familiar, yet so new, exciting, and intoxicating. I am drowning in the mind-numbing sensations I am feeling, greedy for more and more of this guilty pleasure. Suspended in time, I can't help the wants from flowing, the desires from taking control over my body. There's no stopping it now. I smile inwardly as I realize I just embarked on the pathway to my doom.

And then he began to *respond*.

His hands touch my shoulders gently, but the intensity of the kiss magnifies several times over. I can taste the tangy flavor of the blue fruit as his tongue enters my mouth, amplifying the sensations coursing through my mind and soul. I never want this moment to end. If I'm an alcoholic, this man must be the best tasting wine in the whole world. Which probably, now that we are here, isn't saying too much.

I admire my obnoxious ability to crack stupid jokes to myself in the middle of the most intriguing, frightening, and invigorating instant of my life.

After what seems like only seconds, but in fact stretched much further than that, my hand subconsciously reaches out to grasp at his chest. As if I had suddenly stepped on a landmine, everything just suddenly stops.

Aware that my lips were now touching a statue, I withdraw and look him in the eye questioningly. A fathomless expression is decorating his handsome features, his eyes cloudy. He doesn't return my gaze, but quickly turns on his side after scooting away from me. I can sense his heavy breathing, but all I feel is confusion and the pain of his rejection.

What just happened?

I quietly laid my head against the knapsack, moving as slowly as possible, struck by the events that had just occurred. My eyes close, but the true darkness does nothing to ease this burning pain. I can't think, nor can I hardly move or feel, blinded by the utter defeat I had just experienced. Not only was I absolutely humiliated, but more importantly, this sweet taste has left me starving.

Starving for what can now be comfortably called my greatest and most pitiable weakness.

Short Nights, Endless Days ∞

My eyes open quickly, and I survey my surroundings. The t-shirts from the night before are scattered across the cave, the fire only consisting of cold ashes. From what I can tell, the sky is still full of low-lying fog and heavy mist, the rain having retreated far into the horizon. I can't really see the sun, if there even is one in this world, but only the gray darkness.

With grace that I didn't know I had, I slowly edge to my feet and pad over to the mass of clothes to my side, careful to not jerk the rope binding my ankle. Chills take hold of my body, and I shiver as the wind brushes against my neck. My clothes still feel pretty wet, though not quite as soaked as last night. I pick up my long, flowing shirt and ring it out, getting rid of the excess water, and tie it around my waist as a makeshift skirt. There is no way I am putting those soaked pants on, especially with this stupid rope to mess things up.

Xavier shifts in his sleep, scaring me as I hear the disruption in his breathing. I beg him inwardly to not wake up. Preferably, never. I don't want to have to face him ever again.

My hands still burn from the shame of last night, and I don't want to have to think about that event, or even him. Everything is all too firmly embedded in my thoughts, displayed in crystal clear definition in my mind. I would do anything to get a delete button in my mind, to wipe these away from my brain forever. Anything to get rid of that burning kiss.

I want to say I've forgotten it already. And maybe if I just want it enough...

His breathing steadies, causing me to sigh in relief. The next question that comes to my mind is how to get out of my current situation. Being tied to this guy makes me sick and I can't deal with it any longer.

I scan the room, and my gaze lands on my makeshift pillow right next to Xavier's head. A lightbulb goes off in my head as I remember Xavier shuffling through the knapsack last night. Surely there has to be some sort of knife or sharp object in that mystery bag of his.

But it's so close to him, I don't know if I can get it without waking him up. Is that a risk I really want to take?

I lean against the wall, feeling both the swirling mist and the aches in my stomach. If nothing else, I will at least get a good breakfast out of this challenge...either of the rope I'll end up chewing off or that weird fruit in his backpack.

It is really strange how I end up losing all my newfound poise at the prospect of seeing his stupid green eyes again. Practically stumbling over to his side, I lean against the wall to avoid tripping over the rope. A sudden, intense drumming erupts in the cave, reverberating around the walls. It takes me a moment to look down and realize that the unnerving sound is coming from my own chest.

There's no way he can't hear this thunderous, embarrassing heartbeat. I crouch down and survey his back, watching initially for his breathing and then inevitably falling into a trance over his sparkling blue hair. I don't understand how this idiot can have such glossy, shiny hair when it's so dark in here that I can barely make out anything. We haven't even bathed yet, so how his hair doesn't look oily is just beyond me. Speaking of bathing...

I sniff my underarms, scrunching my nose in disgust as the slight odor is magnified through my overly sensitive nose. A good, long bath should be at the top of my to-do list.

I almost forget why I am even by his side, but a quick kick to the head—mentally—knocks me out of my daze. Knife. I need something sharp, and something tasty.

Turning away from him, I get on my knees to shuffle through the knapsack. The first thing I see is a wallet, accompanied by sunglasses, disgusting socks, and a dingy blanket. A lot of junk—playing cards, pens, and a clean brush. I stare at the brush for a minute, and then take it in my hand. I might use this.

A tiny fruit sits at the bottom of all the mess, and I snatch it greedily. I try to justify taking it to myself, blinded by hunger. It's not stealing, it's just borrowing. Without the giving back part.

Disappointingly, I don't see anything that could possibly break these bonds. There's some nail clippers, but they look like the baby version or something. They don't look like they could cut any decently sized nails, much less ropes.

A muffled scream escapes me as an arm swings over my shoulders, pulling me down to the floor. My legs become tangled with the ropes and Xavier's legs, and I feel a pulsating warmth coming from his body. My eyes are covered by his hand, and I am tugged against his chest. I am still in a state of shock at this point.

The terrifying sound of his breathing as it permeates my ear jerks me into high gear, and I push him away with all my strength. To my surprise, his head snaps back and his grip loosens, allowing me to crawl as far as I can manage away from him. I cast a glance at him, and am shocked to see his eyes slowly opening and blinking furiously in the process. If I didn't know better, I'd think he was just now waking up.

"Why'd you kick me...?" He asks while rubbing his eyes, and my fears are confirmed.

I don't answer him, focusing on the rope. Placing my hands on it, I forcefully pull it in two directions. I can see the rope start to give underneath the pressure.

I can feel him watching me as I rip it apart while marveling at how easy it was to do so. If I had just done that earlier, I wouldn't have had to worry about getting into his knapsack.

"Mona, what are you doing?" His voice is low, tinged with drowsiness.

I turn away while prying my half of the rope off my foot. I don't want to talk to him. Or listen to him.

"Mona..." I can sense him coming closer, and edge against the wall. The rope splits at my ankle, falling on the floor. At my current location in the alcove, there is no escape, no place for me to hide.

"Mona." He repeats himself, his arms suddenly on my shoulders. All the strength is sucked out of my body as he whirls me around. "Look at me." One of his hands cups my chin and lifts it so I am forced to meet his eyes.

As I look at him, hoping to keep calm and collected, my face grows red in a betraying manifestation of the turmoil stirring inside my body. His green eyes bore into my soul, and I imagine my appearance in response resembles a deer caught in the headlights. All I can think is that I need to *get out*. Get out... before I lose myself.

"What's going on?" His hand travels from my chin to my cheek, brushing down towards my neck.

The action reminds me of last night, and I jerk away with sudden ferocity. "Nothing," I mutter, looking at the ground. "Nothing is going on."

He opens his mouth to speak, but I throw the fruit in my hand at his face before he can say anything. "Just stop."

Instantly regretting the action after a brief recognition of the pain in Xavier's features, I whirl around to face the outdoors and immediately start running. My stomach roars with need, but I am unwilling to turn and retrieve the fruit. If I turn back, I could lose everything in that stare of his. I could feel that same, indescribable desire that drives me insane.

Somehow I just know that something about him is different. Different from the rest of my harassers in this forlorn world, different from my past recollections and present emotions. It's a hard thing for me to describe, quite honestly, because I can't even begin to understand it myself. In this

case, the word "different" must take on a myriad of implications and interpretations to reflect the chaos erupting within my own heart. I feel hatred, yet I feel an undeniable attraction. I want to slap his face and stroke his cheek. But for the other people I have encountered here...nothing fazes me.

I think what I am so afraid of may be the intensity of my feelings. Regardless of what they are, they exist, and they are presented in a way that is near impossible to ignore. There is strange beauty in this new revelation—that I can feel, and do so strongly—but also great terror as I witness the control it holds over my body. I almost...want to be subjected to the pretty boy's reign of terror. It gives me shivers to imagine sleeping next to him again, to see his smooth skin and irritating, perfect face. Which is exactly why I must escape, and do it quickly.

I must keep all of this shame and emotion locked within my body, because what I truly need is strength, not weakness, in such an empty land. Weakness invites trouble, and I can't take any more of that, especially if it comes in the form of a blue-haired werewolf.

The biggest problem here is that it just seems like I can't escape, no matter how hard I try.

Large hands wrap around my waist, and I lose my balance, falling towards the rough ground. I am immediately enveloped in an embrace, the warmth spreading throughout my entire body. Everything happening in an instant, the only thing I truly notice is the sickly sweet aroma surrounding me, almost pungent in strength.

And then it's over, and strangely I feel none of the impact of the collision. My personal pillow, whether he or she meant to be one or not, has saved me. But he or she also provoked me to trip anyways, so I don't feel sorry at all.

The familiarity in my savior's gesture reminds me of Xavier, as well as the feel of his hands on the small of my back. I look up, fully expecting to see his face, but nearly jump ten feet away in the surprise that Ray is in front of me instead.

"Wha...what..."My voice cracks and stumbles, coming out in an embarrassing stutter.

"Nice to see you again,"he comments, a smirk on the corner of his features. "So, you survived the night with the monster?"His eyes crinkle as he laughs, twisting around as he does so. Now I am on the ground, with him on his hands and knees above me.

"Barely,"I mutter, scrambling to my knees and away from Ray, who is casually standing up and grinning annoyingly at the same time. When he smiles like this, he almost looks like his brother...and it just makes me want to keep running.

"Where are you going?"he asks as he sees me backing away, trying to be conspicuous but obviously not enough to fool him. "The group's in that direction."He points to the west, which is definitely not where I am headed.

"Uh, I wanted to head down to the river and take a bath."I make my excuse quickly, and his eyes narrow in response.

"There is no river around here. There's a pond, where the group is."He smiles, but in a slightly more menacing way that chills me to the bone. "So why don't you follow me over there and we can grab some food. You must be hungry."

My stomach grumbles, making me wince. Maybe it would be better to stick with the group, as long as I can somehow prevent myself from seeing him. If not anything else, I could still grab a bite to eat from wherever they're getting it.

He reaches out and grabs my arm, his grip like iron. It is then that I hear the crackling of branches and the pounding of feet. I start to squirm in Ray's hold, fear taking hold of my heart.

"Mona?"A frenzied call echoes throughout the forest as Xavier races into the clearing, his breathing heavy and erratic. His eyes first land on me, and then slide down to our linked arms. He then surveys Ray, probably trying to put everything together. His face clouds over, and his eyes return to meet my own. I instantly look away, blushing furiously and cursing myself for doing it. "Were you..."

"Bringing her back to camp? Yes."Ray jumps in, supposedly saving Xavier from making false assumptions. Although I don't know why I even care if he makes them or not. "She was looking for a bath and I was trying to help her get to the pond near here."

"Oh..."Xavier blushes, looking downwards and then up towards me, "so that's why..."

I guess this is better than nothing. It would be bothersome if he thought Ray and I were doing anything.

I slap myself mentally and once again...wonder why I care.

We start walking in complete silence, the awkwardness stretching between us. I don't look at the others, staring straight ahead and trying to wipe my mind of all stupid thoughts. There are many swirling around in my head, seeking to distract me from the matter at hand.

What now? I don't have many options, and Ray has just eliminated the stupidest one of them. Running away is just not a possibility when my companions are so much stronger than I am. And it also seems like running doesn't bring me farther away from my problems in this world, but only draws me closer to them.

"Ray, why did you know where I was?"I ask him in a clipped tone, my feet crunching on the dead grass. I try to keep my voice unwavering, betraying none of the uncertainty within me. "If the camp is way over there, then..."

"Oh, I was just trying to find some more fruit. It seems like these plants only grow near water, though, so I found nothing. Well, except for you."Ray walks a little faster to match my pace, and I can see the amusement in his eyes as he regards the two of us. I want to change my stiff expression, for I know he is going to think that something has happened, but somehow I just can't make myself look indifferent. "Had an argument, huh?"He asks teasingly, just as I guessed he would.

I sneak a glance over to the side, watching Xavier's expression in response to Ray's words. He looks confused, his face tilted in embarrassment. I feel a little guilty for a moment, and then snap out of my contemplative stupor. It seems like I'm doing that a lot around him lately, and I don't like it.

My footsteps quicken as I hear growing voices from the clearing. Ray dances in front of me, speeding up even more, and twists around so that he is not even looking where he is going but is staring back at the two of us. A mocking grin is on his features, annoying me to no end. "Aren't you two going to kiss and make up before we reach the others? Can't have any hostility in the camp."He teasingly twists his hands into the shape of a heart and makes a kissing noise with his lips. My hands clench in anger.

"Mona..."Xavier's low voice murmurs cautiously beside me as a spirit spear begins to materialize in my hand. "What are you doing?"

I take deep breaths as I look downwards, surprised at the weapon I had created. The sharp edges slowly dissipate into fine particles, blown away by the wisps of the wind as I concentrate on controlling my anger.

That's really weird. Usually my spear doesn't appear unless I'm at least focused on it. I wonder if the decreasing lack of control I am having over my fury has anything to do with it.

When I look up, eyes wide, I see Ray's own eyes locked onto my clenched palm with an unfamiliar expression on his face. I can't quite decipher his emotions from that one expression, and I usually pride myself on my ability to do so.

"Are you okay, Mona?"Xavier asks me gently, his hand touching my arm. He has gotten so much closer over the last few seconds, sending my brain into an emotional overload.

"I'm fine. Sorry. I don't know what came over me,"I say quietly, causing him to step back at the iron laced within my response. I am determined to treat him normally, like any other person. I will not trifle with silly emotions I am not destined to feel.

I look up—my mistake—to see a pair of eyes, glittering with golden flecks within a green meadow that continues endlessly throughout the horizon. They are as dark as the night, yet shine with the brightness of a perfectly cut jewel. They push you away, almost forbidding in their

abnormally, yet somehow you get tugged towards them pulled by the mysteries of their vast depths.

I lose the lucidity of free thought for a few seconds, and then furiously snap my face away. My cheeks burning in embarrassment, I try to shut out all noises, all of Ray's stupid reactions, and most importantly, Xavier.

I walk through the bushes quickly to reach the clearing, leaving the rest behind, and at the center is a decently sized pond. I almost scream as a figure starts to get out of the pond, heading for his clothes on the rock.

I feel people around me as I instantly twist around and put my hands over my head. "What's wrong, Mona?" Ray whispers close to my ear, completely back to normal.

"M-m-man..." I stammer. "N-naked..." My eyes still stay tightly shut.

"Oh." Ray sounds nonchalant. "Haven't you ever seen a naked man before?"

"Ray... shut up," I whine, "tell me when he has clothes on." There is something about this awareness that shouldn't faze me, but it does anyways. I don't get why I'm so adverse to things that are so silly and reflect my innocence.

"Yi!" He shouts, "Put your clothes on!" There is silence for a moment, and then I feel a rough tapping on my head. "He's done, princess."

"Don't call me princess." I punch him in the arm after raising my head, scowling at the smirk on his face. He grabs my arm, bringing it through his own with such force that I can hardly resist.

"Let me escort you, princess," He says, unperturbed. His eyes are scanning the area, but then return to mine as quickly as they left. "Mona, I'm teasing." Ray's tone seems slightly more apologetic now, though still twisted with laughter. "Don't be offended."

I want to smack him so badly on his pompous, arrogant face.

We start walking towards the pond, I furiously tugging on my captured hand, he grinning smugly as if the expression has been plastered onto his features. He keeps my hand securely locked within his hold, and I am unable to do anything against him. I look behind me, and Xavier is meandering a few paces behind me. He is looking down, but with my glance his gaze travels upwards to meet mine again. A strange panic floods over me and I quickly turn to face Ray. A strange, incomprehensible look was on Xavier's face, and for some reason the expression made me feel undeniably guilty.

"Sorry, Mona. I wasn't thinking," Yi calls, now wearing torn and dirty pants. He uses his t-shirt to dry off his body. I try not to look at his glistening skin.

"No problem," I mumble, feeling embarrassed. I don't even know where to look anymore, and my eyes roam across the clearing. A small area catches my eye, and I see the tiny fruits peppered among several bushes near the water. "Is that where you guys got the fruit?" I ask, distracted by the prospect of getting food.

"Yeah, those are the only living bushes we have found around here," Yi says contemplatively, "seems like they only grow around water sources."

"Yeah, Ray said something about that. I wonder if these are plants that are just drawn to water, or if there is any other reason for their location." I walk over to the plant, surveying the roots and the stems.

"Even though this is a forest, this is really the only part we've seen so far that truly seems living," Ray comments, his feet clomping on the gray grass as he comes over. "Isn't it weird how everything here just looks so gray, as if we just stepped in a picture book? Even these stems and leaves on the plant has a grayish tinge to it."

I have to admit, Ray is right. The veins on the leaves are a deep gray, as if the very essence of this world is contained within them. Fingering the leaves with my hand, I wince as a sharp edge slices into my skin. "What the crap?" I mutter as bright red pulsates from my brand new injury on my thumb. It throbs, leading me to believe that this is not the everyday paper cut.

"Mona," a deep, seemingly sensuous voice in my delirium speaks. "Let me see that." Large hands envelop my own, and soon both are stained with blood. The red drops from both of our hands onto the plant, and it tinges the leaves with somehow depressing accuracy. From where I am squatting, the leaf is almost bleeding like I am, a dark green in the roots but crimson in the edges.

My cheeks match my fingers again as Xavier wraps a small rag around my thumb. "Be more careful," he says softly, with a worried tone. "That cut is super deep. In fact, I'm surprised the plant was able to inflict that much damage." His hands leave mine to touch the leaf, dancing across the same edges.

I say nothing in response, standing up quickly while ignoring the throbbing in both my heart and my thumb. "W-where's the others?" I quickly address Ray and Yi, who are both smirking.

"Danae is just beyond the clearing, exploring for anything of interest with Griffin. And besides her...this is it." Ray motions to the four of us. "Well, that we know of."

"Last time I checked, you were missing as well," I comment wryly. "What changed?"

"I was found, obviously."

I glare at him, wondering how one person could possibly get on my nerves to such an extent. I decide not to comment on that statement for fear of an imminent explosion on my part. "So tell me about what happened to you right until you were found by the group."

"Well, quite simply, I woke up in this forest all alone, wandered around, and bumped into Xavier while he was frantically running around trying to find you. It was quite hilarious actually." Ray boisterously strikes a grief-stricken pose. "He literally looked like this, and his cheeks were a beautiful cherry red. Isn't that right, Xavier?"

"Shut up," Xavier mutters, glaring at the instigator with the same annoyance I had just displayed seconds earlier. However, I felt a flicker of interest in Ray's remark, something I probably shouldn't feel under the circumstances.

He catches the glimmer in my eye and smiles wickedly. "Want some of the scoop on your fellow lovebird?" He winks, and for a second his face looks almost exactly like Xavier's. My heart starts unintentionally pounding, and I forget to scold him for making Xavier and I seem like a couple.

"Hello lovely!" A sweet, youthful voice calls out as Danae enters the clearing, Griffin in tow. She is nearly dragging him for some reason, and is otherwise empty handed. "Hello, everyone else."

"What did you find?" Yi asks lightly, bounding over to her. He is definitely the most excited of the bunch, with Xavier nonchalant and Ray disturbed over the fact that she didn't call him a "lovely".

"Nothing much. Just the same forest, extending on for ages." She shrugs, shoving some sticks together with her foot. "Who knows how far it could stretch."

Griffin looks up to catch my eye. At the sight of me, his tight facial expression immediately relaxes and he smiles. Caught off guard, his infectious smile brings a smile of my own to my features.

"Well buddy," he says brightly, stepping forward taking my hand into his own. "So glad to see you."

"Well buddy?" I ask, sensing a burning gaze drilling into my back. Subconsciously I shiver.

"You know...because we were in the well together. Get it?" He laughs. I stare at him pointedly. "Yeah, it's a bad name," Griffin says bashfully after he sees my expression, "but I like it."

"I don't want to talk about wells ever again," I groan, slipping my hand out of his. "But I appreciate the sentiment, whatever it is."

Danae smiles at our exchange, and my gaze turns to her. "So it's morning, huh?" I ask, noting her youthful appearance. She smiles.

"Most likely." Danae nods, and then wrinkles her nose. "Mona, you need a bath. No offense."

"I've been dying to have one all morning," I mumble, casting a glance at Ray, who's snickering.

"Well, let's not prevent you from doing so any longer. Guys, leave."

Murmured groans echo from the group. Backing away, Yi was the first to leave, and the rest trailed behind. Xavier takes up the back, eyeing the others suspiciously. I watch until their bodies fade into the trees. "That was too easy," I say, narrowing my eyes.

"I'll go keep them in check," Danae replies comfortingly, "and make sure they don't sneak over here. For right now, just focus on yourself. You've had a hard time so far, lovely." My nose crinkles at the use of such familiarity, but in some way it is almost relaxing to my ears. Something about the phoenae makes me feel so welcome...and safe.

