

When I was a little kid, I would spend all family drives sitting in the back seat of our family station wagon staring out into the woods that surrounded our small town and dream of running through them; I could picture the wind whipping my blond waves behind me, flicking from side to side as I picked up speed. My legs would pound the ground, hopping over all the bramble and brush of the forest. I was never allowed to run through those woods when I was younger; my parents were too afraid to let me out of their sights, let alone travel the forest that touched the edges of our property.

What I didn't dream of, though, was how I would get there and what it would cost me. So instead, I spent my time in our backyard, laying in the grass that bordered our tree line. Tilting my head to the forest, I would watch the spotted deer hop over the fallen trees and dead leaves, bounding in a way that I wished I could. Then, something I never dreamed of happened right in front of my eyes.

There, with the grass tickling my nose in the mid-summer breeze and the setting sun, I saw something I wasn't expecting, something I couldn't even imagine. Though, I guess I really couldn't have predicted that someone would be doing the very thing I always wanted. But there he was – wearing a black t-shirt and jeans – jumping as elegantly as a deer and twice as high. He came crashing down when he turned his head and saw me watching. His piercing green eyes locked on mine as he effortlessly lifted himself from the ground and brushed the leaves out of his smooth brown hair.

He tilted his head slightly as he took in the sight of me, almost as if he were trying to determine if I was friend or foe. I shivered at the idea that he thought I might harm him when he looked bigger and stronger than me. He lightly shook his head, gave me one more passing glance, and kicked his feet out from under himself as he leaped out of sight and farther into the forest. Had I known at that moment, right there on the ground, that my life would never be the same – would I still make all the decisions I did?

I'm not sure I would ever know because, in the long run, with everything that I lost because of that fateful moment, I still think I gained so much more.

It was another five years until I saw him again, my first day of senior year, and there he was. This time he wasn't leaping or falling but walking. He calmly approached me, stopping a hundred feet out, tilting his head in the same manner and studying me as if I were a new pet, and I might pee on the rug. This time, however, I was a little more prepared when he stopped by. I lifted my head slightly while reaching to the sky and gave him a light wave. I smiled as his piercing green eyes narrowed toward me, but he raised his hand and flicked it. It was almost a friendly gesture if he wasn't sneering at me.

I pushed myself up and settled on my left elbow, tilting my body toward the forest. I gestured for him to come closer, my fingers curling back and forth as I tried to make myself look more and more enticing. He tilted his head in the other direction, closed his eyes in focus, and took a step toward me. My smile grew brighter as he took another and another step toward me. When he reached about fifty feet out, I heard the familiar sound of the screen door to our house. His foot froze mid-air, his right hand flicked up and pulled his brown hair out of his closed eyes as he visibly took a deep breath.

"Marika! Dinner! Adesso!" my mother's familiar Italian accent and choppy English gave me a slight frown as I watched my new friend take a step backward. I held up my hand in stop motion, and he froze.

I turned my head and shouted, "Give me 5 minutes, mama!" I made sure to emphasize my accent on 'mama' to hopefully give me a few extra minutes.

When I turned back, he was gone. So much for my accent buying me time. It looked like I didn't need it. So, I got up, brushed the dirt off my jeans, and started toward our kitchen. It smelt like Nonna's famous meat sauce, and I didn't want to miss out. When I got to the back door, I turned my head to get one last glimpse at the forest, hoping my friend had come back. The only thing I could see, however, was the leaves still blowing in the wind from his speedy withdrawal.

It was another five years before he appeared to be, but that day would forever be etched in my mind as the day my life became something I did not plan for. For once, I was not held from roaming. I was not told I could not run or play. I was free to do all I pleased, but today, all I wanted was to hear my dad tell me to stay inside, stay away from the forest, and, my personal

favorite, you're going to turn green from laying on all that grass. But my father, he wasn't here anymore.

It's not like this was some kind of surprise, far from it. Dad had been sick with leukemia for a few years now, and he went peacefully. But that didn't mean my feelings would be peaceful or that I would willingly let go of the memories of my father. It did mean, though, that I was finally able to listen to the call of the forest, heed it, and ease my grief in a way I've always wanted to free myself.

