

Forest Kids



K.M Lendor



Forest Kids: Welcome to Copper Hill

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Copper Hill High's archery team returning from another victorious tournament was the biggest thing to happen in school all week. The pep squad ran to the steps with pom poms and faces with glittered letters CH on them. The student body could not be contained and rushed to see the boys getting off the bus between classes. Those who were in classes had all but squished their faces to the windows to get a glimpse of the red, white and green tracksuits. Damon Fellowes was the first off the bus. Captain was printed in bold red letters across his back as he took his victory stride up the stairs. His towering height and lean-muscular body garnered him a lot of fans and they all cheered for him as he walked by. The pep squad cheered his name in synchrony with their green and red pom poms. He held up horned fingers with one hand and his bow in the other. "First place baby."

The students on the steps roared in response and the entire school seemed to cheer in unison. Nina silently grinded her teeth behind tight lips as she watched the display from the bus. As annoyed as she was, she couldn't blame them for fawning over the archers. In a town with two churches, no mall and no movie theatre, teenage national archers appeared larger than life to the small-town folk.

Luke, Noel, Roman and Ethan followed off the bus. All were in identical tracksuits but with less arrogance than Damon. They held their gear at their sides and shied away from all the attention with their eyes casted downward.

"Let's go boys, stash your gear away and get back to class." Alan said. The boys nodded and did as the team sponsor said. They hurried up the stairs and the crowd of fans disappeared after them. Even the faces in the windows disappeared with the boy's team gone there was nothing else worth seeing. With a final glance around the now deserted school yard, Alan stuck his head back onto the bus. "Alright girls, hustle."

Nina and the other four girls hurried across the school yard and into the staff's washroom where Miss Gaines waited on them. Miss Gaines nodded and waved to Alan from where he stood and only then did he take his leave. She had a stack of white fluffy towels in her hand where she stood at the door. Each girl took one as they made their way into the communal showers with their gym bags flapping at their sides. Clover was the first one in, she had green slime dripping from her hair. If she didn't get that gunk out of her hair soon Nina feared she would burn down the entire school. Eirene and Lindsey filed in after her both with smudged dirt and more green slime on their faces and tracksuits. Finally, Jessie and Nina who looked the worst of the bunch trailed in after them. Scrapes and cuts marred Nina's neck while Jessie was nursing a small bump on her head and a nasty scrape on her neck. Nina smiled and thanked Miss Gaines with a small bow.

"Did you get it?" the history teacher said.

Nina nodded. "We got it." She looked around at the empty bathroom, the girls were in front of the mirror stripping down.

"What did you say that we needed the bathroom for?" Nina said.

Miss Gaines peered over her shoulder and said, "Colossal period emergency. You have about fifteen minutes. Make it count. I'll stand watch."

Nina looked back at her friends, Clover was muttering under her breath as she scooped gunk out of her golden curls. "Thank you," Nina said. She tried to shut the door but Miss Gaines' foot was in the way. "No Nina, thank you." The woman smiled before closing door. Nina locked the door then looked back at the girls and said, "We have fifteen minutes. Let's get cleaned up."

She glanced around at the bathroom, she had never been inside the staff's bathroom before. It was essentially the same as the student's, only this bathroom wasn't covered in graffiti and was much cleaner. To her right was a long counter with four sinks and awful light blue tiles. But unlike the bathroom she was accustomed to, the grout was still white. To her left was a large communal shower separated from the sinks by a tiled, privacy wall. Tucked

into the corner was a door that she assumed led to toilet stalls. It could have easily been the general bathroom but they needed the privacy. They couldn't have their peers stumbling into the bathroom questioning them about the actual monster guts splattered all over them. Clover had gotten the brunt of it. If she counted right, she had two seconds before a Clover meltdown.

"Son of a bitch," Clover said. She was now stripped down to her pink matching bra and panties set. "I'm so sick of this. The boys get all the glory when we're the ones doing all the work." The others sighed, Eirene ignored it altogether and hopped into the shower first. Clover scowled at her back and then turned back to the mirror where she continued scraping the gunk out of her hair. "When are you going to get over it Clo?" Lindsey said. She pulled out a hair tie from her bag and piled her blond hair into a top knot bun.

"I'll get over it when I get some freaking respect." Clover said, a blob of green goo dripped down from her fingers into the sink.

"We literally have a network of people who respect us. Whose entire lives are dedicated to protecting us." Nina said, arms on her hips. She was annoyed she had to do this every time with Clover and even more annoyed that the cut on her side was now throbbing. She stiffened, ignoring the injury she had not revealed to Alan or the others.

"A *secret* network Nina. Secret admirers don't count." Clover said. She looked back for support but Lindsey was already in the shower and Jessie was not backing her tirade. Jessie was sitting between two sinks on the counter rubbing at her neck. Nina vaguely remembered the monster scraping her neck with a tusk.

"I'm supposed to save the world, pass Chemistry, have a social life and get no recognition for it? Bullshit." Clover said. Nina slapped her hand against the counter making Jessie flinch and Eirene peer around the tiled, privacy wall in the shower.