"Okay. I won't be long." I smile, and she disappears into the trees. Once again, I am completely alone.

This could be my chance. This group is so gullible, and it would be so easy.

Even as I think this, my mind flashes back to Ray's arms as he grabbed me, and the well as I fell inside. Seems like running away brings me nothing but trouble. And given that these fruits are the only nourishment we have seen so far, I could very well starve without the group's help.

Quickly giving up on that possibility, I begin to remove the t-shirt around my waist. I nearly rip it in the process, but eventually it's strewn across the grass along with my other t-shirt. Feeling a sense of exhilaration, I lower myself into the pond, which is a strange crystal blue color that does not fit at all with its surroundings. The water caresses my skin, warmth spreading through my body and disarming me of all my defenses. I lean my head against the ground while soaking in the soothing waters.

As I rest, I reflect on our time here. I remember that in the other world the pack consisted of Ray, Xavier, Yi, and two others. What were their names...?

Wes. Right. And Drake.... no, it's Jake. I envision the two, wondering where they could possibly be. It's hard to picture them in my head, but I can barely make out Wes's golden locks and Jake's sparkling buzz cut. A pain strikes my heart, and alarm flickers across my features as I realize that I miss them.

It really has been a whirlwind, a crazy journey from when I almost died in the forest until I almost died in a forest yet again. I lost track of time, but I am sure that it hasn't been too long since that time—a month, maybe two—and seemingly shorter considering that sheer amount of events that occurred during the time period.

I never considered myself an adventurer or even an interesting person, yet I have been lucky, or unlucky depending on how you look at it, enough to land in a ton of situations that have been eye-opening in a number of different ways. And it all started with Xavier, when he saved me from that monstrous hail. A certain haziness fills a gaping hole in my memory as I try to remember the events directly after that, such as how he introduced himself, how he came to my school. However, I somehow know it happened, and could remember certain scenes, such as when he was in my bedroom at the orphanage, and when he brought me steak in the lunchroom. I reminisce in the swirling memories, and a slight smile comes to my lips before I know it. As if suddenly realizing the depths of my emotions, I try to banish the feelings from my mind, yet they only grow stronger in response. It disconcerts me that there are things I can't remember, that things are foggy in my mind to such an extent.

I wonder if there isn't any truth to the ramblings that the rest of my group had uttered when we first arrived. Maybe I'm the crazy one that's causing all the trouble. Maybe these people mean more to me than I realize.

My head snaps up as I suddenly sense a presence around me. I can also hear shouting in the distance, probably Danae and Ray's voices. "Who's there?" I ask warily, trying to cover myself in the frustratingly clear water.

"I'm... not looking," A low murmur reaches my ears, "I promise."

I twist in my position to see Xavier inching towards me, covering his eyes with the back of his hand. I try to feel irritation, but only curiosity enters my mind. I don't feel nearly as threatened as I should be.

"I just wanted to drop off your extra clothes that you left in the cave," he says, lowering the clothes onto the ground. "I thought you might want them. They are dry now."

His thoughtfulness surprises me in more ways than one. After only a few seconds, I sense nothing at all. He just... left.

I don't know if I was expecting anything, but something about the encounter just left me feeling a bit empty. After this series of continuously exciting events, this bath is turning out to be a bit anti-climatic.

I probably should get out, so I don't make them wait too long. It's been a few minutes, and I feel thoroughly cleaned, both in body and in soul. I know it's a cliché, but it's been a long time since I have felt so relaxed.

Putting my hands on the ground, I start to push myself out of the water. Right before I get out, I hear a sharp intake of breath, and I fall back into the pond. Suddenly shivering, I watch with alarm as Xavier jumps out of the trees, heading for some unknown location. He seems to circle some random area near the edge of the clearing, as if eyeing his prey, and pounces.

A squeal erupts as Xavier grasps at air, almost as if locking it into an embrace. "Xavier, that hurts!" The air gasps. I think I'm about to have a heart attack.

"You can stop now," Xavier growls, now putting the air into a headlock. "And no excuses."

Suddenly a man starts to materialize, a wide grin on his face. As his face appears, I realize that the intruder is Yi. My eyes narrow into slits. "It was a joke," Yi says laughingly, "I was just passing by."

Xavier says nothing, glaring at him with seemingly laser vision. "Okay," Yi continues, maybe a bad joke."

"Look, Yi. We need to learn to trust each other, to feel safe with each other, and even though you think it's not a big deal, in this you are tearing down what everyone has worked to build up." Xavier grabs him and pulls him into the bushes. "Sorry, Mona!" He calls on his way out, never once looking at me.

I stare after him for who-knows-how-long, while entertaining conflicting thoughts about him and the rest of the world, and then sink into the the sparkling depths of the warm waters with exhaustion.

* * *

"So, what next?" Ray asks, looking at all of our faces. We stare back, as clueless as he is. Silence reigns between us, and not even the sounds of insects or birds are heard. I shift restlessly in my seat on the dark gray rock.

"We need to find Wes and Jake," Xavier finally says with a commanding tone, "I'm sure they are around here somewhere."

"So far, everyone has all been found within the same ten mile radius. Maybe scouting out the rest of this area will prove fruitful," Danae says calculatively, staring at a notebook in her hand. "We still have a lot we haven't covered."

"I say we look for water," I speak up forcefully. "There isn't a limitless amount of food near that tiny little pond, no matter how filling the fruit is. And

If on that journey we find Wes and Jake, great. It won't, but we can always go back and look for them with a significantly higher chance of survival on both sides." I can see Yi and Griffin nodding after my suggestion. Xavier just looks back at me with displeasure.

"I think Mona is right. Let's just gather up all our resources and all the fruit on those bushes, and head towards the outskirts of the forest," Ray says firmly.

"Is there even an end to this forest?" Danae asks wonderingly. Her question marks a similar concern for all of us. Are we really here just to die in this empty wasteland?

Why are we even here, anyways?

I think back to the dozens of visions I have had over the past month, searching for some clue to lead us on the right path. Castle doors, tall mountains, and endless forests flash before my eyes. I do remember seeing an ocean or lake of some kind before... but where was it?

After pondering hard, I point to the north of us. "It's that way."

"What?" Ray asks, looking at me with a dubious expression.

"Water. I figure that since we are at the base of the mountains, the lake should be directly north of here. Although I don't know how far away it is."

I can feel all of the eyes on me, making me fidget uncomfortably. "How do you know that?" Ray shoots back, and then abruptly stands up from his position on the fallen log. "In fact, do you know something about how we got here in the first place? And what here even is?" He steps closer to me, and I shake involuntarily.

"Ray." Xavier stands up and puts his hand in front of Ray to gently push him away from me. "Don't be so overbearing. She can't take too much at once."

"No, Xavier," He brushes past him, flinging aside his arm. "I think Mona owes us some answers, and that we need them *now*." When he looks at me, his green eyes glowing with barely contained intensity, a strange fear grips my heart.

"You're... right," I acknowledge, "so you can sit down now, and I promise I will share everything I know."

He stares at me for a minute, and then returns to sit on the log. Xavier sits down as well, and I can sense his gaze. Knowing he is looking at me gives me the jitters in my stomach, for some unknown reason.

"For quite some time now, I have been seeing visions. Usually they are about people, some sort of elite group that lives in a tall castle, but some give me views of the world beyond the castle. Based on what I've seen up to this point, I believe that we have landed in the world of my visions. Given the conversations I've witnessed, I also think that this world is not a physical world, but exists in some sort of spiritual sense, and is also the home of the Shifters."

"What the—" Yi curses under his breath, and the rest of the group reacts similarly. Ray in particular is looking both confused and almost annoyed, rubbing his knuckles together in a worried fashion.

"What did you hear?" Ray asks, but his voice is quickly drowned out by the others. Everyone comes forward with questions at once.

"Mona, what do you mean by saying this world isn't physical?" Griffin queries while rubbing the bark on the log. "Looks pretty real to me."

"Just what I said. I believe that this is the spirit world, kind of similar to what we have heard about heaven or hell. Except this is obviously much different," I speak, sounding much more confident than I feel. "I mean, there's Shifters absolutely everywhere. There seems to be no other explanation."

"Last time I checked, we were in that dark room in Headquarters," Yi comments, "even if this is the Spirit world, how in the world could we have ended up here? Unless we're dead."

"No, I don't think we are," I assert, standing up from my perch. I cast a glance at the sky, which is still covered in heavy fog and thick clouds. "I think, somehow, I transported us here. And don't ask me how, because I honestly have no clue."

The group breaks into chatter, with everyone talking among themselves. Strangely relieved by finally sharing what has been within my head for quite some time, I tilt my head to let the mist embrace me, dancing across my jawline and chilled skin. My eyes close, and I let my senses encompass my entire body, trying to feel everything around us.

"I don't understand how this is not a physical world when we can feel things, and we all still retain our bodies," Danae says hesitantly, "how can you be so sure?"

"I'm not." I open my eyes with new focus and clarity. It is time to test out the conjectures I have made, seeing if it is possible once and for all. "Just... let me see..."

Xavier quickly stands behind me as I close my eyes again. "Are you okay?" He murmurs softly into my ear. My heart starts beating like a drum, distracting me from the swirl of thoughts I am trying to create.

"Xavier, stay there," I command, all the while thinking of words concerning pain. *Strike. Blood. Hurt. Ache. Stab. Destroy.* As I let the words boil within me, a spirit spear begins to materialize in my hand. Except this time, it isn't a spear, but a miraculous, sparkling sickle. It looks deadly, with a sharp curve and pointed tip. I marvel at the size of it, and the feeling of power that it gives me.

I look out among the group, and I can tell none of them can see the weapon. They are only staring at me in confusion. I somehow know that now is the time.

Please work, I beg as I bring down the sickle upon a nearby tree with all of my might. Collective gasps erupt from everyone, and then we all look in stunned silence. Myself more than anyone else, quite honestly.

"Move!" Xavier jumps and pushes me out of the way as the tree comes crashing towards the ground, hitting it with a resounding thump. In the process, my sickle falls from my hands and lands on Xavier. No, the correct phrase would be that it seemed to melt on Xavier, dissolving into nothingness as soon as it hit both him and the ground.

I am on my hands and knees now, covered in dirt. Deprived of the strength to move, I just stay in my exact position. But once I finally look up, I find that once again I am the center of attention.

I turn my head laboriously towards the falling tree, seeing the clean cut where the tree had been severed from its trunk.

After a few more seconds of this awkward silence that seems to be the norm among our group, Griffin speaks up. "So... North?"

* * *

We have been trekking for endless days, and short nights. It seems at the beginning like every step is leading towards deliverance, yet when I lose that hope towards the evenings it seems like we are only walking farther away from our goals. We try to rest, but I am just too anxious. So far we have seeing nothing, and no one, except the Shifters.

Even them I only catch sight of once or twice, and only at a glance, as if they are trying to hide from us. It is strangely disconcerting to see the Shifters running from us, like we are the villains in all of this. I guess in their point of view, we may be.

To try and pass the time while both walking and running, I practice making weapons. After lots of experimenting, I have figured out that the

weapons won't hurt tangible people, but will affect the world around us. I was scared to try it before, but now I realize it is necessary for both our survival and for an even higher purpose that none of us may even realize yet. Already I get the feeling in my heart that we are *supposed* to be traveling towards the water, because the water is close to the castle. And the castle is the key to everything... at the center of the uncertainty.

For there must be a reason for why we have landed here. There must be a reason for why I have been seeing all of these crazy visions. There must be a reason for why my heart can't stop beating every time I see a blue-haired werewolf's face.

Well, that might be totally unrelated. But... not really. I think.

Maybe he is the one at the center of everything, because he certainly occupies most of my thoughts. I just can't keep myself from wanting to brush his hair out of his eyes, and to just stare into them to my heart's content. I always have the urge to touch him, to trace his cheek or—shamefully—his lips. Even when I'm thinking about other things, the incumbent desire is always there, ready to distract me at every turn. And just like before, in the cave, I just about can't take it anymore.

I've tried everything. Distancing myself, talking to Ray and Griffin, and even making myself keep my eyes downwards at all times so I wouldn't have to look at him. But by this point, at which four long days have come and gone, I know that there is no use. The madness is overwhelming, and will continue to be until I do something about it.

I remember the shame of his rejection at the cave, but now it is almost like a distant memory, faded from the intensity of my brewing emotions. The strange thing about all this inner turmoil I have been having for quite a while now, and the one factor that makes absolutely no sense to me in the context of my emotions, is that he isn't different from the others. Everyone treats me politely—except for Yi, who's a jerk—and in particular Griffin makes me feel warm and safe whenever I'm near. They all have the same eyes, besides Griffin and Danae, with the exact same intensity and sheer beauty. All of the men are also undeniably attractive physically in their own way, and I can't really rank any of them above the other on an objective standpoint.

But at the same time, he's not like the others. And I have grown to realize this over the awkward silences and boring chatter that does nothing to stop me from facing the truth. And the truth is... I'm tired, desperate, and hungry. In both the literal and figurative sense.

Which is why I'm oh so gracefully stumbling over to Xavier's side as the world lies in slumber, waiting for the new day to come.

"Xavier," I whisper, crouching down and touching his shoulder. Even this feels invigorating, in all the wrong ways. I'm inwardly both repelled and fascinated by my thoughts at this moment, especially after a particularly dreary period of time.

His eyes flicker open, and I slowly gesture for him to follow me. He just stares back at me while blinking, and I soon grow impatient with him. Quickly I back into the trees, retreating until I am one with the night. A slight crunch of the leaves echoes behind me, and I know he is not too far behind.

Once I feel like we are far enough away so that we can talk quietly, I stop and lean against a pretty intimidating, monster-like tree. "Mona..." Xavier groans as he reaches me, probably still half asleep. "What... why..."

I don't know why I find his sleepy expression so cute, and I don't plan on finding out at the moment.

"We need to talk."

At this, Xavier's head snaps up and he shakes himself out of sleep. He blinks a few times, and then gives me his full, undivided attention. I feel strangely pressured by his stare, like I don't want to disappoint him after I just woke him up during our precious nap time. "Is it about you apologizing for flirting with Griffin and Ray every single second of the day? Because you're going to have to do much more than drag me out here in the middle of the night for me to forgive you." He snaps a little bit, obviously just a little bit grumpy.

"Flirt? What in the—"

"Don't even try to deny it. You were doing that on purpose to make me angry." Xavier's cheeks color a little bit, his eyebrows tilted in annoyance. Although disconcerted myself, I watch his expressions with interest.

"All I wanted... was to avoid you," I say softly, eyes downcast. At this Xavier's eyes widen, and then a bitterness enters his features.

"So..." He slowly states, "What changed?"

A silence stretches between us as I try to figure out how to phrase my next words. I soon give up, unable to make much coherent sense. "I don't understand," I choke, sliding down the tree onto the ground. "I just don't get it."

When I look up from my hands, Xavier is right there, gazing into my soul with those eyes of his. "You don't get what?" He asks me gently. His hand brushes against my own, bringing warmth and comfort along with it.

I hastily try to regain my composure. "You should be the same as them, Xavier. You really should be nothing more to me than the means to an end."

"As them? You mean Griffin and the other guys here?"

"Yes. You were one of the pack back at home, the man who saved my life and made me feel both irritated and comfortable, often at the same time. But that doesn't explain all of the strange feelings I have been having since we have gotten here towards you, and I just don't understand what happened."

Xavier just stares at me, as if silently processing my words. "So you feel attracted to me, but you don't get why you feel it towards me and no one else."

"Right." My expression brightens a bit. Maybe he gets it. Maybe he can help me get out of this mess, or just talk some sense into my stupid heart.

He thinks for a while, and I watch the skies shift into a deep navy blue, with a soft, muted white orb crossing the horizon. Hope blossoms in my chest in the prospect of relieving this curse of mine. And even if nothing happens, it's great that I don't have to pretend anything anymore. I can finally get this out of the way so that I can look towards a hopefully brighter future.

"This is not what I imagined," Xavier says finally, sighing reluctantly. "Although I had a clue when you kissed me the other night that you were searching for something."

I blush, about as red as a tomato. "Are you toying with me?" I ask, my voice uncannily high. My blush deepens at this, embarrassing me even more. I look away in shame. I... knew this was a bad idea.

But then I feel a hand on my chin, lifting my face with effortless grace. When I see him again, he is right in front of me, much closer than before. "Mona..." he says in a low, husky voice, his breath dancing on my cheeks. "I'll give you what you want." His pupils look dilated, infused with desire. My pulse quickens as I watch his other hand head towards my cheek, and then travel down to the nape of my neck. "But you have to promise me something."

"W-what?" I ask as Xavier's face looms ever closer. His eyelashes are almost brushing my cheeks, and his hands are filling me with both incredible warmth and insatiable desire.

"You must... promise to surrender yourself to me. Entirely." He says this with such temptation, each word melting like honey from his lips. "If you don't do this, then you must leave now... while you still can."

My heart nearly bursts out of my chest. Surrender? There is something about the word that is so sensuous, exploiting my senses and overturning my defenses until I am only a puddle onto the ground. Under normal circumstances I would never stand for it. I would abhor the word, and if it were an object I would throw it on the ground and stomp on it with my feet. I like to think I am a strong person, who is independent and can think for myself, and to surrender is to become subject to another's will. It is an impossible request. My pride would never...

His lips brush against my forehead, trailing down my nose with breathtaking passion. "I want you to be mine," He whispers, drawing back to look me in the eye. "Just say the word." He waits for me, watching my reaction.

Completely under his spell, I murmur, "yes." It is as if I am helpless to my own selfish cravings, a slave to the passion I wasn't even supposed to have in the first place.

Instantly after my response our lips meet with furious desire, and Xavier takes his hands away from my face only to grab my arms and push me roughly against the forest floor.

It is at these moments when I realize just how powerless I really am.

"Say my name, Mona," he whispers forcefully in between kisses, nibbling at my earlobe and then bringing his lips towards my collarbone. "Yearn for me." Our breathing is heavy, even frantic as we scramble to fulfill each other's passions.

My lips are covered again, and I drown in ecstasy.

Too Late to Back Down, Too Early to Give Up

I have no thoughts. I am experiencing a feeling—probably—but it is too hard for me to even describe, stretching beyond both words and expressions.

Xavier is kissing me, and I never thought it would ever feel quite this... good.

Good is a pretty overused term, used to explain tons of different emotions and is placed in many contexts, but in this case the word should be taken as a mere placeholder for a reality so undefinable that I wish it would last forever. Something so strange and beautiful loses its impact through communication, which goes for many things, and can only be delivered through experience.

It is almost like the one time when I was a little girl, and my parents took me to the beach for the first and last time in my life. I remember standing there, my feet sinking into the pure white sand, in awe of the magnificence surrounding me. I could taste the hint of salt on my tongue, the wind caressing my tiny body. The sun would cast its glow upon me, making me feel like an angel bathed in holy light. And the water felt so cold, so refreshing, that I just wanted to simply dissolve and become nothing, emptying my mind so I could be immersed in the beauty. So I could etch that moment into my memory, and never forget it for the rest of my life.

In many ways, this moment resembles my other inexplicable experiences, but in other ways it takes me beyond a mere wish or desire. Yes, it feels wonderful, unlike a kiss ever should, but the urgency of my emotions shock me more than anything else. I am in a frenzy, willing to do anything to keep intensifying the experience (for lack of a better term). There is more to my life that I must consider, but strangely all of those considerations have flown away. It is like nothing matters anymore, except for this.

There's some sense of nostalgia that comes with this as well, something that bothered me last time I kissed him. It feels so real, but it is almost ethereal as well, like we are not only connected through our lips both through our souls as well. And even though it should be, it isn't a new feeling at all. I get a small sense of it every time I look at him, every moment that he enters my thoughts. It just makes me wonder where on earth it is coming from.

The only thing that makes sense is that there might be some truth to the words of my companions concerning Xavier and I's past relationship. That my memory was wiped, along with strange markings that should be on my body. That everything I believe about myself during this time has been a lie, and I'm actually a big softie with a hard shell. I don't want to believe that Xavier is mine...or do I? Even now, the thought causes butterflies in my stomach, and I let out an involuntary moan.

"Shh," Xavier whispers in a low, husky voice. "Do you want the rest of them to hear you?" My eyes open, and I stare at him, thinking about nothing and everything at the same time. "Don't...look at me like that," he says softly, leaning in and kissing my brow bone.

His lips touch my eyelids, trailing down my nose and cheeks. I can't help but wonder, as I look at his face, what he could possibly be thinking. He seems so calm and measured, tearing my defenses with accuracy and not wasting a singly movement. Has he ever lost himself? I find myself wanting to know the answer more than anything else.

A warmth touches my lips, and I feel my bottom lip being gently bitten as he teases my mouth open. As soon as I do so, his tongue pushes in, and I am taken with surprise. So there is more to everything...and I want it all.

This should be really gross. I would never imagine a guy's tongue in my mouth a day ago, or even a week ago. In the logical side of my brain, it's all just really weird. Tongues are for eating and communicating. Mouths in general are for eating and communicating. Those human body parts have no other use, and should only be used in those given purposes. But now the sun has set, and the brightness of the moon has risen over the dark landscape. It is a new world out there, one full of mystery and enigmas with neither sense nor reason.

His face leaves mine, a hairsbreadth away from my lips, and his eyes flick upwards towards mine. We look at each other, and he smirks slightly. A flicker of annoyance flashes through my thoughts, but he kisses me before I can think of anything else.