I slid out of my black blouse and skirt from the service my mother and I had to sit through just a few hours ago and pulled on a plain grey tank top and black leggings. Grabbing my forest green sneakers, I headed toward the back patio off the kitchen.

"Marika? Where you go?" My mother asked as I kissed her cheek. She was in her usual spot, next to a large pot of what smelled like chicken soup, but her stirring was off. Instead of her general lackadaisical stirring had become something frantic like if she stirred hard enough, he would come back. I squeezed her around her shoulders, and she patted my arm. We would be okay.

"Just for a run, mama. I'll be back soon," I said as I sat down to slip my sneakers on and tie my hair into a sleek ponytail.

My mom swatted my ponytail and muttered, "you and your silly capelli."

"Ma, it's bene. Fermare. Stop."

I stood up, gave her a wave, and bounced out the back door. The forest looked warm and welcoming in the pre-dusk light. I gave my legs a stretch, rocked on my calves, and then kicked off. I felt my feet pound into the bramble of the forest and wind whip my ponytail around. With each step, I let my frustration and grief be released into the ground below me. I felt it drain into the dead leaves and sticks that crunched under my feet. I felt the branches and leaves snag at my clothing. I took a deep breath that turned into a heavy sigh, which turned into a heavy sob. The sob caught in my throat, and I let out of strangled sound, but it was just too much. I dropped to my knees, leaned back onto my heels, and let myself cry for my dead dad. I felt myself shake with the sobs, my vision blurred, and it sounded like a dying seagull was nearing me, but it dawned on me. That was probably me.

Over the sounds of my heaving sobs and the wind rushing the leaves, I doubt I had the chance to hear what was about to happen but even if I could hear over those things, my eyes, bloodshot and still blurry, were not able to pick out individual trees let alone someone hurtling toward me. So by the time I heard the pounding or saw the swaying 'trees' or registered that it was not me that was causing things, I was already knocked over, legs splayed out, arms stretched out above my head. It took another minute to register that what had knocked me over had not kept going but instead had pinned me to the ground, it's face inches from mine, piercing green eyes staring at my tear-streaked face. I felt it let out a soft breath and breathe me in.

"After all these years, this is not how I expected us to meet..." his, I now realized, voice sounded breathy and musical, almost like laughter in the wind. I felt him push himself upwards enough that I could make out his features up close. His piercing eyes were deep-set with dark bags that sat above a smattering of pinky-orange freckles. Freckles that made his alabaster skin look lively and cheerful instead of reminding me of cafeteria lights from high school.

"You expected us to meet," I grunted out. It came out more like a statement than a question, but he quirked his right eyebrow, and the corners of his mouth lifted.

"Did you think you were just seeing me for no reason? That I enjoy standing in one place staring at a teenager lying in the grass?" He scoffed, lifted a hand, and brushed his hair back in a pulling motion I recognized. The brown strands, the familiar gestures, the man – maybe a boy then – was the same man I saw in the forest watching me all those years ago. He pushed himself off me finally, giving me a look daring me to so much as move an inch so he could pin me down again. Still, I pushed myself up into a sitting position so that we were knee to knee. He lifted a skeptical brow but didn't push me back down. He raised his hands into air quotes and sneered, "Watch the 'little donna,' dad always said. 'She's important.' Well, dad can bite me. I don't see anything special about you. You don't look special. Your ears are barely *pointed!*" He spits the last word like it was offensive that my ears were slightly rounded.

"It's like he cared more about you," he flicked my shoulder, "than he ever cared about me. It's like I never even existed next to you. What is so special about you? Come on. Tell me. What's so special about you?" He pounded his fist into the ground, little specks of dust flying up around his hand. I focused on the individual dirt flecks and took a deep breath. His anger was not my doing, and I couldn't let it get to me, but I couldn't help thinking that I made a mistake ignoring my dad's words so soon after his passing.