"You..." he murmurs as we take a second to breathe. You know, because I haven't done that in quite a while. He straightens from where he was leaning over me, some strange expression on his face. I sit up as well, an uneasiness in my heart.

"Xavier?"

"Tomorrow," he says roughly, turning his head away. "We can continue tomorrow."

"What are you saying?" I ask him, my voice uncannily high. This is not how things are supposed to work.

"You're mine, and I can do whatever I want with you. Which is why you are going to meet me...tomorrow night." He finally turns and looks at me, his eyes sparkling like emeralds. I feel a little uncomfortable under his steady gaze.

"But...why not now?" I sound so tiny, surrounded by such an empty wasteland.

"I don't want you to disappear, Mona. Every day I want the guarantee that you still want me, and that you won't run away. So it has to be this way."

"N-no, it doesn't. Xavier, please..." I touch his arm, but he shakes me off almost robotically.

"Mona, I'm sorry, but we both need to get some rest. I'm not going to bend on this."

I stand up, feeling as if I was hit by a moving train. My knees start to wobble, and they almost buckle down the small hill. I can feel his gaze on me as I vanish into the trees.

He must be playing with me, treating me like I am his toy. How did I deserve this? Now I am destined to be controlled, and more frighteningly, a small part of me actually wants this to happen. Well, maybe a bit more than a small part of me.

What in the world is wrong with me? Why can't I just be normal and contained...and strong? I already know the answer, but I can't keep myself from asking those questions.

The anger leaves my body along with my strength as I collapse onto an empty spot on the ground. And as the noise of the forest fades away into an eerie silence, the only thing I continue to hear is the fervent beating of my heart. I can't help but stare into the forest, wondering about him.

And shamefully waiting for tomorrow.

* * *

I swing the spear with incredible force, hitting the large oak tree and getting my weapon caught in the middle of it as a result. My face drips with sweat, traveling down my face and body, but I don't even care. I feel powerful when I'm swinging a sword... like I can do anything.

I am alone in the forest, surrounded by dark gray foliage and towering trees that I desperately want to topple. Doing so would ensure that I've taken a step forward in my training, and I can finally take a break. My frustrations, which had initially led me out here, have long since abated, and now I can feel a dull ache in my bones.

"Nice, Mona." A voice erupts, and I whip my head around to see Ray, casually leaning on the side of the tree. "You're getting better."

I don't really know how to take compliments, so I just stare at him. "You're welcome."

"Uh, wrong words. I think you've been away from society too long. The correct reply is thank you." He laughs, and I can't help but laugh as well.

"Actually, I'm right. You're welcome for when I have to save your butt with my awesome skills." I wink at him, twirling the spear in my fingertips. It shines with iridescence, and then starts to fade away in my hands.

"I wonder..." Ray says, walking closer to the faded spear and watching it with his eyes aglow. "When you and Griffin were stuck in the well, why didn't you use your amazing skills to get you both out of there? I seem to recall you guys pretty much about to die...and us saving YOUR butts."

"I'm not sure either." I have been wondering about that, and it's bothered me for quite a while. "I tried using them in the well, and it went straight through."

"Maybe it was the materials. It's not natural like the rest of this world is."

"You know, you're right. Maybe metal materials, or even just human-made objects, are not affected by my weapons. Hey Ray, you're pretty smart after all."

I smile and Ray grins as well, grabbing my head and rubbing his knuckle across my scalp. "Was there ever any question?" He asks me jokingly.

"Always." I twist out of his grip, running out of his reach. "With you, you can never know what you'll get."

The dark fog gathers in the area, quickly almost obscuring him from my vision. I feel discomfort at how easily this place can conceal, disguising anything at the drop of a hat.

"Well, it's lunchtime now. If you are done now, we'd really like it if you joined us." Ray turns away, his voice fading in the roar of the wind. I nod, following him into the trees.

It's been pretty hard, coming up with meals for the day, but we have been making it through. We passed by a small pond the day after yesterday, so we were able to stock up on fruits and get some water. Luckily, all of us have more energy than humans do, otherwise we would have all died long ago. Every day we are traveling about a hundred miles, give or take, and are gradually getting closer to the ocean. We can't see it yet, but I can sense it, remembering it in my dreams in relation to the mountains.

I haven't had any visions recently, which worries me because I need more evidence to connect all the puzzle pieces in my head before I can make any accurate conclusions. And at the rate we are going, I need to make some decisions about what we need to be doing very quickly. There has to be some way that I can get us out of here. Given the scarcity of food, there is no way we could live here for too much longer. Unless there's a Garden of Eden around here, in which case we need to find it, and fast.

I step into the clearing where most of our group is gathered around a small campfire. A few logs have been placed around it for us to sit on, and Danae is pouring water from her huge water bottle that she had back from the old world into emptied fruit shells. They kind of remind me of those coconut cups that I would see all the time in commercials on TV. Seeing everyone together, laughing over something Griffin said, gives me a strange feeling in my stomach. And I am really trying to feel guilty for it afterwards, but I just can't make it go away.

"Are you going to grab some?" Ray asks genially as we join the group. "We have a grand specialty today. It's a delicacy, really."

"Ooh, I can't wait," I say dryly, "and whatever might this magical entrée be?"

Laughing, Griffin tosses me a spiky fruit that I have grown used to over this time period. I stare at it, and then at him, and then a smile spreads all over my face.

"Looks good." I start to peel the skin off with my fingernails. "Actually, looks great."

I turn to scan the area and spot Xavier to my side, sitting down on the log. We make eye contact, and he flashes me a brilliant smile. He gestures for me to sit down near him. I can feel my heart beating with uncontrollable voracity as I cautiously do so. The heat of his body near mine makes me more nervous than I could ever admit.

"How was your morning?" He asks me while he chews on the core of the fruit. We have all started doing that in order to get more nourishment, but it tastes disgusting.

"Pretty productive. I almost cut down a tree in one swipe," I reply, my mouth full of fruit. I probably look like a wild beast right now, but I'm too hungry to care.

"That's a huge improvement from yesterday. I'm really proud of you."

"You sound like my father," I reply mockingly, and then fall silent as I remember that I don't have a father any more. I've been remembering a lot of my past lately, and memories of my parents have really been bothering me.

"What's wrong?" Xavier asks, his voice close to my ear. His arm snakes around my waist, and I can sense his confidence in the gesture.

Griffin, sitting across the fire, is looking straight at me when I look away from Xavier. Strangely enough, he doesn't seem mad or angry, but he is smirking at me instead. I blush, my whole face turning a bright shade of red. I try to shake off Xavier's hand, but it's impossible because of his grip of iron.

"Nothing," I say through gritted teeth, trying not to look at him. There's just something about looking into his eyes that makes me constantly humiliate myself.

"Aww, Mona, don't get embarrassed. Just tell me." He isn't trying to keep his voice low, and I can sense a bit of exhilaration in his tone. I wonder what could possibly be running through his mind right now.

Even as his grip loosens, his hand still brushes against the small of my back, as if he's making sure I'm still here. I finally turn my head to look at him, and there he is, probing me with his stupid eyeballs.

"I was just thinking about dad," I say softly, knowing any of the other werewolves could pick up on my voice. If they did, they didn't show it, making their own salads from a few patches of green leaves we got near the last water spring.

"I'm...sorry." Xavier's hand leaves my back, and his gaze drops.

"Don't apologize. You didn't even know him," I reply, and then toss the remaining shell into the fire. I can't help but feel touched by his concern, a warmth gathering in my heart that has nothing to do with passion.

"Yeah, but I was being insensitive." He smiles slightly, prodding at the dirt with his shoe.

"That's nothing out of the ordinary." I grin slyly. "So don't worry. I'm used to it."

He suddenly burst into laughter, his eyes widening. "So Mona can crack a joke? I never knew?"

"Who said I was cracking a joke?" I shoot back, a little confused, or at least pretending to be. It makes me...feel happy, conversing like this without the pressing urgency that comes with a difficult situation.

Xavier gives me a dubious look, his eyebrow arched in a teasing manner. I can't hold back the giggles, now, and I turn away from him, hoping that he won't see my laughter.

"Well, you guys are getting along." Danae looks at me, raising an eyebrow. I feel a little embarrassed at her scrutiny, looking at the ground. Yeah...I know. I don't truly get it either.

"Mona can't help but like me," Xavier teases, "I knew she couldn't hold on for long."

There's probably more truth to that than I would ever admit. "I just make it seem like I like him so I can take his food," I comment warmly, taking another fruit out of his bag. I measuredly take the sides and rip it with all my might, splitting it down the middle.

"What a sucker," Ray says, smiling widely. Xavier laughs in response, looking more relaxed than he has been in a long time.

Everything feels peaceful, almost as if we were sitting back in the mansion in the movie room or at the breakfast table. I can't help but feel nostalgia as I remember the long hallways, the many rooms, and the experiences surrounding them. There are some gaping holes in my memory, but slowly I'm starting to gain some of it back. It is comforting to know that I developed relationships with this group of people before we even reached this world, that they aren't the strangers I thought they were. Maybe I could even learn to trust them.

Speaking of this peaceful aura surrounding our camp, it's probably time for us to get moving. My eyes leave the ripped fruit and travel upwards with the intent of addressing the group.

But then I scan the forest, my attention alerted by a flash of color to the right. At first I see nothing, but then a dull, pulsing white light, only a speck in the distance, appears behind some faraway trees.

"Hey," I say distractedly, never taking my eyes off the light. "I have to check something out real quick. I'll be right back." I stand up from the log afraid to blink at the expense of losing it from my vision.

"Mona..." I can hear Xavier's voice behind me, but I keep going, slowly weaving between the trees. If it is what I think it is, I really need to take a closer look.

My suppositions are proven valid as I can make out a translucent shape by a tall oak tree. The Shifter is weak, its light rather subdued as the creature—what I've been calling it recently—rests on the floor. This one is similar to one of the first Shifters I saw in this world, with a vulnerability about it that makes me feel unsure about my convictions.

There's something about this one that enchants me. I can't help but feel drawn to this being, a strange emotion gripping at my chest.

I clear my throat nervously. At this noise, the Shifter jerks, as if waking up from a fitful sleep. It starts to back away, and even though it looks like a ghost, I can feel a bit of fear emanating from the creature. "Don't worry...I...am not going to hurt you." I venture a little closer, watching its movements. Surprisingly, it almost seems to acknowledge my words, stopping its jerky motions and opening its wide eyes. I don't feel scared, or even intimidated. As if in a trance, I continue walking towards the Shifter until I am only a few inches away.

I crouch down, peering into the creature's body. There is no definite shape to it, but it doesn't have the usual intensity that a normal Shifter would have. Instead of the brightness of a monster, its eyes contain the darkness of an inner turmoil. We continue to make eye contact, I unable to break away.

I try to call on my past knowledge. Back at headquarters, at the encounter with the Shifters, I had a slightly similar feeling. There was no hate, nor resentment, that I had come to expect in other situations. What should I do? I wish there was some sort of manual that would explain everything to me, because then everything would be so much easier.

A small body of light leaves my body, surprising me with its sudden appearance. Without knowing what I am doing, my hand closes around it, trapping it within my grasp. By holding it, I can feel the compassion that I was just experiencing.

This light looks very similar to the other light that Griffin and I saw at the well. I can only guess, but it seems like these...things are essences of our emotions, somehow released from our bodies. And very oddly, without any real explanation, I felt like I needed to open my hand and offer it to the Shifter.

Not knowing what I am doing, I just slowly uncurl my fingertips. My eyes open in wonder as I survey it, watching the sparkles of light twist around a small, glowing core. Slowly the Shifter edges closer, and I can see its body tremble.

"Here. Take it." I move my hand, and the light stays exactly where it is, shining brightly. The Shifter, however, moves like lightning to the swirling energy. Once it is at a close enough proximity, the light dissolves into small particles and then vanishes into the Shifter's body. The Shifter in turn starts to glow, while keeping its large eyes on me.

I feel a peculiar happiness while watching this happen. While inwardly trying to put the puzzle pieces together, I also revel in the complexity and mystery of the scene before me. There is something so beautiful about this convergence that almost brings me to my knees.

So the Shifter is not a dark, shapeless void, but a soul filled with emotions and the brightness of life.

"Mona?" A deep voice whispers near my ear. At this, the Shifter scatters, disappearing into the forest without hesitation. "Why...are you crying?"

I raise my index finger to my cheek, brushing against the droplet that had been running down my face with confusion. He's...right, but I don't have the explanation he's looking for.

"Xavier." I turn, and there he is, so close that I catch my breath at his intoxicating scent.

"What were you looking at?" He asks, his breath caressing the nape of my neck.

"It was a Shifter." I stare at him, my eyes wide. His gaze crawls over my body, and then his arm snakes out to support me. "Thanks. I'm not feeling too well."

Overcome with dizziness, I lean against his chest. I am completely defenseless, as weak as a twig physically yet strong with the knowledge of purpose. I don't have pretty much any of the details, but our fate is definitely intertwined with the Shifters, and maybe we can help them to the extent that we would be rewarded. There seems to be suffering here, which could be the root of all the strife back in the other world.

The salty air tickles my nose, and I look up at Xavier's face. "We're close...can you feel it?" I ask, and he nods in response.

"I can't wait until we get to the ocean. Then we can have a beach party." Xavier winks, making me blush. I quickly back away and straighten my body, though feeling a bit nauseous as I do so. "Are you feeling alright?"

"Yeah, sure." I turn away, peering at the trees to my right. I can't make out anything, but I'm pretty sure the saltiness is coming from that direction.

"Do you still want to...meet up, tonight?" He asks in a low tone, his hand pulling on my arm. It burns from his touch, but not in a bad way at all.

I can't help but look into his eyes, and shakily give an affirmative nod. "I...mean, if it's okay..." I stumble over my words, unsure of myself.

"Of course it's okay." His hand rises to lift my chin. I find myself sucked into his gaze, and he leans closer to softly kiss my forehead. "Don't misunderstand, Mona."

"W-what are you t-talking about?" I ask quietly, my own eyes widening.

"I want you, more than anyone in this world," he whispers, his lips close to my ear. "In *any* world, I guess I should add." His face retreats from my own, and I can see his eyes again. They are glowing with an animalistic desire, making shivers run down my spine.

"Then...why?"

"I told you why last night." He finally steps away, and I can finally breathe again. "I know my feelings, but I don't know yours."

"But—"

"No. I'm not going to let you lie to me," he says calmly, "I think I know you well enough by now that I would be able to catch you if you did."

"That's not what I was going to..." I trail off as Xavier turns to walk back to camp. I guess he isn't interested in my response. Irritation sears

through me as I quickly follow him, a tight knot loosening in my stomach. Time to shut the feelings off.

But seriously, I wasn't going to lie to him about feelings or lack thereof. Who does he think I am?

"We should go, guys," Xavier calls to the others once they come into view. Probably knowing he was going to say that before he actually did, Griffin and Ray are already packing up supplies.

"To the coast!" Ray yells, fist pumping the air in a silly burst of enthusiasm. I roll my eyes as I pick up Xavier's backpack.

"What are you doing?" He asks, but I wave him off with my hand.

"Grab Danae's bag. I haven't been carrying anything for a while." The truth is, I have gotten so tired of watching other people deal with their own stuff. Griffin and I were the only ones without bags, so we've had to mooch off everyone else without being much help to anyone.

Without looking at the others, I start moving quickly, trusting that the others will follow. And they do, their footsteps pounding behind mine.

It's probably going to be a long run, but I'm pretty sure we can reach the ocean by nightfall.

* * *

When I see a vast expanse appear on the horizon, I nearly have a heart attack. Which may seem weird, but after a couple hours of travel, seeing anything at all besides moving Shifters and dead foliage is a big surprise. At the sight, my stomach starts grumbling furiously, probably more ready than I am to reach the ocean.

We continue to travel, our footsteps pounding in unison. But now that we can see the end, it seems like we are running at a slower and slower speed. I find myself impatient, and I speed up, the rest of the group keeping up easily. The ocean grows larger and larger, along with my excitement.

It finally creeps upon us, and we can finally slow down to a steady walk. The others cheer beside me. Ray seems especially excited, jumping up and down with his backpack in his hands.

Xavier looks at me, and we make eye contact. His face is twisted into a tentative smile, and it is easy to notice that he may have a few misgivings about the whole thing. "What is it?" I ask softly, not noticing that my arm is swinging towards his until it brushes against his side. After the contact I jump half a mile into the air, edging away from his body. "S-sorry."

"Mona," he laughs, "no big deal. I'm just pretty tired." His expression is strained, doing nothing to alleviate my concerns.

"Yeah right. Don't think you can get away with not telling me," I warn, wagging my finger at his face. This time his features crinkle into a genuine smile.

"It's really nothing. I'm relieved that we finally made it." He starts walking into the wind, spreading his arms wide. I narrow my eyes after him, unconvinced.

The sand is like pure crystals, each grain soft and illuminated by an unearthly glow. The trees have shifted into ones with skinnier trunks and long, generous branches. They are similar to those that appear at a normal beach, and it leaves me with the same sense of awe that I experienced years ago. And on either side, it seems to last forever, the white expanse continuing as far as I can see. The only thing is that there is something so empty about this atmosphere. Maybe it is just the lack of color, or the chilly air, but the beach doesn't seem as inviting as I remember.

There are small plants by the edge of the beaches. Immediately Danae rushes over to it, fingering the leaves with avid fascination. I leave her to it, putting Xavier's backpack by the base of a tree. Just as before, I place my toes in the sand, hoping to immerse myself in the beauty of the moment. My feet disappear, sinking in to my ankles.

It feels nice, and I'm not unwilling to admit it to myself. Pretty much exhausted, I sink to my knees, and then to a sitting position. Watching the others' reactions with interest, it surprises me how happy they are behaving. Griffin is walking towards the water, and Ray is lying on his back. Danae is holding several ripe fruits in her arm, heading towards the outskirts to probably set up some sort of camp.

"We shouldn't stay here long," Xavier says, looking in my direction. I return the look, baffled at his words, yet receiving the same ominous feeling about these ghostly beaches. He's probably right, but I need a minute to myself... to rest.

"Don't be a party pooper!" Ray laughs, jumping immediately in the water. Once he hits the water, his face immediately turns stark white. He freezes in place, startling both me and Griffin, who was about to jump in.

"What's wrong?" He asks, taking a step back. Ray says nothing, his face now an scary shade of blue.

"Ray!" I stand up, and run over to the shore. The water rises and falls, but he doesn't move an inch.

I inwardly groan and take a step into the water to grab his arm. As soon as I make contact with the ocean, I immediately understand Ray's reaction. This water... is something else.

"Wow, it's like stepping into liquid ice," I complain while wrapping my arm around his. "It's probably not healthy to stay in here for too long." Tugging him out of the water, I practically have to drag him at this point. "Good grief," I mutter quietly, bogged down by his weight.

Xavier is waiting at the edge, and he hurriedly rips Ray away from me. "Always getting into trouble, huh?" He asks, slapping Ray heartily in the back. The action seems to shake Ray back to life, and he awkwardly jumps away.

"It's pretty cold out there. I advise not jumping in." He uncomfortably shivers, and I run to grab him a dry shirt.

"I'm thirsty," Griffin says out of the silence, "does anyone have some water?"

"I don't think so," I reply while shuffling through the bag. "We ran out early today. You could drink from the ocean, but..."

Oh no.

Everyone's face darkens as they have the same revelation I am experiencing. I don't really know why it hit me just now—when it hadn't on the whole journey up here—but it hurts like a ton of bricks.

Griffin sticks a single finger in the water, swirling it around and then flicking his tongue at it. "It's about as salty as the Dead Sea," he comments, smiling dryly.

"What the crap," I mutter in a scathing tone to myself. "What was I thinking? And I thought we were getting closer to a water source..."

And we were, I correct myself mentally. Except it's a salty mess that everyone can look at and not drink while we are dying of dehydration.

I put my head in my hands, slumping against the base of the tree. Mona, you should be better than this.

"Mona." Ray walks up to me and takes the shirt from my hands. "It's okay. We'll just keep going after this."

"But... what if we don't find anything?" I ask him, nervously clenching my fists.

"Well, that's pretty pessimistic." He grins. "Although I guess it suits the rather anticlimactic situation we got going on here."

"Yeah, unfortunately we need to leave before long," Xavier says, repeating the same worry that I know has been haunting him since we reached the beach. He starts to gather up our belongings from their locations on the sand.

"We can gather our energy for a minute," I say weakly, "It might be a few hours before we reach another water source."

"We can... but just remember that every minute we spend here is a minute we have to continue without any water." Xavier scans the area, his

eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"Xavier, what's wrong?!" I ask him, frustrated by his unexplainable behavior. "You never act like this."

He whirls around to face me. "Do you not *feel* that?"

I just sit, staring at him openmouthed, while at the same time trying to feel exactly what he's feeling. I concentrate for a minute, focusing on the wind and the waves as they roll towards the beaches.

"Nope. I got nothing."

Xavier crouches down and covers my ears with tender hands. "Don't think. Just feel. And smell."

"What the crap..." I close my eyes, draining myself of thoughts and feelings. As I do so, a slight wrinkling of the nose reveals a strange, familiar scent that has the hint of some odious flavor I can't identify. "What... is that?"

"I don't advise staying here to find out," He replies, edging towards the outskirts. "The scent is much stronger than it was a few minutes ago."

"Doesn't that smell like... human? Or even werewolf?" Ray asks, standing by my side. His eyes are closed, his face bent in concentration.

Xavier's eyes widen. "You're right, Ray. What the..."

Griffin is staring out into the distance, as if searching for something. "Look!" He calls, and then immediately starts running. Terror enters my heart, and I start shaking nervously. What could be out there?

The cold takes over my body, and even as Xavier tugs on my hand, the fear only increases. This is something unlike anything I have ever felt in this world. But, like most things, there is some nostalgia associated with the emotion that unsettles me.

"Hey!" I can hear loud shouting in the distance, and immediately I start to run towards them. Xavier looks at me as he starts running as well, and I can see his concerned face in the corner of my eye. But I disregard it, speeding as fast as I possibly can towards the others. They are all stopped in a strange semicircle, piquing my curiosity in the worst of ways.

"What's going on?" I ask breathlessly as I approach them. My knees are heavy, so I lean down and put my hands against them. With my head down and a heavily beating heart, I feel the apprehension building beyond control.

Finally, I cast my gaze upwards, and nearly jump a hundred feet in the air. "What the... no..."

A blonde man is lying before us, covered in blood, and drenched in sweat. He looks to be barely conscious, his eyelashes fluttering in a struggle to stay awake. With his clothing ripped down the back and side, strange indentations had been made in his body that could have never been made with human hands. Newfound chills ripple down my spine.

"Wes?" I ask, the name flowing as easily from my lips as it did with the others in my group. Yes, I know him. I could never forget that golden hair, tumbling past his ears and glittering in the sunlight. In this current state, the brightness has been dulled, tainted with both red and brown.

Xavier is ahead of everyone else, walking towards him and trying to lift his body without touching his wounds. "What... happened?" He asks with concern. Wes's eyelashes flutter, and eventually his eyes flicker open. As soon as his consciousness is fully gained, he immediately starts kicking and thrashing, attacking Xavier weakly. "Wes? Wes! It's me!" Xavier yells, trying to pacify him.

"X-Xavier," He whispers, and then gradually gives up on all resistance. "Hurry... can't stay..."

We all turn to look around, anxious for what else could be on the coast. The markings on Wes's back indicate that we could be facing a real enemy, and in a world with no rules, who knows who or what could be the threat. And there's no ignoring that our group is weaponless, with the exception being my spirit spears.

Another head appears from the forest, glistening with iridescence. We all turn to look at him as he barrels onto the coastline. In a similar state to Wes, with his clothing in tatters, he casts a glance at the ocean and curses beneath his breath. Turning to look at Wes, he sees the rest of us and his mouth opens wide.

"Xavier? Mona?" Jake asks, clearly surprised to see us. But the surprise quickly dissipates on his rugged features, leaving only resignation. "We're probably cornered by now. Do you guys have any weapons?"

Xavier narrows his eyes. "What's going on?" He questions Jake, who rolls his eyes in response.

"No time to talk. Just run," he speaks in a clipped tone, and immediately starts off again. He's heading north, supposedly in the direction of the castle. I can hear him loudly shouting expletives as he approaches the outskirts.

"What the crap is going on?" I ask angrily, trying to survey the forest with a more perceiving eye. To my alarm, I can make out some humanlike bodies, making their way out onto the beach.

Xavier, still carrying Wes, starts to make his way towards Jake. "Come on, we all fight together," he says in a commanding voice, and then turns away. His bare feet stomp through the sand, and even though his voice is calm, his shoulders are shaking in either fear or exhaustion.

Now having gained clarity of the situation, I start running with all my might. The space beside my arm glitters as a large, silver spear forms within my fingertips.

I can see them, a multitude of Shifters in either physical or spirit form converging upon the coastline, and these are nothing like the others I've seen. Red eyes glitter in dark, pulsating bodies. Each one of them looks thirsty, tinged with the insanity that comes with emotions such as hate or envy. Some have delved into the surrounding foliage, with glowing tree trunks for torsos and blood red veins running down the heads to the roots. They have human like shapes in that they don't look as sturdy or as thick as a normal tree would, and the arms are made of branches gathered together, while possessing intimidating elasticity.

Jake pulls out a small dagger, his face twisted with some of the same madness that the Shifters possessed. "Get ready," he growls as the first Shifter in physical form rips from the underbrush and runs faster than any normal human being should.

Without a second thought I raise my arm and throw the spear with all of my strength. Exhilaration fills my chest as it hits a Shifter square in the face, wedged deep into the wood, and it sinks to the sand in temporary anguish. But that doesn't last for long, and it soon pushes itself up by the roots and edges closer to our group. "What's going on?" I yell, astounded at its resilience, "I just hit it!"

"You have to literally destroy it," Jake says grimly, cracking his knuckles, "I can't tell you how many times that's happened to me since yesterday when they found us."

A bow starts to form next, probably more suited to my needs as countless voids cross into the sand. "Cover me! I'm going to go for the Shifters in their spirit form!" I yell, the first arrow already in my hand and fastened to the string. Jake casts a glance at me, obviously confused, but I don't try to clear it up for him. I let the first one fly, feeling grateful to myself for all those training practices I've taken in the past week or two. As it passes through a Shifter, the creature just evaporates, but strangely I feel none of the pain that I had grown accustomed to when attacking them. There is no guilt, but liberation. These twisted creatures are way past the point of no return, and it's time for judgment.

As Griffin tries to block a tall Shifter from pouncing on me, I let out a swarm of arrows that mostly hit their targets. After several fall, Griffin turns and looks at me. "That never gets old." He laughs energetically.

"What?"

"Seeing u throw an invisible spear and actually knock down stuff with it." He smiles at me, and then turns to the next enemy. He pulls a small

packet knife out of his pants and jumps the Shifter that's the closest.

Jake throws his dagger to Yi, who's flickering in and out of human vision, and immediately long, glistening talons protrude from his fingertips. Although I don't have enough time to really watch him fight, it is amazing to see him slash at the trees and almost rip them in half. I've never seen him fight before, nor most of the others.

Xavier has set Wes down and started smashing everything with his crazy Earthquake punch, a look in his eyes that is both feral and bloodthirsty. Griffin doesn't really have a special talent, but he is incredibly agile with his small knife, amazing me with his strength as he repeatedly stabs a Shifter in the sides and head. Danae is just carefully watching Wes, measuring his temperature and warming his body from the chill of the wind and water. It is amazing to see everyone using their talents and just in general working together towards survival.

The most impressive fighter, however, is definitely Ray. I had never seen his talent before, and it amazes me to witness it now. Surrounded by probably the largest number of Shifters, his body has grown about twice as big in the wake of the oncoming threat, covered in hair and rippling with muscles. His hands look almost like paws, with sharp claws, and his face is covered in hair so it is nigh impossible to see. So this is the Beast talent.

It is funny because the pack had mentioned their powers several times before, but absolutely nothing beats seeing them in their culmination. As continuously fire off arrows with mediocre accuracy, they continuously fend off attacks with the Shifters running after me. And these creatures are not normal in the least. They are fighting machines, able to continue through near anything. And even now they are flooding onto the beach in countless numbers.

I swing a tall mace to the monsters in front of me as Griffin tries to hit them with the knife. "Take them now!" I call as they fall to the ground. Griffin casts me an amazed look and then leans forward to stab them one at a time. I can hear him groaning as one of them lashes out and hits him in the side. I feel pressure closing in on me from all sides, my conscience blurred with red.

There's way too many. We are putting up a good fight, but for every one we kill, five take its place. Anger courses through me as two of them make it through the others to Wes and Danae, both of whom don't notice anything.

"Watch out!" I scream as I throw a glistening spear directly towards them. It heads straight through the two Shifters and vanishes when it reaches Danae's body. I cry out when the Shifters collapse on the sand, running towards them and stabbing them with my newly constructed sword, actually splitting them in half this time. At this point weapons are just magically appearing left and right, and most of the time I don't even know what they are when I throw them. The appearances seem to be fueled by my emotions, in desperation the sword, in hope the spear, and in sadness the arrows.

"Mona!" I hear Griffin's voice to the side and immediately turn to see three Shifters bashing at his body without mercy. His face is bleeding, dark blood running down his nose and neck.

There is just too much. My attention is constantly diverted, diluting my chance for action by introducing so many possibilities. I am losing myself, losing the rationality of free thought in the face of so many enemies.

I call his name and shoot several arrows into the faces of the attackers. Casting a glance at the rest of the beach, it looks to be covered in bodies and blood, most of which is ours. I grab Griffin's arm and tug him over to Danae and Wes. "Help him," I tell Danae firmly, and then turn back towards the battle.

My vision is suddenly, without any warning, knocked out as I am hit in the stomach. I double over, coughing violently. I feel dizzy, and fall over completely as my consciousness starts to fade away. All I can think is that it's over. This pain now corrupting my body will inevitably take over.

I look upwards to see a huge Shifter leaning over me, swinging a huge branch directly in front of my body. I snap my head back, but I can tell it is going to hit me anyways. Fear like nothing I have ever felt before seizes my heart.

There is a loud growl as a flash of color races across my vision. "Don't you dare touch her!" Xavier yells as he jumps at the Shifter with his arm outstretched and his hands clenched into fists. As soon as he is close enough he punches it with such strength that it literally bursts into pieces. Right after he does so, he races back towards me and cradles me in his arms. "Are you alright?" he asks, staring into my eyes.

"P-put me down. You need to fight," I protest, and then he sighs in response.

"I can fight and carry you at the same time." He smiles, and then slings me over his shoulder. I grab his neck while battling the temptation to give up my consciousness. Surveying the area, I can see now that the attack has abated slightly, with Yi having dropped his invisibility, and Jake not wearing that same look of desperation. But my eyes widen as I turn my head to Ray's side of the beach.

"Xavier, Ray!" I call, and he turns his head. Literally covered by ten or more Shifters, he seems to have been knocked down and halfway morphed back to his regular self. Xavier starts running, barreling through some lone Shifters on the way.

"Ray!" He calls, while punching a few of the Shifters surrounding him. On Xavier's back I still manage to produce a small spear, throwing it weakly into another that was beating on Ray's head. As we get a clear view, I gasp as I see several terrible injuries cover his neck and body. One of the Shifters must have been striking him repeatedly with the scourge-like branches, because the same puncture marks I saw on Jake are abundant on Ray's chest.

Xavier bends down to check his pulse. "I don't feel anything," he whispers weakly, causing me to gasp. What... this just... can't...

"Ray, you just can't do this!" I scream pointlessly into the distance. Xavier stands up, and turns slightly to survey the rest of the battlefield. He seems surprisingly calm, but tears are pouring down his face in a betrayal of his real emotions.

I just can't help but think that there is something wrong with the picture before me. That Ray is breathing, that he will open his eyes, and nothing will be amiss. That he would say something like "were you fooled?!" in his low, flippant voice, and immediately jump back into the battle. I try to push forward this proposed reality while wondering, if I wish it enough, that it could become the actuality.

"They seem to be... backing off. But Griffin..." He narrows his eyes and immediately starts running. Griffin was standing up when he clearly shouldn't, the only one who could fend off the ones attacking the wounded, and pushing two monsters to the side.

"What are you doing! Ray!"

"I can't think about him right now, Mona," Xavier says through gritted teeth, "or I'll fall apart before the battle is over."

I realize he is right, but at the same time I don't want to believe it. I don't want to believe any of it—that any of this is real, that there are monsters such as these who are so merciless, emotionless, and cruel.

He helps Griffin for a few minutes while I lie on his back, images swirling before me. A wave of nausea almost overcomes my body, and the entire battle starts to blend together after a little while. I have no clue what's going on anymore, struck blind by the intensity of my emotions. There was something about Ray's bloodied face that makes me feel so guilty, and defeated.

I jerk up as Xavier jumps backwards to swing his fist at another Shifter. "I think they are leaving for some reason," He comments wryly, "luckily for us."

The Shifters do seem to be retreating, the sea of monsters abruptly turning as if they had suddenly received a direct order. As if spellbound, I watch them turn away and march backwards. They step over their dead without a second glance, having no emotion whatsoever. These are not representative of the many Shifters I saw dotted within the forest, full of desperation, hope, and longing. These are beasts, mere monsters that

cannot be salvaged.

Immediately my gaze shifts to the side where Ray had been fighting. My eyes widen, and I start shouting in alarm. "Xavier! Look!"

There is no body over to the side of the beach, only hundreds of tree trunks and scraps of bark. In such a horrific scene of destruction, the only thing missing is the only thing that I wanted to be there.

"Where's Ray?" I ask with tears streaming down my face, knowing that I won't receive an answer. Xavier starts running, but I know no amount of speed will change anything.

"They took him," I murmur chokingly as Xavier frenziedly checks the area, "they... took him. How could they be so cruel?!" I burst into sobs as I grip as Xavier's back.

I never thought of Ray as my best friend, or even liked him half the time I knew him. But I had grown more attached to him over this short while than I could even acknowledge, and now a piece has been ripped out of my heart, and only a gaping hole remains.

Splatters of blood are scattered along the coastline where they must have dragged him. I try to follow the trail, but soon give up as the tears blur my vision. I drop to my feet, sliding off Xavier's back, and soon find that I don't have the energy to even stand. Xavier wraps his arms around my body, sensing what I could never say, and leans forward until our bodies are just barely touching.

"Xavier... you saved my life," I start, acknowledging him in a halting voice, "thank you. I owe you."

He nods, his blue hair blowing in the fierce wind, looking not at my eyes but past me entirely, casting his gaze into the furtive unknown. I realize that even though he is here, he is not, and at this moment—what he is, he isn't. There's a questioning of identity that comes with every horrible situation, whether it is realized or not.

I can hear the others coming closer, but their approach is about the last thing I recognize. Caught in the pain of the indefinite moment, I lift my face up towards his and let my lips rest against his cheek.

Xavier's arms tighten around me, almost to the point where I can barely breathe, and his face tilts so that he can brush his lips against my eyelid, and then my temple. Once again, his hand rubs up and down my back, as if confirming my existence.

"I'm here," I whisper, knowing that for the first time since I met him, he is the farthest away of all of us.

The Pursuit

"Xavier, wait!" I call after him, racing into the vast underbrush. I know that I have no chance of catching up with him unless he wants me to, but I couldn't live with myself if I didn't even try. No one knows more than I about how large the world can be when you feel so alone and vulnerable.

"Please!" Tears form in the corners of my eyes, dripping down my cheek and lips. Within this desperate pursuit, I can't help but feel a variety of intense emotions. The most predominant of these is a strange form of affection that cannot be easily described as desire or simple amity. I want to absorb his sadness, take in every negative emotion so that his pain will fade away. And the strangest thing is, there is no personal gain involved. I will get nothing of value out of consoling him.

But I still want to. And that fact scares and enthralls me beyond measure.

"Mona." Strong hands encircle me from behind, trapping me in the place I desired most. His body heat surrounds me, his shoulders lightly shaking. His voice is pained and his grip emulates that same feeling. In confusion, I look down at the ground to see a red splotch of blood.

"It stops here." Xavier says, his tone heavy. His face lowers and rests on my shoulder, his eyelashes fluttering against my ear. "The blood stains disappear. I... don't sense him at all."

I let him embrace me, closing my eyes and immersing myself in him. As I do so, that same affection grows to consume my entire body until I can't help but accept some form of it. Turning so that I face him, I place both hands on his cheeks and lean forwards.

There is no logical reasoning. I guess you could say that it was because he saved me. Or maybe because of his ways of persuasion. But to me, there is no process. It just happens—or maybe it happened already, and I just didn't know it—without warning, without hope for recovery, and without obligation.

I love him. Maybe since day one, maybe not until this very moment. But all I know now is my own realization, and I'm never going to let it go.

My heartbeat escalates as his head leans closer to my neck. His breathing is heavy with fear and exhaustion. I can't stop myself from stroking his hair with my fingertips, and wondering if things will ever get any better.

"Xavier, I know how you feel, perhaps more so than anyone else," I sigh, rubbing his back slowly. "But you haven't been getting any sleep, and it shows. Come with me and rest."

He doesn't move, but his grip loosens. I gently twist out of his embrace and instead reach for his hand. His palm feels warm and clammy as he gingerly closes his fingers around mine. A strange expression appears on his face as he squeezes my hand.

I take a step towards our camp. Noticing that he is barely moving, if at all, I cast a glance at him inquisitively. He seems rooted in place, thinking about something intently.

"Xavier?" I ask inquisitively, casting a glance at our still interlocked hands. And then we make eye contact, his gaze scaring me with its intensity.

"I don't need rest," he insists, pulling on my arm so that I am forced to turn around. "I just need you."

My cheeks are burning red as he walks closer with purposeful strides. He picks me up, and immediately starts to run, each step taking us farther away from reality. Even though the surrounding scenery melts into a blur of colors with blinding speed, I can still consistently feel his warmth against my side. As I look up at him, I see the determination in his features, as well as defeat, and even loneliness. My heart contracts within my chest at the pitiful nature of his expression.

He stops in some desolate region, his grip loosening on me to the point that I almost fall out of his hands. Carefully I try to lower myself onto the ground, worried about Xavier's countenance.

"Xavier," I whisper, keeping my hands on his arms while I steady myself, "it's okay. You can let it out."

His face crinkles up as he leans back against the tree, his eyes starting to tear up in a betrayal of the emotions he must be facing inwardly.

"Xavier!" I cup his cheeks with my hands, afraid of losing him. "It's not your fault, do you hear me? It's... not your fault." We are only a hairsbreadth apart, but from where I am, the distance seems much greater than that.

"I appreciate you trying to make me feel better," Xavier smiles weakly, his face tilted towards the heavens. Or whatever else is up there.

I take my thumb and wipe a single tear off his cheeks. He laughs through his anguish, a pitiful laugh that is in distortion of everything a laugh should be like, and leans forward.

There is no time for me to react before his lips meet mine, his teeth tugging at my bottom lip. The kiss is gentle, but soon evolves into an animalistic passion that is impossible to control. His tongue invades my mouth, and I accept it willingly, hoping that he will share some of his burden with me. That he will let me into his heart when it matters the most.

His fingers race through my hair, pulling me even closer, almost painfully gripping at my scalp. Another hand trails down my neck and then my back, pushing my entire body so I am leaning into him. My bottom lip burns as he nips at it again, and then he tilts his head to brush his lips against my nose.

I can feel them now—the wetness dripping onto my cheeks, my chin, my neck. I wrap my arms around his back, somehow knowing without even having to ask.

There are no words that can be spoken, but maybe, in this one moment, there are no words that can't be conveyed through actions like this.

Breathing heavily, Xavier slides to the ground with me still in his arms. I can tell that his exhaustion is getting to him, because the intensity of his kisses has gradually decreased. I gently pull away, and he lies against the grass with his eyes fluttering.

I move to where he was leaning and sit on my knees, staring at his face. He looks so... troubled. Even though I bet he doesn't realize it himself.

"If you want to, you can lean on me," I say softly. He looks at me, and then weakly smiles. My breath catches in my throat.

"I might have to take you up on that offer." Sliding himself over, he positions his head to lie in my lap. I blush at the movement, not expecting him to lean on me exactly like he did.

He sighs, looking up at me and then the sky with the same defeated expression. Silence stretches between us, and it lasts for ages, neither one of us willing to break it.

As we rest, my mind wanders to the implications of the recent battle at the beach. The Shifters that fought against us then were so unlike the ones I have seen in this world up until then. They looked like an army, fighting in inexplicable unison that did not match the normal isolated behavior of a lone Shifter. To my knowledge, they don't usually travel in packs or strategize in their attacks. Although, now that I think about it... they did congregate together inside Headquarters after the barrier was broken. The question is, is there a leader of the Shifters who is controlling or coordinating them for these attacks? Does someone know we are here?

Well, I guess the better question to sum all of my worries up at once is: Are we not alone?

A hand brushes against my cheek, startling me out of my daze. "I'm... sorry, Mona." Xavier stares into my eyes imploringly, not the slightest hint of a smile on his face.

"Sorry?" I shake a little, as if I had a chill, from the suddenness of his voice. "W-what for?"

"Everything." He smiles now, but this one is so weak that it would have been better if he had kept a straight face. "For bringing you along this journey with me. For assaulting you with my feelings without caring for yours. For... trying to make something happen when it was... clearly... never going to work... out." His last words are so feeble that I strain to hear them, but they are the most poignant out of all of them. My heart turns as cold as ice.

"Xavier, I"

"I'm sorry for betraying you and the entire pack." After he says his last words, he shuts his eyes tightly, as if willing himself to go to sleep faster. I can tell that he doesn't plan on continuing the conversation, if you can even call it that.

My head starts to droop as the exhaustion gets to me as well. Something about seeing his face slowly morph from a stony expression to something more peaceful as his breathing steadies makes me feel like I should call it a day.

The rest of the pack will probably wonder where I went, but that's okay. We need this rest, I argue to myself, especially when so many of us are injured.

The only thing that worries me is that maybe the Shifters will come back for the rest of us. I really need to keep guard, in case something like that happens.

I start fighting vehemently as my eyes keep slipping downwards. The absolute stillness in the forest is not helping matters either.

Giving up, I lean my head against the back of the tree and let sleep take me.

* * *

What a cruel way to continue the story.

Sometimes I feel like I can understand it. These events and circumstances are necessary, although sometimes inexplicable. Sometimes harsh. Sometimes painful.

Why?

No, no... I take it back. Must. It isn't my place to know. I'd like to... but I can't. Can't ask, can't question, can't know.