"I don't know what you are talking about," I muttered as I glanced around me, forest surrounded me on all sides. I couldn't see the house anywhere, and I wasn't even sure which

way to go anymore. I knew I should have brought my phone with me. I never think these things through; I thought to myself as I tapped my fingers on my thighs. He tipped his head to the side, evaluating me further. "See something you like?" I sneered.

I don't know what it was about this guy, but he got the better of me. I wasn't usually this hot-headed or rude.

"Perhaps there is more to what my father was saying. It's dull, perhaps covered by all the circumstances, but it's there. I see it now. How had I missed it? All this time," he mused, mostly to himself it seemed since I had no idea what he was talking about. Who was this guy, and why wasn't he letting me go? Maybe I was free, he had never told me I had to stay. I put my hands out to my sides and pushed up so I could stand. I felt my head slam back into the ground before I even saw him move, it was like lightning striking me down.

"Listen here..." he growled. "You're not going anywhere. I was sent to pick you up. It is time. I don't know what good you will do, but I am to bring you home." He stared daggers at me as he pinned me down. I tried kicking my legs out, hoping for a lucky swing or something to kick his feet out from under him and put him off balance, giving me a chance to run back. Or at least, in a direction away from him. I've been running all my life - I had enough stamina to find civilization in any direction. "No, don't run. I'm not in the mood to chase you. Besides, like this," he gestured with one hand while effortlessly propping himself up with the other, "You're not going to get far. I'm much faster than you." I lifted a brow at him, I was pretty darn fast. Especially while running for my life. "No, really, I am. Don't. Please," his voice softened, and he lifted himself up, reaching a hand to help me up. I breathed a heavy sigh, it seemed I would need to pretend to be friendly, at least for a little while. I darted my eyes around making sure there were no distinct escape routes I could utilize. Nothing but forest. With a second sigh, I put my hands in his. My eyes widen in time with his, an electric shock pricking my fingers. It wasn't a painful shock, but it was enough to get my eyes watering again. His fingers loosened, and I slipped closer to the ground.

"Fuck," I muttered as he let out a whispered, "I hate when dad is right."

He sounded angry, but his eyes looked happy. Little crinkles had formed around his eyes, and there was a sparkle in his eye. With the distance his loosening gave me, I could see his full face again. His lips were curved in a small smile, and if he didn't look so happy, I would have thought there was something malicious in his thoughts. But as fast as it appeared, it was wiped from his face with an abrasive tug at his hair.

"Alright, up with you. You don't need my help," he sneered. *Back to the attitude.*

Greeaaaat.

I lifted myself off the ground while he rolled off to the side and bounced up. He gave me a final look over his shoulder and started to march off into the distance. He got about 50 feet before he realized I wasn't following him.

"Let's go, princess," he sneered. When I didn't budge, he stomped back over, grabbed my hand, and proceeded to pull me further into the forest. I tried to grind my heels into the forest floor, but with the leaves under my feet, it wasn't giving me enough traction. But it was enough for my new 'buddy' to notice, and before I could give a scream, I was flipped over his shoulder. My face slammed repeatedly into his hard back as he picked up speed.

"Where.. are.. you.. taking... me..." I managed to get out, my words punctuated with additional face slams. "I... can't... breathe... like... this!"

"That's for me to know and you to find out." I hear the smirk in his voice, he was enjoying this. He didn't acknowledge my complaint, but he did slow down enough so I could hold myself from hitting his back anymore. I took a second to peek around his torso and gasped. The forest we had been running through stopped abruptly at a mountainside. It was higher than I could see and flat as a board, not a foothold or jut out as far as I could see. I couldn't imagine him climbing it by himself, let alone with me on his back, but he didn't seem to be veering or stopping for that matter. He was going to slam us into this giant rock.

The thought stuck.

He was going to slam us into this giant rock.

"ARE YOU TRYING TO KILL US?" I shouted at his back as I started to pound my fists into the same. "I DO NOT WANT TO DIE TODAY. ARE YOU KIDDING ME?" He laughed, he laughed so hard that he slowed down, his entire belly dancing with his laughter. He was almost doubled over laughing, I could feel my body slipping, but as soon as I thought it, he stopped laughing and stood up, fixing myself back over his shoulder.