I won't get an answer anyways.

Purpose is cruel. A beast that robs you of your natural identity and aspirations and places you on a different path that continues in a straight line, always moving never stopping running running stop take a breath no don't do it stand up keep running running running or else you'll know.

Sometimes I feel like I'm about to shatter. Hit the ground so hard that my face splinters and my fingers crumble and my chest explodes and then I realize, it's already happened. And so it can happen, again and again and again, without any relief, because why? Because I'm dead! Dead then, dead now, dead forever and always.

And there's no difference anyways because

Life is a lie. A beautiful lie. A lie that curves, diverts from the main road and detours by the rocky cliffs, crystal oceans, and pink-stained sunsets. It can move backwards and forwards, sideways and diagonally, every which way, but the truth is the lie is an illusion. Don't be fooled! There is only one direction. There is only one choice. So make a decision. There is the choice to be, and the choice to be. Take your pick.

The end.

"Mona! Mona! What's wrong?"

I feel someone violently shaking my shoulders, and my eyes immediately fly open just as my head hits the front of the tree. "Ouch!" I squeal, my hand reaching up to rub where it had been hit.

Xavier is in front of me, his face only inches away. My eyes widen at his proximity, and my first instinct is to look away, only to feel guilty for doing so a few seconds later. He's... just looking out for me.

"What... Xavier..." I murmur, still confused by what was happening.

"You were shaking just a few seconds ago, almost like you were having a seizure," Xavier says worriedly, his hand rubbing down the side of my arm. My skin burns with his touch, the heat spreading throughout my body.

"I don't know..." I reply, moving my hand to rub at my temples. My forehead throbs, each moment bringing a new wave of pain that is quickly increasing in intensity.

"Were you having a bad dream?" He asks, his eyes immediately gravitating to where my hands are located.

I wince as pain like a sharp blade pierces my head. "Maybe so... I'm not really sure," I groan, my mind growing hazy. "It was so strange... I thought I heard someone... crying, or talking, or maybe both. I'm not sure."

His grip tightens on my arm. "Well, forget about that." He shakes his head anxiously, "how are you feeling? You look absolutely terrible."

"Thanks," I grin, looking up at him briefly with a mischievous expression. "I appreciate that."

"You know that's not what I meant." Xavier sighs, making me laugh.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I just have a headache, that's all."

"It must be pretty bad for you to be groaning like that." He leans in, and gently presses his forehead to mine.

"W-what are you doing?!" I ask him nervously, leaning back subconsciously. I can see him grin out of the corner of my eye. He's enjoying putting me on edge, which is a clear indicator that he is back to normal.

"Yes, what have you guys been doing?" A new, deep voice echoes throughout the area, and we both jump. Turning towards the source, we both see Jake, who is staring at us suggestively. His smirk makes me blush.

"How the crap..." I mutter, looking around quickly to see if any of the others came with him. If it was Yi, I'd understand, but I should have been able to notice Jake as he snuck up on us. "Sneaky devil."

Jake raises an eyebrow at me, unable to hide a broad grin as he catches my words. I realize, all too late, that my statement probably just made things worse.

"Checking her temperature," Xavier replies nonchalantly, adapting quickly to the shock of his sudden presence. I marvel at the way he can

change his attitude so quickly.

"No, I don't mean now... I mean the last several hours you guys have been out here together." He winks and leans on a nearby tree, in a perfect display of reticence that only makes me more nervous.

"Nothing, Jake... drop it." Xavier says, standing up slowly and then extending his hand towards mine. I look at Jake and then take Xavier's hand, letting him pull me up. I don't even care about the impression we are probably giving off right now.

"Well, I'm glad that you guys had an entertaining evening," Jake says so flippantly that I wonder at its authenticity. "But we need to talk. As a group. It's been almost two days and we haven't decided on anything yet, which wouldn't be a problem except we left almost all of our food on the coast."

As I stand up, I mull over his words. He's right in that we need to make a decision quickly. When Xavier first disappeared from the group about two hours after the attack ended, I went after him with the intention bringing him back to camp. We had set up about a mile from the ocean, afraid to go any closer and risk another ambush. I was healed by then, but Griffin and Wes were more severely injured and still needed some extra care. After they finally recovered, we were planning on voting on what our new strategy or game plan should be. If you can even call it that.

Another bout of pain causes me to unintentionally lose all strength in my legs, Xavier rushing towards me to support my body in an immediate response. Jake stares at me, wide-eyed, as I grimace at the pins and needles stabbing at my consciousness.

"What's wrong with her?" He asks worriedly, taking a step forward to place his hand on my head. Xavier brushes his hand away so quickly that it almost looks like a blur, his eyes narrowing slightly.

"I already did that," he grunted, to which Jake smiles and laughs mischievously.

"Okay, Tarzan. Don't be so on guard." I laugh in spite of myself at the comparison, and Xavier's face turns a light shade of red, which is a pretty rare expression for him. I find myself enjoying it.

"Let's not start the Disney references," he mutters, and his face eventually regains his normal coloring as we start walking. The forest is as silent as we are, which only makes it more difficult for me to start a conversation.

"Sorry about making you come look for us," I finally apologize, and Jake nods in acknowledgment.

"It's okay. To be honest, no one was really bothered about your no-show. I was just curious about what could possibly be more interesting to occupy your attention than us on a beautiful night like this."

I roll my eyes at him, and then tilt my head upwards to see the same, plain gray horizon that greeted me last time I bothered to look. "You wish," I say absent-mindedly, watching the clouds swirl together and move endlessly.

"Who knows what that means?" Jake replies, shooting me another Cheshire Cat grin. I almost mention that to him, but then remember that it's a Disney reference. Sort of.

We keep walking in silence, my hand burning as Xavier continues to lock mine within his own. At first I didn't even notice, but now I couldn't ignore it if I tried. At the same time, I don't even want to ignore it. I want to immerse myself in the feeling of his warmth in any way that I can.

Even the thought feels like a new, chewy candy. Although unfamiliar and strangely flavored, I can't stop myself from eating it.

It isn't too long before we reach the camp, but honestly, between my throbbing headache and Xavier's overt gesture of possessiveness, it felt like an eternity. Xavier's vulnerability seems to have completely dissipated, leaving his insufferable confidence that I can't bring myself to hate.

"Xavier," I whisper in his ear, "you can let go now." Standing right behind our makeshift shelter, I hurriedly attempt to shake away his arm.

"You wish." His grip tightens, leaving me more embarrassed and nervous. In any minute they are going to see us, and assume things that don't need to be assumed.

I embarrassedly look away, trying to mentally prepare myself for their reaction. Surprisingly, I feel Xavier's hand leave my own after a few seconds, and I glance up at him in confusion.

"I was kidding, Mona." He smiles widely, with a hint of sadness entering his features. This one glance reminds me of the past several hours, and catches me by surprise. "Don't be so serious." He starts walking towards Wes, the new space beside me sending a chill throughout my body.

As he leaves, the warmth leaves with him, and goosebumps erupt on my left arm.

"So you're back," Danae says, coming towards me with another one of those stupidly suggestive smiles that I have grown to hate. I've seen way too many of them in a short time period.

"Yeah I am, and ready to roll-" I grip my head suddenly as the same pain is amplified. "Well... actually, maybe not."

"What's going on?" She asks, reaching for my forehead. This time I am the one to back away, tired of people trying to get my temperature. I think I can safely say by now that doing so will lead to no good.

"I'm fine. I think it might be a migraine." I turn and sit on a broken log. "It's just the first one I've had in a while so it just caught me off guard."

"What in the world could have caused your migraine?" Danae asks, to which I just shake my head. There is no way of knowing something like that as a definite.

"I did have a strange dream earlier," I say softly, thinking deeply. When I focus, I can almost hear it in my head... the muffled cries, and the painful words that were so scattered and unrecognizable that I couldn't distinguish anything from it. Maybe it's just my gut, but something tells me that this dream was important, maybe more so than anything else I had experienced so far.

"A vision?" Danae asks casually, and my head snaps up immediately. Her glance is inquisitive, but satisfying her curiosity is the least of my worries. What I have experienced today could be an indicator of another life in this barren world, or even what I can't dare to hope for...

"Guys." I stand up immediately on the tree trunk, calling everyone's attention. The headache retreats slowly as I make up my mind, and hopefully begin to change everyone else's. They come towards me, Griffin and Wes dragging their feet and the others yawning with boredom. "We need to talk," I say firmly, my voice stronger than I expected it to be.

"Finally," Jake says exasperatedly, "I've been waiting for this."

I ignore him, waiting for the others to get closer. Xavier and I make eye contact more than once, and he grins broadly in an awkward manner that makes it seem like he's trying to encourage a little child.

"Do you remember when I said I was having visions... that I've seen this place before?" I begin, to which several of them nodded vigorously. Jake and Wes, on the other hand, are staring at me blankly.

"You know where we are?" Wes asks, his eyes narrowed. "I think it's time to fill us in."

"We'll have time for that later," I dismiss his question easily, still too focused on my current train of thought to be distracted. "I'm sure we will both have several stories to tell. But here is the basic gist—things are different here, as I'm sure you have figured out. We aren't exactly living in a physical world."

"What the..." Jake says in protest, "how can you say that this isn't a physical world?!"

Without responding, I concentrate on producing a single dagger. I can feel his gaze on me as it materializes and measuredly throw it into the ground beside my feet. It leaves an indent, and no further explanation is necessary.

"Either my power has changed, or the world has changed. Which seems more likely to you?" I ask him, stepping down from the broken log to touch the dagger. It is fading gradually, but still feels real and dangerous in my hand.

There is silence for the next few seconds as Jake and Wes absorb the new information. I feel a bit bad for them since they have to adjust so quickly, but there isn't too much I can do to make it any easier.

"Well, anyways, I don't remember much of my recent dream, but I still can remember a crying person that seemed to be at the center of it. I don't know who the voice belonged to, but it stands to reason given the context of my other visions that it relates to something within this world, and could have big implications. If this truly was a connection to another life within this world, I think we need to pursue it. Especially since we have nothing else to do."

"But how do you know that what you heard was a person?" Griffin asks, obviously confused by my statement, "and how do you suggest we go about doing that?"

"I don't, to be honest, although it sounded a lot like one. You're just going to have to trust me on this, especially since we don't have many options. And as for plans, I think we should do exactly the same as what we were doing beforehand."

The others stare at me, incredulous, and I almost laugh out loud. Something about their mouths hanging wide open is just so amusing and unsettling at the same time.

"I mean, like what we were *originally* doing, which was heading towards the castle. It feels like the source of everything that is going on is located over there, and it could be our ticket out of here."

Everyone looks up in the direction of the castle, its first spiraling tower barely peeking over the tops of the trees. In our journey to the coast, we forgot how close we were getting to the main source of our curiosity, but now it looms before us as a deathly reminder that we don't have the answers.

Wes's hand clenches tightly as he turns back to meet my gaze. "I don't want to go back there," he states firmly, "Jake and I already traveled to the gate yesterday."

I look at him in surprise, but keep quiet as Wes unsteadily continues. His eyes start to dart back and forth as his countenance crumbles at the mentioning of the castle. "I originally woke up in this world near the castle to begin with, although not close enough to be in any danger. Every time I tried to go to sleep or rest, I would continue to hear whispers that were seemingly talking to me, as if unseen creatures were trying to hold a conversation. The murmurs scared me, and eventually I had to leave to go find some food. I moved towards the coast, and bumped into Jake, who had been resting out in the open sand by those weird fruit plants. We stayed together for a while, but then decided to look for you guys. I thought maybe the whispers might have been an indicator of where you guys were, so I suggested that we go explore that area again. That... was a mistake."

He stops, and for such a long period of time that I feel compelled to try and probe him to continue. However, Jake steps in after noticing my impatience and realizing that Wes isn't going to speak. "At first I thought he was crazy when he told me about the whispers but when we later went to the castle I could definitely hear them as well. It felt like they were swirling around me, choking me with its intensity. Surrounding the castle was a large gate, and there was also a grand entryway that was unlocked and devoid of any guards. I thought that the lack of protection was a sure indication of abandonment, and we went closer to the gate. However, when we almost reached the arch, the whispers intensified into screams and I could barely hear myself think or talk. Several trees surrounding the area began to glow a deep, pulsating red. It was probably the scariest thing I have ever experienced."

"Were they... Shifters?" Yi asks him slowly, his face drained of color. "The same ones that we saw earlier?"

"Yes, pretty much." Jake nods solemnly. "It almost seemed like they were expecting us, with the way they immediately began to chase after us. Originally they were surrounding us completely, but we managed to tear through them and run into the forest. But they were hot on our trail, and by the time we were close to the coast several of them were gaining on us. One of them grabbed Wes and ripped at his back before he could react, and for some reason the wound weakened him, almost like there was poison in the Shifter's attack. I sent him ahead of me while I finished up, or so I thought, the Shifters, and he eventually landed at the beach, where you guys were. And then tons more appeared and I had to run too."

"Wow..." Xavier says, his hand gently brushing against Wes's shoulder once to get him out of his moment of shock. Wes literally shakes at the sudden touch, and then snaps his head towards Xavier while glaring at him.

"Well, the moral of the story is, don't go to the castle. Bad things will happen," Jake says, and the casually starts walking towards the small, dying fire. Most of the others leave as well, probably sensing that the discussion must be over. I can hear them talking about the castle, with most of the conversation being negative in tone. Everyone seems to agree with Jake in being cautious, and I can't help myself from feeling alone after that realization.

I sit down on the broken log again, and try to think about the next step that we should take from here.

I feel a presence beside me, and Xavier's deep voice slips in like honey through my concentration. "I know what you're thinking," he whispers. His hand slips around to my waist and rubs my lower back in circular motions, an action that I am very familiar with for some reason. I feel memories emerging from the chasm, at the very edge of remembrance.

"What am I thinking?" I ask him, turning to face him. His bright green eyes are glowing as he looks back at me, his face full of confidence.

"You're thinking that we should go anyways."

My eyes open wide as Xavier smugly stares into my face. He's right. To me, the Shifters' presence is only a further indication that there is *something*. If there's a guard, there's something being guarded.

"I do think we should go," I confess to him, bringing my hands to my cheeks in frustration. "But I don't know how to convince the others. Wes especially seems shaken up about the possibility."

"You know, Mona, you're a pretty persuasive person. It shouldn't be that hard, especially for you." He smirks, and I resist the urge to slap that silly grin off of his face. He has to be kidding me. I'm the least persuasive person alive, and he knows it.

"Well, I'll leave it to you then, mister leader," I say mockingly, standing up and taking a low bow. I make sure to keep eye contact with him, letting him know that I'm willing to play the same games.

"What are you going to give me if I take care of it?" He winks, and the smile instantly drops from my face. While inwardly melting into a puddle on the ground, I sit back down on the log.

"I mean, this is in your own best interests as well," I reply gruffly. I know that he was probably kidding, but I can't help but try to hide the embarrassment I feel.

"I didn't know leading our entire group into a Shifter's den was in my best interest," Xavier laughs, and gently punches me in the shoulder. Now I know for sure that he's playing with me, but this time I don't really have any comeback. In just about every way you look at it, going to the castle doesn't make logical sense. It could easily lead to our deaths. Wes and Jake already established that the castle is heavily guarded, and that the castle was probably abandoned of any real people. But I really feel like this is the right thing for us to do at this point. Wasting away in this world

does not really seem like an attractive option after the amount of time I have squandered by deliberating endlessly over what to do and what not to do.

And then I decide to use the trump card. Feeling guilty for my new strategy but not having an alternative, I stand up and call out to the others.

"What does Ray mean to you?!" Anger flares up within me as I say these words, not for the others' response but for Ray himself. I picture his face, bent in laughter, and the fierce emotions multiply.

As for Xavier, his expression completely changes from one of mirth to a wholly hostile expression. His icy demeanor does not seem to be directed at me, but the overall frustration frightens me more than anything else.

I try to ignore him as I continue. "Ray may be... d-dead right now. He could be taking one of his last breaths. But the fact that the Shifters took his body should strike within us the desire to fight! Not only for our own guilt and revenge, but for him, and the very idea of what he means to us. Not only did these enemies wound us, but they took one of our own. Our pride has been shattered and our confidence has been destroyed. But one thing we must remember throughout this time of grief is that we do have the power to defeat our enemies! We shouldn't run away from situations that seem improbable when our purpose is higher than that! And even if Ray is looking down from us from above right now, I am sure he would say the same. We owe it to Ray... we owe it to him to find our way home so that we can make true meaning of our lives. Or else... he died for nothing."

Tears start to drip down my face, and I condemn myself for bringing up the harshness of the true reality when it might just be the last thing we needed. I turn my face and Xavier is there, his face devoid of emotion as he looks back at me. He probably feels like I just ripped off the band-aid, and I can't feel any guiltier for it.

"What a load of BS," Jake finally mutters, stepping forward so that he's in front of me. "We'll be walking straight into our deaths, and then Ray truly would be dead for nothing."

We stare at each other evenly, as if judging each other for weaknesses and flaws. "Is there really a difference?" I ask softly.

The silence seems to last for an eternity. And then... I finally remember to breath.

Jake looks at me, and then slowly he nods. He reaches out his hand and I cautiously take it. "Might as well," he whispers, as if to himself, and then looks at Wes with a guarded expression.

Although bitter in his expression, Wes moves to be beside Jake. "Guess this is the manly thing to do," he says, and then quickly looks up at me with a slight smile, "or womanly." He places his hand on top of ours, amazing me with his strength and dedication.

Something warm touches my palm, and I look to the right to see Xavier at my side. "I call touching Mona's hand," he says firmly, his joking manner contrasting with his fierce expression. A hint of a smile appears on my face as Xavier's support fills me with hope.

Because I truly believe my words. We must find our peace, or die trying. The pursuit is what makes life worth living.

Griffin, Yi, and Danae come forward and place their hands on top. We all look at each other, unified by our goals, friendship, and resolution. I count to three, and then we throw our hands in the air, the pointless act having more hidden implications than we could ever possibly realize. I try to send a telepathic message to the Shifters, feeling the effects of my bravado.

We may or may not be ready. But we're coming regardless. So now... it's your turn.

* * *

It's been a long day, but we are finally here.

The brick walls tower over us, marred by several discolorations, cracks, and various ivy plants that have enveloped entire sections of the exterior. Tall, stone fences encircle the area, and it is cracked and even destroyed in several places. Even the architecture of the castle doesn't seem to be that impressive, with its simple roofing and lack of aestheticism. It doesn't look very intimidating in general, besides the factor of its enormity.

But as we come closer, I can feel the buzz. It starts in my head almost like a ringing in my ears, but then intensifies into identifiable whispers. "Come," it seems to say, over and over again. There are several different variations, but that single word is easily the predominant element.

Come to me, and accept your fate.

Xavier falls into step with me, and he leans close to my ear. "Can you make anything out?" he asks slowly. I nod my head, and he frowns.

"I can't hear anything besides a weird buzzing noise. Griffin said he heard the same."

"That's strange," I reply, "mine is pretty... disturbing." Xavier looks back at me in concern, and I smile weakly. "It's okay. Really."

"Don't you dare try to shoulder anything on your own, or I swear..."

"What are you going to do?" I ask slyly, interested to hear his answer.

"I'm going to punish you, obviously." He says this to incite me, but I'm not falling for it this time.

"Well, I'm looking forward to that," I smile, and his eyes widen. I unexpectedly like doing the unexpected, especially during a serious time like this.

My face turns solemn as I return my attention to the matter at hand. I look around the premises, and am surprised to see not a single Shifter. It should have been easy for me to see any of them, but it simply seems like there is no one guarding the castle.

Perfect timing. Come on in.

"Guys, I see nothing," I say softly, turning to both look at the others and scan the area behind us. Similarly, I see no one but ourselves.

"This is pretty strange." Jake walks closely behind us, his nervousness showing through his voice. "Last time I heard definitive whispers. This time I can only hear a loud ringing in my head."

"Who knows..." I murmur, now only a few feet from the stone rods. We travel along the fence until we reach the arch, which is massive in size and has several strange designs etched into the stone material.

"Should I go in?" I ask quietly, pondering to myself. Xavier grabs my hand as I stand inches from the entryway, encouraging me to move forwards. However, a moment of doubt enters my mind and I turn frantically to face him.

"Doesn't it seem like they are ready for us?" I ask, to which Xavier's expression morphs into something more serious and cynical. "It's like they just gave us an invitation, to be honest."

"I agree," he whispers back, "but that doesn't mean that we should turn back. Let's be brave... together."

So sweet of you to accept my invitation.

I squeeze his hand, the warmth spilling over, and start to walk on the brick pathway. This castle doesn't exactly have a moat, but a plethora of trees, lining the pathway to the point where its boundaries are almost impenetrable. Darkness and shadows fill the area, and I find it hard to see. Clinging to Xavier's arm, I try to watch for sudden tremors or movements.

I can feel the other's nervous attitudes emanating as we reach a few steps that lead to some kind of door. It is near impossible for us to even

make out the doorknob because of the scarcity of light. When we finally find the knob, however, the door swings open very easily.

I've been waiting.

"What the..." Wes murmurs as a huge, elaborate room greets our eye. Although lit only by the natural light flooding through the windows and a few candles, we can tell that the inside is more opulent than the outside. There are nice bookcases, furry rugs, elegant chairs and a grand chandelier hanging from the ceiling. However, there also seems to be a mix of old and new fashioned items, which is very strange. For example, on one side of the room is a corded telephone, and on the other side there is a wide screen TV. I balk at the contrasts displayed within the room.

We all enter and stare at the many items placed throughout the room. There are also several doors lining the walls, each hopefully leading to a different room. Although before the whispers were bearable, it is at this point that the voices are almost to the screams that Jake spoke of. It pounds at my head, the impeding headache overwhelming my thoughts. For some reason, I feel compelled to keep walking to the North end of the room, and then farther East. Xavier's hand slips from mine, which immediately throws me off of my concentration.

"Xavier?" I ask shakily, my voice wobbling as I notice that several candles had been blown out. Either there is no response, or I simply cannot hear it due to the clamoring of voices. "Danae? Jake?" I call, to be left only with an echo.

The inside seems to get darker as I get increasingly nervous. "Anyone? Yi? Wes? Griffin?"

The silence that accompanies the strange voices makes me feel inwardly cold and wary. I feel a fear unlike most that I have ever experienced in my life. It is the fear of impending doom, looming over me like a tidal wave, threatening to wash away everything in my life that I hold dear.

Walking over to the faint outline of a door where the voices seem to be the strongest, I place my hand on the doorknob. Although scared out of my mind, I can't seem to stop myself from turning it and finding out what could possibly be at the source. I feel like this is *it*. I'm... getting closer.

The door opens just as easily as the first, but I barely have time to look inside before I am startled by... a mirage. An illusion. A fantasy. A fairy tale.

No one is coming for you.

A foreign voice reaches my ears, high-pitched and extremely shrill, and it takes a second for me to realize that the scream is my own.

And then everything turns black.

The Beginning, the End, and Everything in Between

The sound of a crackling fire is the first thing I notice when my eyes open. The light aroma of cinnamon wafts throughout the room, although tainted by a heavy premonition that I can't seem to shake, even if I can't quite remember the reason for that mysterious feeling.

I blink once, twice, attempting to consolidate the whirl of colors into something that more closely resembles solid objects. Just to convince myself that I'm not crazy, I bang my head against the floor, and then woozily roll onto my back.

"Ouch, that must have hurt," a low chuckle erupts as my vision settles on long strands of brown hair that are hanging around my face. Still a little dizzy, I let my hand brush against the hair, and then eventually a firm chin, tracing down his jawline and neck. As if just realizing my actions, I let my arm drop and my mouth open as I finally register who the person leaning precariously over me is.

"Ray?" I ask him, my hand reflexively reaching back up to touch his cheek.

"After fainting at the sight of me, I thought your reaction might be a little different. Looks like I was wrong." He smiles weakly, and something about the exhaustion in his expression makes me feel uneasy.

I sit up, peering around the room. I remember now... Ray was sitting at that dark ebony desk over in that corner, writing something on a strange notepad when I opened the door. As soon as I took my next step he almost immediately lifted his head and looked at me, his eyes glowing with a strange intensity, as if he had been expecting my arrival. I thought he had been a ghost.

The many bookshelves lining the walls are cast with an eerie glow from both the small candles scattered throughout the room and the fire in the elegant hearth. The carpet seems to grasp at my ankles as I slide towards the wall, trying to gather the strength to push myself to my feet. "Ray," I ask, my voice wobbly, "what are you doing here? Aren't you hurt? Where are the others?"

He raises one finger to my lips, and I inwardly quiver with uncertainty. "Too many questions at once." Standing up, he offers his hand to me. As I look at him from below, something seems off about his appearance. It isn't necessarily that he doesn't look haggard, or even the slightest bit injured. The problem is that he looks too... calm. Like he knows something that I don't.

"Answer me, Ray," I say as I accept his help, stumbling to my feet. "Where's the rest of the group? They disappeared earlier... and how long was I out? Why didn't you try to wake me up?"

"Mona, please," he replies, his eyes gentle. "Don't act so freaked out. They are all fine. And you weren't unconscious for very long. It was only a few minutes. I was waiting for you to regain a little bit of your color back. You lost almost all of it when you saw me."

"Oh, okay." I breathe heavily, leaning against the bookcase. After catching sight of the plentiful cobwebs lining the corners, I back away and sit haphazardly on the back of a large sofa that was facing the fireplace instead. "You have a lot of explaining to do. How... do you know the others are fine?"

An unfathomable expression flickers across Ray's face. He blinks a few times and then turns his head as if to shake himself out of something. When he looks back at me, he is gently smiling, making the past few moments seem like a mirage.

"A gut feeling, I guess." He chuckles softly, although not quite convincing me of his optimism.

Ray turns and walks over to the fireplace. He grabs a steel rod and starts to prod at the flickering flames, tending the fire. The side of his face is illuminated by the weak light, making it seem distorted. At the same time, I can still sense a comforting familiarity in his face and body to the Ray I know so well.

"Is something wrong?" I ask him, sliding around on the sofa so that I am facing him. "You seem strange."

"Do I?" He asks, his voice a little deeper than normal. As he utters those words, he stops suddenly, clears his throat, and then awkwardly fingers the rod in his hand. "I guess I do feel a little strange. But in a good way. Don't worry about it."

He turns to me, finally, and I notice a lack of symmetry, almost like a trick of the light, in his facial features. "We should be talking about you right now. How do you feel?" His eyes meet mine, and then veer to the right, sweeping across the rows of books.

"Fine, I guess." I shrug, trying to evaluate my mood. Besides a dark feeling in the pit of my stomach, my body seems fine. It's not what I'm concerned about either. "I mean, I'm really worried about the others. How did you reach the castle, Ray? Are the Shifters keeping you prisoner here?"

"No. Well, yes. It's complicated," he replies slowly, clearly trying to conceal any emotion. He carefully leans the rod against the wall and starts walking towards me. My heartbeat quickens as he reaches the chair across from where I am sitting. He lowers himself into the seat, crossing one leg over the other, and his mouth moves as he whispers something to himself.

"What do you mean...?" A myriad of thoughts are swirling around in my head, and none of them make any sense. Things are just not adding up, and the pressure of this room is starting to swallow me home.

"I'm afraid that I haven't been completely honest with you, Mona." Ray's voice is soothing, contrasting with the gravity of his words. "It's like most interactions I've had throughout my life... so deeply intertwined with lies that I can't even tell you what is true anymore. If any of it can even be counted as such."

"What do you mean?" I ask him, frightened by his strange demeanor. It looks like he is battling with himself, with his right eye twitching slightly and his hands shaking. The pit in my stomach grows to consume my whole body, and I nervously rub my nails against each other.

"Where do I even begin?" He asks himself, throwing his head towards the ceiling. The inner debate seems to continue for quite a while. Finally, he decides on something, lowering his head to meet my gaze.

"To be honest, this is my prison. It has been, for quite a while." He casts a glance across the dark walls, clearly disdainful of his surroundings. "It's a pretty impressive prison though, I must say. There are some interesting rooms scattered around here. Would you like to take a quick look at some of them?"

He stands up, offering his hand to me. Narrowing my eyes, I cautiously take it, letting go as soon as I am on my feet. His palm felt as hard and cold as ice, and I can't help but wonder how that could possibly be when he was so close to the fire only moments ago.

I follow him to the door, not quite knowing what to think as he slowly twists the doorknob. As the door swings open, the main hallway appears again before my eyes, still darkened by the eternal night streaming through the glass windows. The silence prevails throughout the room as we walk onto the carpet, leaving a stinging sensation in my chest.

"No electricity?" I ask, desperate for some hint of normalcy within all of these events.

He laughs in response, and this laugh feels more real than anything else. "The builders didn't believe in adding it, I guess. Old fashion is the best fashion over here."

"The builders?" I look around anxiously. "Where are they?"

"This castle is ancient anyways," Ray says, completely ignoring my question. Looking straight ahead, he walks over to a pair of doors and then

stops.

I almost ask him why he is being so evasive, but the sight before my eyes prevents me from doing so. Speechless, I survey the narrow hallway, with the stone walls inlaid with gold and the floors covered in a luxurious, blood red carpet. At the end of the hallway, a magnificent set of doors is present, engraved with a number of strange designs.

"What is this..." I murmur in wonder, staring at the carpet and waving my foot around in it. My feet seem to sink into its luxurious depths as I imagine myself falling onto it and floating away.

"This is the most sacred area of the castle. Everything in this world stems from this room." He grabs the handles but holds it closed, turning to face me.

"How could that-"

"You'll see. Just take a look." Ray smiles, his eyes softening as we look at each other. He continues to stare at me for a while, I almost frozen as his expression morphs into one of vulnerability.

"I don't want..." His voice chokes up, his hand turning white against the golden handles. I step closer to him, my own hand reaching for his.

"Don't want what?" I ask softly, my fingers about to curl over the same handle. At the last moment, he pushes me aside, his eyes narrowing at the movement. His body shakes slightly.

"I'm sorry," he quickly apologizes. "I had a moment of nostalgia." He quickly pulls the first door open, and keeps it open for me to walk through. "Ladies first."

When I peer at his face, he seems as if, once again, he has adopted a completely different expression than he had possessed minutes before. I pass him, and take a look into the vast depth of a room that defies logic in every sense of the word.

"Ray, what... is this place?" I ask, surveying the walls that are not walls, the floor that seems to be crumbling beneath my feet.

"I like to call it the core. Pretty nice, huh?" he asks, lifting his arm and flinging it from side to side. "Be careful on the ledge. You don't really want to fall off."

Yes, he's right. I couldn't really see it before, but now I can clearly make out a ledge, stretching an unfathomable distance into the darkness. I tilt my head to look over a sharp edge, only to see a dark chasm, glittering with nothing but the spark of curiosity.

Ray comes to me and gracefully takes my hand. "Please take a seat, Mona."

I whirl around to see an ornate chair engraved with the same designs that decorated the door. The uneasy feeling returning, I slowly lower my body into the seat, wondering how I could have missed such an obvious object in a room that seemed completely empty only seconds before.

"Do you remember our conversation in the library? You know, when you chose to be awakened?"

"Yes," I reply, my thumbs rubbing against the sides of the chair.

"I told you then about the purpose of the werewolf species. It was to defeat the Shifters, who are all evil, terrible beings that exist merely to terrorize humans."

I nod, unsure of where he is going with any of this.

"Well, that was not exactly the truth."

"What-"

"Some are, to be honest. Many of the most ruthless Shifters travel to Earth on a daily basis to grab their next meal. Others are not even close to what we have encountered on Earth. I know you have seen many of them here."

"Did you say... next meal?"

"Wait, Mona. Just let me talk," Ray implores, his eyes searching mine. I fall silent, and after a few seconds he continues. His body straightens as he lifts his arms again. A wash of color begins to appear behind him, painting a strange scene that spellbinds me. As the picture takes shape, I suddenly realize that the room we are in is spherical, with the ceilings and walls slanting into each other, curving around the thin ledge into the vast depths that lay below.

"There... is a God." Ray looks at me, and then sweeps his gaze across the vivid landscape. Miles and miles of bleak horizons are before us, not unfamiliar to me as I make out the corner of a sandy beach scattered with battered bodies.

"So this is..."

"There isn't a name. It can't have a name. If it allows itself to be named, it allows itself to be controlled, and no one can truly harness this realm. Like a wild horse, it lives and dies alone and free, without anyone to hold it back. But anyways, this is besides the point. What I mean to say is, I've never had to question."

"Question what?" I ask nervously, bringing my hands together. The scene behind Ray is shifting to reveal close up scenes within the world, with the first being a lone Shifter looking deep into the well that Griffin and I fell into.

"That there is a God. It's quite a paradoxical privilege to have. Knowledge is painful, to be honest." Ray pauses, his eyes reflecting a dark crimson, almost as if it were a trick of the light. "I hesitate to give it to you. But I have no choice, anyways. It will be over soon."

"Ray, you aren't making any sense. What's going on? What is this place?" I move to get up from my seat, but a strange force holds me down. I look down, and in horror see a thick rope strapped around my waist. I whip my face back up to him, and he is smiling sadly at me, his hands still raised.

"Even now, I'm struggling on how to tell my story. I suppose I don't have to tell it. I could leave you here. Or push you over the ledge." He steps closer, sticking out his foot. "It would be so easy. But I can't. There isn't a point. Fate says it won't be so."

I begin to breathe heavily, my heartbeat accelerating. I rock within the chair, testing the rope to see how strong it could possibly be.

"Shifters are more than the werewolves have made them out to be. In fact, every single one of them is a soul, both the corrupted and the pure lumped all together in this waiting room for their final destination. And me, I get to be their leader. I am the caregiver of the waiting room, protecting both the peace and the Shifters from escaping their cage."

My eyes widen as his face starts to shift along with the scenes around him. His arms immediately fly to his cheeks, as if trying to hold himself together. "Just a minute longer... I can wait... don't want... to..." He whispers to himself.

"Show me who you are," I say, my hands working at the rope. It is too strong, however, and I know that it would be pointless to keep trying. But most of all, I am concerned about Ray's evident pain. It grips me, and I can't take it any longer. "Let it go."

There is no response as Ray clutches at his head, struggling once again. "Show... just... let it..." His hands move to cover his eyes and an almost lightning-like flash appears in the room, causing me to blink several times and look at the ground. When I finally look up, I nearly jump with my chair into the abyss.

"Ray? What happened to your eyes?"

Instead of his green eyes, he now possesses a pair of ruby red eyes, glowing with the same demonic intensity that I am so familiar with. The rest of him is the same Ray I am used to, but that one feature frightens me beyond anything else. Shivers run up and down my spine as he almost takes

a step forward, then backs away at my expression.

"I guess there's no going back anymore. I can't be Ray, just as you can't be Mona." Ray pauses. "I will finally take on my role. Mona, I am the enemy. I am what the prophecy calls the wolf with the red eyes. I have been given a mission by God, and I intend to finish it, while at the same time doomed to certain failure... as it is written."

I only stare at him, my teeth chattering involuntarily as the cold sweeps in like the snow upon the backgrounds of the sphere, each crystalized piece of water fluttering to its death in the gray valleys.

"When the true God created this world, he made me as well. He made hundreds of servants, built this large castle, and gave me companions to counsel me as I led this kingdom. At first, there were no troubles. Our land flourished, nutrients rich with emotions dripping from the treetops and Souls practically frolicking among the green plains. Everyone could use feelings of joy and happiness as proper sustenance. No had to leave... or wanted to leave.'

'But he did not leave me in charge of this world without conditions. He gave me a piece of paper, detailing what was to happen when the first Shifter crossed over into the foreign worlds that lay past our borders, that I was not allowed to open until the time came. A long time passed, a time that could only be described as peaceful and blissfully temporary; when I was living a life that was as stagnant as the reigning clouds over our terrain.'

'But after a while many more souls were entering our world and there were not enough nutrients growing to support the population. Some would fight each other for a single piece of fruit, while others would intimidate Shifters into relinquishing their hard-earned nutrients. This went on for a while, and soon a brash, rebellious Shifter decided to take matters into its own hands. It left, sneaking through the gates into Oblivion, and I thought we would never see that particular Shifter again. Well, I was wrong.'

'It appeared again, at the edges of the gates, holding some strange sphere-like objects. When other Shifters came to look, he released the spheres, all of which released a wealth of feelings that invigorated the Shifters that surrounded it. They were introduced to many emotions that were not available within our realm, such as jealousy, greed, and anger. The reason why Shifters need emotions is to make them feel somewhat alive while they wait, allowing them to retain some of what their soul originally consisted of. However, these... ugly emotions ignited a fire within their own souls, an fiercely burning passion that far exceeded the satisfaction one would get from a single grain of Happiness.'

'Since fire is contagious, the news spread quickly about the Shifter's new mysterious energy source. I knew about it already, having this room to survey the kingdom as a whole at any time I would like. Not worrying about anything, I just let it go. I never seriously thought that the Shifter would even make it much longer when fed with such impure emotions, much less incite an entire rebellion against me. Of course, I severely underestimated its influence, as it lead thousands, against my orders to stay away, into the Oblivion under the pretense of finding a land with wealth in feelings beyond measure.'

'Scared by the events that had taken place, I practically ripped over the letter that contained the true God's message. Within it, I found the prophecy, a description of the real world, a silver ring, and some more instructions. I was to travel between worlds to monitor the Shifters, as their taste for humanity could not be quenched, and watch for the appearance of werewolves, who were an apparent threat to the Shifter society. I was very disturbed by the information, but was secretly excited to leave and see something beyond what I have seen in my very strange crystal ball. When I finally took the first steps out of my kingdom, leaving the counsel members behind to watch over everything, my world was completely and drastically shifted before my eyes. There was spontaneity. There was a rich aroma of adventure and excitement. With my silver ring, I could easily become one of the humans, mingling among them in ways I thought could never be possible. The ring allowed me to take on a solid form, any solid form, and I used it often. I experimented, time and time again, with different animals and different types of people, learning the customs of the world until I knew them better than I did my own. And even as I was enthralled, the other Shifters were satiated to an even greater extent. Everything they ever could want in a dinner menu was available, and soon their appetite grew even larger.'

'It was hard to return to my kingdom. When I did, I went straight to my huge crystal ball to see the Earth and study more about it. I became obsessed, and for hours on end scoured the ends of the Earth for any sort of new curiosity that would strike. But at the same time, I did so with a heavy amount of guilt. Because I knew about the prophecy. I knew about Fate's wishes. And when the framework is laid out, all you can do is build upon it and look down from above, wishing and hoping for the impossible.'

'I knew, yet I just watched, watched the world, watched the Shifters grow fat with sadness and love and pain and fear. Many more went to join the others, lured by the sweet promises Earth offered. As this went on, I noticed that the Shifters down in Earth had changed. They were growing savage, unsatisfied with the taste of a certain feeling but wanted it all. Those who stayed in our realm began to be more satisfied with their portions than the ones who left, staying full for longer periods of time. Shifters on Earth would not just take pieces of the emotion within a particular human anymore, but completely take over both the emotion and the person's identity, swallowing it all with one big bite and then wrecking havoc among the other humans that surrounded them due to the Shifters not being able to control such a sophisticated body. I would continually go back and forth between worlds, trying to convince many of them to return. No one did.'

'But then the werewolves started to pop up everywhere. Finally catching on to the cause of all the new destruction, they took it upon themselves to liberate human kind from the monsters, being able to smell their recently devoured emotions quite easily. I learned later that they also obtained the prophecy, being given to them by God, which gave them a sense of direction as to how to deal with the unseen enemy. As for me, I just tried to prevent any more Shifters from leaving the realm. The Shifters on Earth were growing far too dangerous, their eyes pulsing a deeper red with every soul they consume. It is the ultimate sin to consume a soul that has not been judged by the true God.'

'The werewolves did a pretty good job to control the Shifters for a while. Because of the Spiers, many were being killed quickly and others were hunted down through the physical bodies that they took over. Still, many were escaping the realm and coming to Earth, having their fill and gaining the dark red eyes. As you can see, I have been guilty. Once. I had a sip of love, and immediately got sucked into its beauty and richness, accidentally drinking far too much than I should have. The human lived—barely—but I am scarred, and probably will be forever.'

'And then you came. I knew immediately who you were and what you were. My crystal ball room immediately suffered a blackout right after your birth, and thereafter almost always was zoomed in on you. At the time, you meant destruction to the ones I was watching over. You were going to end everyone's existence, including mine. I was a coward however, and most afraid of my own termination. I knew I had to kill you if we wanted our lives, if you can really call it that, to continue.'

'We tried countless times when you were young. Precarious steps were taken and outlandish plans were made, all of which somehow failed before they even reached your doorstep. It was as if your house was protected by an invisible barrier. I realized later that it was Fate's doing. I learned the inevitability of my actions, but not before I committed the worst deed. I sent one deathly Shifter after you when you and your parents went on vacation. That decision would haunt me forever.'

"You..." I growl, lashing against my bonds. As if they were made of steel, they don't even move. As the initial wave of anger courses through my veins, I sit and wait for reasoning to return for me. Throughout this entire astounding confession, what I don't feel from this person who wants to kill me is hostility. "Why did it haunt you? How did you find it within you to feel regret if you are only an empty shell of a Soul?" I ask weakly.

Ray shakes, his eyes widening regretfully. "Because... I got to know you, Mona. I became a shell of a Human, to try and get close to you, to strike when the opportunity presented itself... and failed in the worst kind of way." He finally takes a step closer to me, lowering his arms. I feel the bonds loosening, slowly, as he lets his guard down.

"Before you, and before Earth, I had nothing to call myself. I had no identity, just like the rest of the Shifters. You, and my brother, gave me a *name*."

"It was a long process, but I integrated myself into the human lifestyle. I needed to get close, and my faithful crystal ball told me that a werewolf named Xavier was involved. In order to get affiliated with him, I would have to tamper with Xavier's memories, making him think I was related to him in some way. After observing him for a while, I decided that the best way to do that would be by taking the place of his brother, who had just died at the hands of a crazed werewolf. All I needed to do was to make Xavier think that Ray had survived, and not only that but had become a werewolf in the process of battling with it."

"But you said he changed you, not that you had unintentionally become a werewolf! Remember?"