"I can't kill you, princess," he said calmly, all laughter brushed away, "this is where we are going."

"This is a giant rock that you tried to smash me into."

"Watch," he muttered, and we were running again. Straight for the *FREAKING* rock.

Well, at least I was going to be seeing my dad soon, I thought as I shut my eyes. I didn't want to watch myself die. We must be close, but nothing happened, we were still moving at the same pace. And then I felt it, it wasn't a bone-crunching smash but a twisting, gut-wrenching punch to my stomach. I felt the wind rush out of me with a whoosh and tears come to my eyes. But as soon as it happened, it was gone, and back was the laughter. "First time is always rough. It'll get better, eventually," he laughed out, but he patted my leg in what I guess what supposed to be a kind gesture. It felt creepy and electric and wrong. I gave a little shiver and finally opened my eyes just in time for the world to blur while he flipped me back over his shoulder and threw me into what felt like a chair. I closed my eyes briefly and shook my head, hoping to gain my bearings.

When I opened my eyes, instead of a giant rock, there was a large clearing, and in a semi-circle, there was a set of vine-covered stone thrones, and I was sitting in the middle one. I played with the leaves that swayed from the thrones and looked toward my captor. He was leaning against the chair, eying me with a smirk.

"Feeling better, princess?" He reached over and pulled a lock of hair, twirling it in his fingers.

"You look better – less murk, more green," he mused.

"Can you tell me why I'm here? Can I leave?"

"I can tell you, but I shouldn't. It's best you wait. However, since we're on my 'turf' now. I will clarify that to get back home, you will need me. Only the Fae who brought a non' here can bring them back. So, I don't recommend running, it's just going to irritate me. Everyone should be here in a minute, you just happened to come to me."

"Fae?" I asked, swatting his hand away from my hair. Maybe running wasn't a good tactic, but I don't need him to play with me. I needed information. I needed to know what was going on, but before he could open his mouth, the air in front of me shimmered like gold flecks in the air, and a tall man walked through. He was older than my new 'buddy' but thinner, almost fragile and frail. With his paler than alabaster skin, he was practically translucent compared to snarky over here. He took a small step toward me, holding a golden staff with a large swirling blue ball at the top that was being used as a crutch, and his eyes widened. Then his mouth curved into a smile that lit his ocean blue eyes up. He looked grandfatherly with his ruffled salt and pepper and wrinkled face. He was calming compared to the electricity I felt before.

He walked up to me gracefully, grabbed my hand, and lifted to his forehead. "She is exactly who she was supposed to be," he whispered into my hand, looking directly into my eyes. He held my eyes for another moment before letting go of my hand and turning his head to speak with the guy. "Are you prepared for the ceremony?" He nodded.

"I don't mean to interrupt, but *CAN SOMEONE TELL ME WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON?*" Both of their heads snapped to me and tilted, almost in unison. Then the older guy ruffled his hair and looked at me with a bemused smile. Then they both started to laugh. "*WHAT IS SO FUNNY?*"

"I'm sorry, I am not laughing at you, little donna. It seems I've gotten so old I have forgotten my manners. I will fill in some of the gaps for you, but I can only provide a certain amount now. I did hear that Lucien gave away our secret identity," he wiggled his eyebrows at what I guess he thought was a joke. "I see his charms really sold you. Well, I guess I could have picked a better welcoming team, but alas, he's critical. You see, Lucien comes from the same sister as you. You walk on the same line, or you are supposed to. This process, the awakening as we like to call it, it's much easier with someone of the same line. Anyway, I will be performing the awakening, and Lucien will be supporting me." Lucien, as I now knew, coughed something that sounded like a rude name, but I wasn't sure. "Oh, yes, thank you, Lucien. My name is Gerald, and I rule over all the Fae that stay within this realm. That should about clear most of it, right?" He looked at me expectantly, but my face must have displayed my confusion well since he frowned toward me. "Well, let's just hope lack of knowledge doesn't change the outcome. You're our last hope."

"Great. That clears up just about... nothing. Thanks for that," I spat at them. "I'm not some 'Faerie' or whatever. Faeries aren't even a thing!"

"Oh, my dear, Lucien, you should have at least told her that she was about to become one of us before you whisked her down here!" He looked exasperated and frustrated.

"Sorry, sir," Lucien whispered, looking down at his feet. But he tilted his head so only I could see, and he wiggled his eyebrows at me like we had some kind of secret that I most definitely didn't know about. "Would you like me to tell her now?" He snickered quietly, but when I looked at Gerald's face, he looked furious.

"Lucien," he said, deathly calm. "Do not be snide with me." He sighed. "I'm sorry little donna, Lucien is terrific at a lot of things, but I'm not sure anyone would ever call him a people

person. In fact, I believe most people would call him 'anti-social.'" He said that last part while making quote gestures like a teenage boy, he looked almost comical. To be honest, this whole thing felt comical. "Nevertheless, I believe we should get started. If we wait any longer, we will lose the solstice and have to wait yet another year. Who knows what that will bring. Lucien, please prepare our little donna, and I will find where I put the cleansing water. I know I have it," he said as he patted down his black cloak until he smiled and reach in to grab a small clear vial that shimmered. It looks like Goldschläger, but there's no way this man was about to force me to drink some college-level alcohol.

Lucien, on the other hand, started to wave his hands around lightly, and the air shimmered with little green sparkles before the vines around the throne I was sitting in started to twist and turn, wrapping around my right wrist up to my elbow. It felt like snakes until a sharp twist of his wrist, and they dug into my skin, thorns biting into my arm.

"Fuck," I muttered.

"They will rip your arm to shreds if you move around too much. I don't recommend it, and I can always pin you down if need be," Lucien sneered. This man clearly did NOT like me, and I don't even know why I was here, let alone what I had done to piss off snarky.

"Lucien! I told you to be friendly!" Gerald snapped, "Get situated. We are running out of time." Lucien nodded, looking slightly abashed. Then he plopped down in the seat on my right, made the same gesture, and I watched as he winced slightly as the thorns bit in. He relaxed into his chair as his vine turned slightly red like mine had. "Okay, little donna, you will now need to drink this to cleanse your soul of all that murk brought on by humanity. I believe it tastes like what you call cinnamon, but it's been a few hundred years since I've tasted it." I quirked an eyebrow at him but stayed silent. It wasn't like I was free to go anywhere, so there was no point in angering the weirdos who had sharp thorns in my wrist. I believed it could get worse, and I don't want that. Gerald handed me the opened vial and smiled at me as I downed it like a shot.

It tasted like cinnamon, that's for sure. When I had swallowed the whole vial, my mouth started to tingle and then my hands and feet. It began to work upward until my entire body was tingling like I was drunk and had 8 shots of espresso straight. I felt my heart race, and I couldn't stop blinking.

"I need you to close your eyes, little one," Gerald whispered, almost purred, his voice sounded far away and melodic. I felt myself oblige before I could stop myself, and then something flashed in my eyelids. It was like a vision of myself, I was dressed in a black shirt and leggings. Green vines were still wrapped around my right arm, dangling to the ground. My hair was down in its natural curls, flowing down my back. It swished in the wind I thought I could feel, but I knew it wasn't real. Or I thought it wasn't real but man, did it feel real. I could see my 'aura' brightening, a yellow crown building from my head bleeding into a green color on my right side, and a red glow on my left side. A blue color surrounded my feet, and as the murk pulled back from my body, the colors turned purple. It swirled out in tendrils into the blackness that surrounded my image. Then something sparked, and the colors whirled around me into a rainbow, snapping out into pinpricks before the exploded, and my vision turned white.

When it returned, Gerald was standing in front of me, his face tilted to the side. "Well, she survived, but I'm really not sure what happened, though. It's like her aura just disappeared," Gerald whispered. It was then that I realized Lucien was already up, red dots lining his arm where the thorns had pricked him. When I look down, my arm didn't have the vines on it or the red dots. My skin was smooth and clean.