"Yeah... that was a lie within a lie. I'm not really sure why I said it. I guess I wanted you to feel sorry for me. Fancy that." He scoffs, his face full of self-derision. "I have to say Mona, I was quite fascinated with you. When Xavier moved the pack into the mansion that was so close to your orphanage, the only thing I would do at nights was wonder at your behavior that I was able to observe when I could sneak away to the other realm. You were always so strong. There was never one weak moment I could sense from you. I wanted a taste of such resilience, but I could never make myself get close to you. I felt dirty and impure, which is a difficult thing to reconcile when approaching someone with such a powerful soul. When Xavier brought you to the mansion, I knew my time was approaching, but I just could not go through with any of my plans. It was over before it even started. And Xavier mating with you... I could have never imagined that things would turn out like that. I really liked Xavier and admired his brave and honest character, which made it so much harder to try and do something to you behind his back."

"Did you... ever try?"

"Yes. At the Awakening. I had poison made in a separate bottle, but then mixed the bottles up at the last minute. It was a silly mistake, and one that I couldn't have possibly made on my own. But it was certainly the last attempt, that's for sure. I was not going to risk anything again, especially blowing my cover. Because my cover, and my name that I borrowed, has become what my entirely too long existence has consisted of. It is as if I waited a countless number of years to have a life... that was truly worth the wait."

The bonds slip to the floor, but I do not move. Ray steps even closer and crouches down so we are face to face. Although his eyes look so beautifully foreign, they are tearing up with the same familiarity that I am so used to. I know its Ray. I know him.

"And now Fate says I have to try to kill you... and I can't!" He whispers hopelessly, leaning his head slowly forward and resting on my knees. "Because you deserve to live, just as the Shifters deserve to be passed on to their judgement day. They have been kept waiting for far too long."

He looks up at me and his eyes shift between green and red, unintentionally reflecting his will. "Ray... please, tell me about what will happen if I complete the prophecy."

There is silence for a minute, as he collects himself. Looking up at me, he firmly gets up from his position. "The werewolves, Shifters, and this world will cease to exist as you know them. The Shifters will be able to move on towards judgement and will not wreck any more havoc in the outside world. The werewolves... will be without purpose. You will live. I'm sure of it... because you are tangible, unlike the rest of this world."

"What are you saying?!" I cry, standing up as well. I walk closer to him and grab his arms. "You are tangible as well. You. Are. Real."

He only smiles, the tears fading away from his features. The scar on his face catches my attention as he turns away.

"Is it a lie if you believe in yourself with your soul? Can you define yourself, or must you let others define you?" I pull on his arm, trying to turn him back towards me.

"I don't need the proof of being defined either by myself or by others. It won't matter for much longer." Ray finally turns back, and in his other hand he holds a crown. A dark red jewel pulsates at the tip. "This is yours. The jewel used to be a deep sapphire, but has been polluted over time. Throw into the chasm, and live."

I stare at the crown, suddenly hit by a wave of remembrance. Suddenly it comes to me, the visions and memories all consolidating together, until it resembles one cohesive message. "I... I saw you, Ray."

He glances up at me. "What? How could you... possibly..."

"I've been having visions. Visions of this world. And now I realize, they were of you. We are connected, Ray, through Fate. How could I possibly throw you away? I don't care what you've done, I"

"Mona, it doesn't matter anymore. Sure, we can prolong it for a few days, and the servants can catch me having committed treason against the safety of the realm and throw us all into a terrible prison for a hundred years until we escape somehow and come back to this *same* place... because we have to! Don't you understand? Just as I cannot push you into the chasm this very moment, you cannot avoid your own role. And I know you. You cannot willingly leave this many lives at such a state of unrest for your own selfish gain. You are more than that."

I look at him, tears starting to flow, and reach a hand out to take the crown. As my hand closes around the cold metal, my mind burns with the pain of the inevitable. Should I be strong for myself, as I always have been, or be strong for the benefit of innocent souls? Both decisions will be like a dagger stabbing me deep within my heart.

A flash of movement catches my attention and I turn my head to see the images reflecting a group of people rushing through a narrow hallway. I look back at Ray, alarmed, but he moves his hand quickly to dispel the image.

"Do it now, Mona. You will never get the courage again. I need you to do this for the sake of my realm." Ray moves to the side, his hands pushing me towards the edge of the ledge. I look over once again to see complete darkness.

"Where does the chasm lead?" I ask Ray, frightened to move any closer.

"There is a dark, eternal fire at the bottom of the chasm, in the core of the castle. It can destroy anything, so be careful and be brave. I am here for you."

I look back at him, unable to stop the waterfall, and then turn to the crown. I finger it in my hands, marveling at its beauty. The same designs from before are etched on the sides, and the jewel glows with a beauty beyond measure.

And I must destroy it? Destroying a world that has existed for years and years before I existed and the werewolf clan existed and maybe even before time truly came into effect?

But how long then must the Shifters have suffered?

I think back to the first Shifter I saw, resting at the base of a tree. It looked so peaceful, so innocent. Should I rob it and others of their possible salvation? How could I be so cruel?

I'll do it. I will let go of the crown. No time for regrets. No time for second thoughts.

Now. Now. Do it now.

My fingers loosen.

I say a prayer, something I am unused to doing, hoping that I am doing the right thing. Not that it matters. Because...

The wait is finally over.

The crown starts to slowly slip past my index, then my middle finger, then my ring...

"Mona!"

The door bursts open to a number of people, racing into the room like their lives depended on it. Leading the group is a person I know all too well, and we make eye contact immediately.

"Xavier?!"

I crumble to my knees, unable to contain my fear as it consumes my entire being, leaving me drained as Fate guides my fingertips.

If it doesn't matter, then why does it hurt so badly?

The Decision to Live

I stare at the man before me, my fingers tightening over the crown until the tips of my finger turn white. My knees buckle as a sudden weight as strong as an avalanche pounds against my shoulders. I can't tell the reality of it, but in this one moment, it doesn't seem to matter. In my delirium, I try to form his name with my lips.

The man yells something and starts running towards me. I feel my body slip as rocky bottoms shift into an eternal void. The weight drags me into the abyss, burying my vision into the darkness. There is no time to think or even breathe, yet my descent seems to occur in slow motion, my arms flailing without command or control. And all the while I am watching through the lens of a camera, powerless as a glass wall separates me from my body and reality.

Until arms encircle my shoulders, bringing me upwards into an unfathomable warmth. The familiar scent disarms me, and my eyes blink as I start to realize what is happening. He came back. He found me.

I had almost forgotten his face and touch in the face of such alarming discoveries. My heart aches as I am now overwhelmed with this comfort and... reason brought upon by his presence.

Robbed of my willpower, I surrender myself to his embrace while turning my body into his chest. For a few moments I listen to his beating heart, the deep breaths as his shoulders shake. I almost allow myself to smile as his breathing steadies. This is why.

"Hey," he whispers in my ear, tightening his arms around me. "You can't leave me that easily."

I smile weakly, strangely not hating myself for agreeing with him. The warmth from his body seems to permeate into my heart, and my fingers slowly relax over the gilded crown.

After a few seconds I let him slowly release me, looking around the room. It still has retained its spherical shape and steep cliffs, but the scenes that flashed across the rounded walls has vanished. The room appears empty in every sense of the word, and for a few seconds I wonder if any of the past events actually happened. None of it truly seems real.

Griffin and Danae inch towards me, while Jake and Wes stay back to glare at Ray. "What were you two doing here? Where have you been?" Wes loudly asks. He tries to look strong, but we can all see his knees shaking.

I glance at Ray, alarmed to see that his eyes had returned to its normal color. He is shaking his head nervously, muttering to himself.

As the others gather around me, I crumble under the weight of their stares and hug the crown to my chest. I... can't tell them. Even if I know they can help, even if it will make me feel a thousand times better, my lips just won't form the words. Or any words, for that matter.

"Why didn't you help Mona yourself?" Xavier furiously snaps at Ray. He turns away from me and starts marching towards Ray with a dark glare. Ray just stands there, totally frozen, a lone figure against the backdrop of the dark, desolate walls.

"It's okay," I caution him, reaching for his wrist. "It's not his fault."

"How is it not his fault?" Xavier asks, still turned away from me. His wrist twists out of my grasp, fingers slipping around my own.

"He's been through a lot," I say softly, questioning myself as I defend him. Should I just let the others get mad at him? Something prevents me from telling the truth.

The truth will hurt.

We make eye contact again, and he simply stares at me, green eyes devoid of any emotion or truth. The fire within me begs for the unveiling of the facade, the fabric holding us together in the patterns of fate. But then the fire fades as Xavier's warmth snakes through my arm and the comfort reaches me again.

"I suppose you have," Wes speaks up, a smile finally crossing his features. "I'm glad that you are safe and with us again. You need to tell us all you've learned about what we are dealing with."

"What we are dealing with?" Ray repeats, his eyes darting around the room and his mouth twitching. He starts moving towards the door as Danae and Jake follow him. Their eyes seem more guarded, as if they are expecting something.

"You know, with the crazy Shifters and all that," Wes replies casually, walking languidly to the door. "And we would also like to know what this room is, and why you two are here."

"It's the Shifter's dungeon," Ray replied quickly, "it's where they have been keeping me." He throws another glance my way as if daring me to deny it.

Xavier leads me to the others, his hand tightening around mine. "Let's talk about it where we can have some light. We wouldn't want the Shifters to come back anyways."

I try to make contact with Ray again before we leave the room, but Xavier is dragging me with such force that I don't even catch a glance. There are so many questions I have, but the biggest one that looms over me is... what now? The web of lies is being spun and one gust of wind could completely destroy it.

We proceed through the elegant hallway and then through the double doors into the large room we first entered. It looks different now, with a little bit of light wafting through the windows and the small candles burning brightly. I can see the detailing of the design and furniture, all with an old-fashioned feel to it. Being able to see more of the castle, however, doesn't make me feel safe or even welcome.

And even as we exit the castle, I get the small, eerie feeling that we are being watched.

Ray is walking ahead, leading us around the perimeter of the castle. His steps seem shaky and unsure, and for moments I catch the edges of his skin blurring. Then I blink my eyes and it seems to be just a trick of the light. The others are walking ahead of us, seemingly unaffected by the strangeness in the air. But I know Xavier can sense it, for his other hand has balled into a tight fist.

"You feel that?" He leans down and whispers into my ear. Within that whisper I can feel the smoothness of honey dripping down his words into my willing ears. Even though I know its not intentional, I feel a buzz from him that is far different from what he's talking about. Instead of responding to him, I catch myself staring at his lips.

"Uh, uh, uh... yeah. I do." I turn my head away, a blush forming on my cheeks. Thankfully Xavier doesn't pursue it, and as I recover his hand never leaves mine.

I don't want to leave this.

Ray takes us to a small cave in a mountain beside the castle. I look around us, the trees blocking my view of the towering turrets. Once again, the area seems free of life and movement, and I hear nothing but the roar of the wind. But I can't shake that feeling, and I wonder if it comes from something greater than what we can understand.

The cave is small and intimate, the few of us standing shoulder-to-shoulder in order to fit inside. I lean back against the wall, confused as to what Ray means by bringing us in here.

"Okay, so what do you want to know?" Ray asks, sitting crosslegged on the dirt floor. The others slowly slide to their knees. Xavier's expression

turns to stone, and he lets my hand slip from his.

"Tell us about your imprisonment," he says, leaning back against the wall with his eyes focused on Ray.

Ray starts to talk, weaving a tale about how the Shifters dragged him to a dungeon and kept him there, feeding him sparingly. I tune out to his story, only paying attention to the werewolves. They look so strong, and determined, yet beaten and bruised as this world takes its toll. Not a smile is to be found as the pack listens to Ray, and I realize that true joy hasn't existed for a long while. There's relief—that Ray is okay and back in the group—but also distrust and suspicion. When did we fall apart at the seams, unravelling to the darkness of our fate?

Frightened by my own thoughts, my hand subconsciously wraps around Xavier's arm in an attempt to forget. To have the bandage wrapped around our troubles and singularity of predestined purpose so that I don't have to look at it anymore.

Probably perplexed by my movement, Xavier casts a quick glance at me. His hair is growing longer, cascading over his eyes and down the back of his neck. I feel the urge to brush it out of the way, but restrain myself as he turns again to focus on Ray again.

"Well, I'm glad we got you out of there," Xavier says firmly as Ray finishes his story. "Now we have to come up with a new game plan."

"What now..." I murmur quietly, looking at the ground hopelessly. There is no game plan. Or even a survival plan.

But they don't seem to know that, ignoring my whispered words to discuss their next strategy. But is it even a strategy? All of our efforts just seem to be poking at the air with a stick.

"We should head away from the Castle to see if there is a border," Danae suggests, peering out from the cave into the fine mist. "It's better than staying here where the Shifters can find us."

"But don't you think the Shifters are hiding something?" Jake asks fiercely. "We shouldn't run away like cowards."

"It's a big world out there," I finally speak, looking at each member of the group in the eye. "We don't want to waste our energy when we are so low on food."

Everyone looks at each other, morbid whispers hanging in the suffocating air. Xavier looks at me again, this time searching my face for answers.

"I think we need to rest," Ray offers, standing up quickly. "Let's find some warm shelter. Two or three can fit in this cave."

I try to agree with him, but the burden of knowledge weighs down on me as countless questions come to mind. What is he doing?

Why are you running?

Xavier stands up as well, pulling me with him. "We will find some shelter as well. Wes, stay here. Danae, you should help him." Danae nods, and I notice a hint of purple in Wes's face. What's wrong with him?

"We think he's getting sick or his injury is infected," Xavier whispers to me as we start walking. "He has been feeling fatigued for quite some time and injuries aren't healing as quickly in this world."

"That's not good..." I say softly, my eyes narrowing as Ray takes a turn ahead of us into the underbrush. Xavier leads me over in that direction, only to see Ray backing into a niche in the ground with a tree trunk over his head.

"A few can join me over here!" he calls back to us, and I visibly sigh in relief. He wasn't going to disappear again.

"What?" Xavier asks quietly.

"Uh... nothing." I smile weakly, starting to walk over towards Ray. Xavier pulls me back, giving me that annoying suspicious look again.

"We are going to find shelter over this way!" He calls back, starting to walk in the opposite direction. "Jake and the others will join you."

"Xavier?" I ask, my eyes widening. He only tightens his hold on me and keeps looking straight ahead. I start to feel guilt, but at the same time I still know that I can't tell him. I can't rob that spark of life from him.

We keep walking for quite some time, until I finally decide to figure out what's going on. "Do we really have to walk so far away from the others?" I ask him, the exasperation impossible to hide from my voice. "I think we passed close to three other spots where we could have had some shelter for a while."

He smiles thinly, continuing to walk forwards. "I want to make sure." He leads me through a pathway between trees, revealing miles of the same empty, desolate scenery.

"Sure of wha-" He whirls me around to face him, his hand pulling my body towards his in a crashing kiss. My knees almost buckle to the pressure and I nearly forget to breathe in the sudden, overwhelming intensity. "Xavier!" I call out chokingly as he retreats only to change angles and leave me breathless yet again.

His other hand leaves my neck and trails down my back, pulling me closer until there is no space between us. I lose myself in the repeated kisses, questioning everything that I know to be true for this one feeling that overcomes all obligation and supposed meaning. My legs become like a rag doll's and I am completely dependent on Xavier's support. In response he lifts my legs so that I am cradled in his arms.

"Sure that we couldn't be heard," he slyly whispers in my ear, brushing his lips down the side of my face into the curvature of my neck. I let out a small whimper as he kisses my collarbone, his hand brushing my leg. "I'm so glad you're safe, Mona. I don't know what I would have done if I lost you." His face moves upwards, dropping a light kiss on my forehead. I stare into his eyes, my heart melting as I see myself reflected within them.

And as he moves towards the base of a tree, carefully lowering me onto the ground as if I was... a precious object, memories start to flash within my head of him, and of us. We met before, in the real world. I hated him because I felt forced into something fake, but he made the connection between us real and authentic with every passing day. He was annoying and persistent, but turns out that happened to be my type because I fell for him anyways.

I remember all of the moments, puzzle pieces fitting together instantaneously. There was the time in the mansion, the time where I betrayed his trust, the time where he told me he loved me anyways, and still continued to love me even as I pushed him away. I remember the Sharuken ritual, when the council told me he was gone although in reality he never left. He was the one who never tried to change me but always accepted who I was.

His thumb gently pushes my mouth open, and his lips meet mine once more. My arms wrap around his neck desperately even as he temporarily releases me. "Forgive me for being selfish," he says quietly, "But I need you now more than I need anything else."

I pull him back to me, his face millimeters from my own. "I love you, Xavier. I remember everything. Now I know that I have needed you from the beginning." I smile at him, then close the distance as his eyes widen. His hands grip at my shoulders, as if begging for confirmation.

His knees fold from the surprise and he falls to his side against me. I guide his arm around my waist and roll into his embrace, fully intending to let go of any obligations and practicality for the most important person in my life. He lets me control our movements, and I add pressure into the kiss, rubbing his shoulder and the sides of his arm.

Xavier smiles at me, leaning back as the surprise wears off. "I'm so glad you remember. I promise that I will always be there for you. You will never regret this." He roughly kisses my temple. "I love... you too and always will."

He pulls my body into his and we lie against each other, looking into the endless sky and dreaming of an eternity together. Even though the ground is cold and hard, my heart is enveloped in an ethereal warmth. This is my home. This is where I belong.

Whispers of judgement.

The winds howl into the night, but I am unafraid. I am stronger than anything this world has to offer. She gives me strength... and hope.

I lean against a tree, robbed of all my energy. Breaths are a triviality to my kind, but I need them... to keep my identity. To exist rather than to fade away into the endless mist.

There is no blood here. There is no tears or anger, no happiness or laughter. We are only shells, but we still have the hope of life. She must come soon, or I will crumble to the emptiness of this world.

I know she will send me on the path to deliverance.

My eyes flutter, and I awake to the roar of the wind. I wonder why I am not shivering, and then quickly recognize the warmth of the man right beside me. It feels so nice here. I could stay here... forever...

I want to say that I'm sorry, but I can't form the words.

I want to say that you don't have to do this, but I can't form the words.

Because I'm losing myself and everything I value. I can't feel or breathe, completely stagnant in a static world. Feelings are a dull ache, and actions are beyond my means. I can't form much of anything that mirrors what I would call myself. Does self even exist anymore? I would like to say yes, but I still can't form the words.

Save me, please. Although I can't beg.

I jerk upwards, my chest heaving. Even though the air bites with a hint of frost, my arms and head glisten with sweat. The whispers are caving in on me.

Xavier lies beside me, still sleeping. His shirt rests against the tree, and I carefully pick it up and drape it over him. He must have been really tired, because he's not usually such a heavy sleeper.

I stand up quickly, trying to rid my head of all the madness swirling around inside it. I... know what I saw, but I'm not sure that I want to admit it to myself. So I'll just call it lunacy. Insanity. Nothing that has anything to do with me.

I bend back down, staring at Xavier's peaceful resting face. My hand reaches out and brushes the hair away from his eyes, and for a minute I believe that I can forget everything once again.

Don't forget who you are, Mona.

I shook, standing back up quickly and pacing around the small clearing. Why am I having these dreams? I saw Shifters, nearly dead, pleading... to me for help. Are these real, or my own illusions? What should I do about them?

I turn my head to see a glint of metal hidden at the base of a thick shrub. Walking over, I dig around in the leaves to find a crown with a pulsating, ruby red crystal at the top of it. I pick it up, feeling the weight and texture only to find that this is... the same crown.

Where did I even leave it to begin with? I know I was holding it in the core of the castle, but I don't remember anything after that. One thing is for sure, I certainly didn't put it here.

I hold it awkwardly while looking around the area, half expecting to see Ray hiding in the background. Who is orchestrating this? Everything just seems to fit together, just like my earlier dreams of Ray and the castle, and in real life things don't work out that way.

For you, it does.

The crown brings with it the burden of responsibility like a tidal wave over my heart. As I look at Xavier, at all these happy, priceless moments we made last night and the many days before, it reminds me that I'm only tying more string to him and the others that will have to be cut. I don't doubt that these moments are special, that they matter to me and to us, but they will just make things harder in the end. I know that it already is.

I have to love him enough so that I can let him go. The Shifters need to be saved, and potentially the human race as well. The werewolves won't have to kill Shifters in order to feel useful anymore. From what Ray said, the werewolves may cease to exist as I know them. I'm not sure that I know that means, but even so all I am left with is the urgency and inevitability of my mission.

Do I need to say goodbye?

No. I can't.

It... will only make things harder.

I whirl around and bend down to drop a gentle kiss on Xavier's forehead. "Sleep tight, Xavier," I say, standing up quickly and hugging the crown to my chest. The whispers are pounding, imploring, begging me to make a change. My heart constricts, because I know that I cannot leave an entire species at risk due to any of my own selfish desires. Because in my heart, I cannot truly believe that Shifters are evil and don't deserve salvation. And who am I to rob them of that?

Please. Come soon.

I start running at a breakneck speed, weaving through the trees without knowing quite where I'm going. Allowing the whispers to guide my thoughts, I keep moving, endlessly, making the decision to accept my fate. Occasionally it seems like a red eye appears to my right, almost as if a trick of the light. It seems as if the Shifters are guiding me towards my own destiny. They always have, I suppose. The tragedy that ended my parents' lives has propelled me to fight, both against and for the Shifters.

The castle turrets soon appear to the left of the trees and I automatically steer towards it. Even though I have no idea on how to navigate through the castle, I have no doubt that I will get there. I reach the gates and they eerily begin to open. I don't even stop to look, my conscience not allowing me to wait.

The door to the castle is similarly left ajar. After a few minutes of going through doors and weaving through darkly lit corridors, I reach a hallway that I recognize. With thick carpet and elaborate door handles, I knew this was the entrance to the core.

Meet your future.

Knowing that it's too late to go back, I swing the door open to reveal the dark space I had been envisioning since the previous night. The anticipation releases, and I stare around the room blankly, not knowing where to start.

There are no illusions of grandeur. This is it, with the plain, dark room and the eternal darkness below. Is it supposed to end like this?

I walk over to the middle of the ledge, not sure where the edges blurred into the void. The silence is unnerving as I finger the crown in my hands. Should I just throw it over so I don't risk falling myself? That would probably be the least heroic thing to do.

Now that I've finally decided to be a hero, the question is how this will go down in God's scrapbook or wherever this will be written down. Should I pose for a minute, or fight the evil dragon who appears out of nowhere? I'm not used to this kind of life.

I almost wish the influence of the whispers were back and as strong as they were, because I could really use their help.

I start walking to the ledge, when I start to hear footsteps pounding down the hallway. My heart rate accelerates wildly as a figure begins to come into view. I can barely see it, but I would recognize his frenzied breaths everywhere.

I would have probably picked the dragon over this.

Tears unwillingly come to my eyes as the figure runs to me, his hand immediately grabbing my shoulder. "Xavier... didn't expect to see you here," I say softly, kicking myself for assuming he wouldn't be able to follow me.

"What's going on?" He asks, tightening his grip. "I'm tired of you and Ray not telling me everything. First he acts strange, and then you. What's so special about this room?"

I begin to break down under his urgent stare. I'm tired of trying to keep things from him, because he deserves to have the truth, even if it hurts. "It's the prophecy, Xavier. This is all the prophecy. I'm about to fulfill it."

He just stares at me wonderingly. "So... this is the red stone?" He motions to the crown. "Is this what you were trying to do yesterday?"

"Yes. Ray is part of the prophecy too, Xavier... everything fits. The fight on the beach, Ray being taken hostage... everything. And all the dreams I had of this world, they were all leading me to this very point."

"So Ray is the one that we... lost in the group? But we found him again!" He says, trying to figure out the complexity of the situation. His eyes search mine, and his hands reach to finger the crown in my hand. "Whose is this?" Xavier asks softly, "was it just sitting here, or..."

"It's Ray's. He isn't what you think he is. And neither are the enemies that you hate and kill. The Shifters... are souls. Dying, polluted souls."

"But that makes no sense." His eyebrows furrow in confusion. "In order for the red stone to be his, that would make him... the red wolf? Who else could be in possession of such an important object?" I just nod at him, and he almost jumps ten feet backwards. "How? I've known him for my entire life. And I'm pretty sure Shifters are evil."

"He is still Ray. Believe me. He's just... slightly different. And a lot older than you think he is. But I have to destroy this jewel and crown in order to fulfill the prophecy, and Ray said that it must be thrown into the chasm of eternal darkness that surrounds us. The Shifters aren't all bad either. You've seen the ones hidden within the forest."

Xavier surveys our surroundings, his gaze cold and calculating. "So, what happens to us? You throw it in, the red stone is destroyed..."

"Well, the Shifters will be able to move on to judgement. Werewolves will cease to exist as we know it. I'm still not sure what that means." Xavier's face crinkles up as I mention the fated words, and his hands leave the crown to wrap around my body.

"Are you saying that you were basically going to leave me forever without giving me a chance to say goodbye? After everything I told you last night?" He asks fervently, his breath impossibly close to my ear. I find myself shaking with the threat of indecision.

"I knew it would... make it harder, Xavier. I knew I couldn't leave you if I did it. And even now, I just want to stay with you forever. But the human race is hanging in the balance, along with the hope of salvation for the passing souls. It's... bigger than just us..."

He tightens his arms until I can barely breathe. "I understand," he whispers softly into my hair, "You wouldn't be you if you avoided this forever. You have a strong sense of justice and I love that about you."

I smile and he kisses the top of my head slowly. His hands rub down the sides of my waist, and I revel once more in his warmth. For the last time I guess. "I'm hoping, Xavier... that there may be happiness for the two of us."

"Oh, I know that this is not truly goodbye. We have each other in our hearts, and will never be alone. I will always have your lovely face to remind me of the peace in my heart." Xavier leans his head against mine and then releases me, stepping back. I blush, smiling at the weight of his words and the beautiful warmth that comes with it.

"So it's okay, Xavier? I'm sorry about hiding things from you. I just didn't want you to know... that I was going to end it."

"But I always knew, Mona. Don't forget, I knew you were the chosen one for a very long time. And I can put two and two together. Now, I don't know what the Shifters have done and exactly what they are, but I do think that you are righteous and will give them whatever identity and salvation they deserve." He smiles at me for what seems to be the last time, dampened by the inevitability of our futures. "But you need to do it, quickly. I think that some Shifters are coming back, because I'm starting to hear noises."

It's true. The whispers are swirling around again, twisting into howls and whimpers. These are not the sounds of begging, weak Shifters but power-hungry monsters. And the sounds seem to be getting closer and closer, accompanied by another pair of footsteps into the darkness of the room. "Mona?" Ray's unmistakable voice calls out, echoing against the unfathomable walls. As he comes close to where we are, I can make out his face, torn with exhaustion and fear. "Oh, Xavier, I should have known you were here too. Look, you have a few seconds, maybe less. I know you're here for a reason. Don't let anything take away from that. You have the power to save, but the window of time is quickly closing upon us all. I'll try to hold them back, but..."

"Them?" Xavier asks, his voice cracking in the growing intensity of the howling.

"The council members, those who wish to stay in power and keep the status quo. They mean to trap you here. They led you in, and now they are going to suck your emotions and feelings for each other until there's nothing left. Turns out, Shifters don't actually keep prisoners in dungeons. Sorry about that little lie, Xavier."

"Seems like you've been keeping a lot hidden from me, Brother," Xavier says loudly. "Why don't you show me your true self? There's no reason to hide anymore."

The two stare at each other, the rest of the world completely forgotten. The escalating tension starts to fade away as Ray sighs, dropping his shoulders and argumentative stance. He also knows that Xavier deserves the truth.

"You're right." Ray starts to morph, his edges twisting and fading, only to reveal seconds later a similar outline with slightly different yet significant facial features. "It's hard to show my true self, though, when the only thing true to me is my eyes of blood."

Xavier seems frozen for a second, and then frowns. "It's true then. Are you a Shifter, or a werewolf?"

"Both, it seems. But I'm pretty sure I need judgement more than anyone else in this world and the next. We've all played into Fate's hands, but our own wills and desires dictate our own identities, and no one can rob us of that if you save us. I'm probably supposed to fight you right now, but I don't wish to live in such a stagnant world, chained to a role where I have to watch countless souls die to the outside world. I almost forgot about it, though, when I was with you. Thank you, Mona and Xavier, for giving me the opportunity to have a life worth living." Ray grins widely, his expression tinged with hopeless insanity. "Please don't hate me too much. I really like you guys, you know. In fact, I'll take care of these guys for you."

Shifters burst in the doors like a dark, stormy cloud, taking over the darkness and plunging it into an even deeper, chaotic madness. I can only watch as Ray starts to morph with the movement of the ever changing cloud, eyes like fire burning into his victims. But the mass of Shifters seems to converge upon him, almost swallowing him at the base of the ledge. "It's not over! I'm fine, but you need to go now!" We hear the faint yell echoing around the room, spurring us into action.

I race over to the edge of the ledge, or what it appeared to be like, and cautiously looked into the eternal blackness. Xavier holds my arm, as if afraid of my movement. "It's okay, Xavier. It has to be now," I whisper.

"But... I love you. I haven't said it enough yet. And we haven't grown old together, if you could even call it that. And I haven't said half of the things that I wanted to say about you, and we haven't bickered over whose taking the last of the cereal, and..." He pauses as the tears start to flow from my eyes, drenching my face and his chest in sorrow as he pulls me to him.

"We will. I promise." I smile weakly, glancing over at the dark cloud as it starts to separate into individual beings heading in all directions. "I just need to take care of some things first." A small, sharp spear forms in my hand, and I offer it to him. "Take this, and protect yourself. I'm going now."

"Going?" He grabs the spear, looking at the looming Shifters and pointing it at them. "You're staying right with me."

"Not today," I whisper, looking into the chasm and knowing that more Shifters already had flown into them, hoping for a chance to grab the crown. I can't let go of it, because Shifters can grab physical items in this world. Which can mean only one thing.

I will save you, not just for you, but so I will never lose any idea of what I know myself to be.

I back away, and then launch myself in a run towards the chasm. "Mona!" Xavier yells urgently, but I am a perpetual, moving force, curving around the singular object so that nothing can get to it without getting through me. The last thing I see as I fall into the darkness is Xavier running after me while batting away a frenzied Shifter. His expression falls as he realizes he can't catch up, and the Shifter pounces on him as if he were a wounded animal.

I'm not sure I wanted a heroic ending quite like this, but I am still unafraid. No one can hurt me now and no one can take this role away from me. Even if I die, I am bringing life to the world and beyond. Besides, if Xavier isn't with me, what would be left in the end?

Come home. Be free.

I smile as I fall into a darkness so deep that it erases everything, the crown finally falling from my hands into the unreachable, my eyes closing softly as a comforting force embraces my body, carrying me to eternal deliverance.

What Comes After

I'm not sure when I even woke up, but it seems as if someone just flipped the switch and freed me from whatever state I was in. Because the last thing I remember is falling into a chasm of death and now I'm sitting in a patch of grass, staring at the awfully blue sky.

Blue sky. It looks nice today. Almost too bright for the...

Wait. Is it?

I feel the grass with my fingertips, the gentle rushing breeze tickling my nose. Am I really back in the real world?

I jump to my feet, looking around the forest, hoping to catch a glance of another human being. Anyone who can confirm that this is my new reality. Hopefully... the one I want to see most.

Yes, *this is the real world.*

I shake, looking back and forth in a frenzied attempt to find the source of the whisper. It's the same voice that has followed me in my dreams and throughout my quest. "Who are you?" I called out. "Show yourself!"

Nothing happens at first, but then something around me shifts in the blink of an eye. The air begins to swirl together, forming a sheer outline that solidifies into a pale, beautiful being wearing a long robe and adorned with broad, delicate wings. Its face is thin, with white eyes that lack pupils, framed by long white eyelashes and small lips. Thick white hair tumbles from its head to its waist, rippling with curls and adding femininity to its, or her appearance. I probably should be more scared, but I feel like I've seen everything by now. And there's so something so comforting about her presence, giving me some indication that she wouldn't hurt me.

"I have been your guide over your journey. I guess you could call me Fate, as you have been describing me for quite some time. Please, don't be frightened," she says, smiling lightly. "You have done well."

I frown, stepping close to her. With shaking fingers, I run my hand down the side of her wing. The soft feathers convince me that I'm not hallucinating. This is actually real. "So everything that happened... was your decision?" I ask slowly.

"No, it wasn't my decision, but a part of something even greater than me. My only purpose was to make sure that the prophecy was fulfilled."

"Okay," I mumble, my hand falling back to my side. "So you have been in my head all this time? What was even the purpose of the entire prophecy then?"

"Well, I wouldn't quite say that I was in your head, but I guess you could call it something like that. I just whispered to you, or created circumstances that allowed everything to happen that needed to happen. I knew the basic plot line, but every detail and every choice wasn't already planned, as you possess your own free will." She sighs, somehow managing to make that simple action look angelic. "The prophecy allowed for the Shifters—the souls—to decide their own identity within the threat of an inevitable future. How they responded and grew within the given circumstances will dictate their own judgement. Your friend Ray is a clear example of reaching beyond his confinements to obtain something that resembles a quality of life."

My eyes widen as she mentions his name. "Tell me... why am I here when I clearly died? And what happened to Ray... and the werewolves?"

"You didn't clearly die because I carried you out of harm's way. Throwing yourself into the chasm was pretty heroic I'll admit, but you dying had nothing to do with the completion of the prophecy so I made an executive decision. As for your friends, well, it depends."

"Depends?!"

"As soon as the crown was consumed, the world was flooded with light. In that single moment, every being was called to the place where he or she belonged. For different people, that means different things. Ray wasn't actually a part of the werewolf society, so he actually moved on to judgement with the rest of the Shifters. In general, the werewolves you know and love still exist but have been scattered, stripped of their powers and given the freedom to find a new purpose for themselves among the humans. Today, you have this freedom as well. You have broken your chains, and now you must choose as the Shifters have chosen."

I stare at my hands, squeezing them into a fist. So.. I'm never going to see Ray again. That fact saddens me, but I know I can't feel too depressed because I know he wanted and needed a resolution. He should have the right to his own happiness. "I'm normal now, right?" I hesitatingly ask, trying to get her to keep talking so I can get as many answers as possible.

"For that question to be answered, you must define normal. Mona, I believe that you are special. Extraordinary even, and you have the power even now to change the world. You don't need supernatural abilities to do so either. So believe in yourself, and gather up the people who care about you the most, because now you belong. Embrace your new destiny, not just for what it will be but for what it is." She smiles widely, lifting her hands into the sky. "Last of all, I'd like to thank you. And as a little parting gift, head to the south for a little while and you'll find him. I know you'll be looking." Her body starts to rise as well, and I subconsciously reach out only to find that only seconds later she is far beyond my reach. After a single blink it seems like she faded into the clouds, only a particle of mist in the endless, blue sky.

The whispers are gone. I feel slightly lonely, but at the same time liberated by the possibilities that this change offers. There is no one to pave the way for me anymore, and I can go in any direction that I choose. Even if Fate was only a figment of my imagination and I'm actually going insane, I can't bring myself to care.

Instantly I turn and start running to what I know to be the south. Call it intuition, or for all I know it could just be a silly guess.

But as I run over the peak of the hill and then tumble down the slope, I can make out a figure running my way in the broad clearing. And I would know him from a mile away.

And suddenly, nothing seems to matter anymore. All my questions, doubts, and suspicions instantly disappear as a pure ecstasy consumes my heart. And even if I don't have powers anymore, my legs still seem to run a mile a minute as I know that he is on the other side waiting for me. This was never goodbye.

And we're finally here, in a rather large forest, not knowing quite where we are or where we are going, much less where we are even going to start. Yet nothing else has ever felt so right, not in my entire life, with all the shards coming together to form a beautiful picture of a perfect world.

I choose you.

Immediately we reach for each other, searching for the warmth that only the other person provides. "It's good to see you again," I say laughingly into his ear, stroking his arm. He doesn't answer immediately, crushing my body in a tight embrace with his lips dancing down my neck.

He finally lifts his head, his eyes sparkling with mirth. "I don't really understand anything, but one minute I'm about to get killed by this one lame Shifter and the next I'm sitting in a green field with a strange urge to go north. But the best part is, I don't even care about how strange this may be because somehow I still have you."

"I don't understand much either," I say softly, "But let's try to understand together. Here's what I know so far: We are somewhere on Earth, we are free of the prophecy, and our friends are... alive as well. We only have to find them."

"Even Ray?" He asks, a hint of nervousness in his voice. My breath catches for a moment, and then I try to keep calm as I form an answer. He

seems to guess what I'm about to say from my hesitation, and shakes his head slowly.

"Ray... is in heaven, staring at us from above. He's having the time of his life right now, I just know it." I smile into the clouds, knowing that this has to be true. Ray is priceless to us, even with the web of lies he spun, and he will be within our hearts forever. Xavier looks at me for a minute, and then bows his head, closing his eyes.

"So, where are the others?" Xavier asks quietly. He rubs my back in slow, circular motions as we briefly dwell in our remembrance of Ray. We stand there for a few minutes, absorbing the fact that Ray is happy and that he wants us to find our own happiness as well.

"I don't know. But that is what we need to do first. Let's find them, and then we can create our new future," I finally say determinedly, "let's not lose anyone else." Both of our expressions brighten, and I grab his hand and squeeze it tightly. Our friends could be anywhere, but with our combined, probably obnoxious willpower I know we will reunite with them quickly.

"We will find them," Xavier agrees, "We can't and won't lose anyone else." But then his expression brightens and he smiles devilishly. "But this comes first."

He tackles me, pushing me to the ground while his arms snake around to protect my back from the impact. I can't contain a annoying, rather girly yelp as he moves to trap me in the thick grass, his hands on either side of my head and his torso draped over my own.

"I'm so thankful for you that I just want to show a bit of my appreciation," he says sweetly, "so let me begin with a few bites of my one and only lady." Leaning down, he captures my bottom lip in his teeth, coaxing my mouth open. I shiver in anticipation as he nibbles at my lip before moving in for a tender kiss.

"Xavier, someone will-"

"No one will see us," he slightly growls, "and if they do, let them watch. I've been waiting patiently for you and for this."

He reaches for my shoulder and his fingers dance around my shirt sleeves as he kisses me again. Overwhelming euphoria mounts as the simple kiss grows in breathless intensity. Gently sliding my neckline to stretch over my shoulder, his hand moves to my collarbone, and then trails down teasingly to my waist.

I helplessly moan in frenzied protest and he stops suddenly, staring at me. "Are you saying you don't want this?" He asks, the hint of a smile at the corner of his mouth.

"I just..." Having lost the words, I just stare back at him, desire gnawing at my reservations. What was I trying to say? I don't even remember anymore.

"I'm going to wait until you say it," Xavier shrugs, slowly twisting his body to the side, away from me. At the movement, the sudden loss of warmth jerks me into action and I grab his arm nervously.

"I do..." I manage to choke out, immediately looking to the side so he doesn't see my embarrassment. As soon as I move my head his hand snakes out to the side of my face, forcing me to meet his gaze.

"What *do* you want, Mona?" he asks softly, teasingly. His other hand slides up my waist to my shoulders, slyly tugging at the thin fabric. This is just too much. I've just about had enough of this.

"Come here," I mumble, jerking his head downwards in a sudden movement and forcing him to meet my lips. No more games, because this is real. And he knows it too, moving furiously, both of us wishing to stop time as we drown in each other's passion.

Yet time does pass, the sun falling on our first day of a new life that shines with the brightness of a happy future. And even though this time around we have no assurances or guarantees, it still feels better this way. Because regardless of where we are or what happens to us, we are home and will always belong to each other.

This is only the beginning.

****** Thanks for Reading!**

Email me at Rayisbeast4ever@gmail.com if you have any questions or want to be updated as I release new works and information about A Howl in the Night. Please comment, favorite, or friend me if you enjoyed, and I hope you have a wonderful day.

Included below is a sample of my brand new book, To Taste the Fruit. If you're interested you can find it on my page. Thank you!

Sample of To Taste the Fruit

To Taste the Fruit by Lorelei Sutton

1

It feels so good to be back.

I flip my brown hair as I sharply turn the wheel, directing my glistening Corvette onto the beaten path. I pound the gas pedal, making the car roar with life and energy. The speedometer increases by ten... twenty... thirty...

Music pours out of the booming speakers, reverberating around the shiny interior. I start to hum the words, rolling down both windows and letting the wind beat against my face. My body relaxes as the chill embraces my skin, raising some goosebumps on my pale but muscled arms. Now that I am almost at Sunny Valley, I can finally stop looking so much like a vampire. I can finally go back to my real life.

It feels so thrilling to know that I am free. I have been liberated from the chains of the city, and more importantly, my mother. No more will I ever have to put up my skateboard or have a cigarette yanked out my hands. Here, no one will care about what I do and don't do. No one will attempt to control my life.

The thought brings a smile to my face, and I cut my eyes to the overhead mirror. Scanning the area, I make sure I am completely alone on the dirt pathway, with no buildings or cars in sight. The trees are sparse, though towering over the grass and shrubs. Surely there is no one hiding around here.

Satisfied, I lift my hands from the wheel and into the air, letting the truck drive itself. My smile stretches to about a mile long, and a yell of exhilaration escapes my throat. I can do what I want to do. There is no one here to stop me.

I can get whatever-or whomever-I want. And I plan on taking it all. The whole town is mine, along with anything within it. Including *her*.

An image appears in my mind, overwhelming all else. Silky blond hair framing a heart-shaped face, with dark brown eyes and perfectly-shaped lips... I cannot deny that meeting her again is what I am most looking forward to. After years of regret, of staring out of the dark windows in my prison at the stars, she was the one mistake that I could never forget. No one else has compared to her beauty. No one else has ever understood me. I should have kept a tighter grip on her instead of pushing her away.

But one thing I have learned over the years is that it is never too late. And I plan on everything going exactly back to how it was before I left. Sunny Valley is such a pitiful town. It probably hasn't changed at all anyways.

A flash of color appears before me, and I snap to attention. My feet slam on the brakes and the car swerves, the wheel turning uncontrollably. I grab the wheel within a few seconds, and hold it still with all my might. Nearly thrown into the windshield as the brakes desperately tried to slow the vehicle, the car finally screeches to a stop. It takes a few seconds for me to realize my eyes are closed, and a few seconds more for my heart to start beating again.

The first thing I see when the blurs around me solidify is a white, wooden surface. Rugged with age, the sign is covered in dirt and markings. I eventually distinguish the word Sunny Valley from the midst of love professions and unrecognizable pictures. In the corner of the sign my name is scratched into it. I remember writing that, years and years ago. Seeing it makes me feel so... satisfied.

I whip my car around the sign and head straight for home. The speedometer races even higher than it did before. I can't wait to arrive.

This is where I belong.

Text: Lorelei Sutton

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