"By all means go into the halls and start screaming about how you just killed a four-legged monster straight out of Greek mythology. I'll wait." Nina waited for the inevitable eyeroll. "Exactly. Just get into the shower Clover." A vein throbbed in Clover's neck as she held her ground in front of Nina who was getting shaky on her feet from the pain in her side. "I don't know who spit in your green juice this morning Woodstock but you should really watch how you speak to me." She rolled her eyes, dropped her shoulders and went into the shower. Nina's eyes shut under the pressure of the morning and she took a deep, calculated breath.

"One day I'm going to run out of sympathy for her." she said in a low tone to Jessie. Flashing her a sympathetic smile, her fellow wood nymph jumped into the shower.

With everyone else in the shower, Nina dug into her bag and left a disinfectant balm for Jessie's neck on the counter. She then tentatively lifted her t-shirt and inspected the gash on her ribs from the creature's bite. It stung like a bitch and with all the adrenaline mostly gone, the pain came back in waves. She didn't want the others to see and quickly dropped the t-shirt back in place. She would wait for the others to leave so she could shower alone. All she had to do was get to the forest for her wound to heal, she could deal with a little bite until then.

While the girls scrubbed away the putrid smell of the green goo that was splattered everywhere when the monster's head exploded, Nina pulled twigs and leaves out of her jet-black hair. She then pulled out a change of clothes from the gym bag at her feet. She couldn't remember how many track suits they'd been through in the last six months. Monster hunting was not a clean pass-time. They were often soiled or torn during battle. Today was no different.

The others traipsed out of the shower a few minutes later, scrubbed raw with wet hair. "I'm going straight home after school and soak in the tub for like three hours." Lindsey said. She was wringing out excess water from her hair over one of the sinks.

“Ditto. Wait, don’t you have dance today?” Clover said.

Lindsey froze. “Oh yeah, scratch that, make it twenty minutes.”

Clover grinned, drying off her annoyingly perfect body.

“Aren’t you getting in Nina?” Lindsey said. Nina nodded, stalling time by helping Jessie with the balm for her neck.

Clover scoffed. “Don’t be such a prude Woodstock, no one cares that you didn’t develop over the summer. Ooo I know, why don’t you grow yourself a pair of lemons and stuff them in your bra?” Nina’s eyes grew into saucers as she locked eyes with Clover’s pointed gaze in the mirror. Blinking back the embarrassment, Nina turned away from the mirror and focused her attention on inspecting Jessie’s small wound.

“Geez Clo,” Lindsey said. The entire bathroom fell in silence as was custom whenever Clover felt especially malicious. No one dared contest her lest she aimed her razor-sharp words at them. It had been like that since they were kids. Nina would have liked to be accustomed to it by now but each day Clover found a new way to snipe at her or worst, embarrass her.

Nina waited for the others to get dressed and leave before she stripped down. Sizing up the damage to her side in the mirror, she bit her inner lip as thick dark red blood oozed from the bite. She popped two ibuprofens into her mouth and washed it down with a half-drunk bottle of water she found in her gym bag. She would just have to manage the pain during evening classes. It would be lunch by the time she got out of the shower, she could make it till two thirty. As soon as she got to the forest, all would be healed.

The dirt and green goo washed off of her and swirled around the drain before disappearing. She blew air out her cheeks as the water pressure hit her wound, despite herself, she smiled. She would have actual battle scars now. They had kicked ass today and took that thing down in record time. They were getting better, stronger. Or at least she was. Sure, it had only been six months since they started but they had been training for this since they were thirteen. She looked down at her hands palms side up and smiled remembering the way they had commanded the vines and branches just hours ago. She ducked her head under the spray of the water completely, nothing could beat the high she felt.

Always aware of time, Nina didn’t let her gloating linger much longer as she was cutting it close to her deadline. After drying off she slipped up onto the counter and peeled the glossy paper off the back of the biggest band-aid she could find in her gym bag. She slapped it over the wound and put it out of her head. Foregoing a bra, she pulled a green sweatshirt over her head and pulled up matching green sweatpants over her tanned legs. Staring at her disheveled appearance in the mirror, she forced a small smile.

She said to herself, “Two thirty.”

Before she returned the key to the staff washroom to Ms. Gaines, she then headed to the janitor’s closet for bleach and some other cleaning solvents. Copper Hill High looked like one long building from the outside but was so much more behind. Behind the main building was a perfect square with a large courtyard at its center. North was the main building, office, staffrooms and custodian closets. West were the labs and auditorium, south and east were classrooms and outside lockers. She wasn’t far from the janitor’s closet and got there in less than a minute. Luckily, he wasn’t there when she knocked. She took whatever she wanted before he stumbled upon her with questions, she didn’t have a logical answer to.

When she returned to the staff’s bathroom Miss Gaines was gone from her guard post. She would have to be quick. She wiped the counters where the green gunk still littered and sprayed the showers so the repulsive smell that came with it was destroyed or at the very least, masked. She knew the girls were not keen on claiming her as their leader but none of them had the foresight to clean up after themselves and until they showed more initiative Nina would have to take lead. She knew since she was a child she was born for something

great. When she grew into her birthright at the age of thirteen, she had needed no convincing to hunt and kill monsters that lurked in and around the woods of Copper Hill.

She returned the cleaning products and was headed to the courtyard when she ran into Emma. She should have run the other way the moment she saw that pink streaked ponytail coming. “Nina, didn’t see you girls get off the bus. Another loss huh?” Emma said.

“I guess it wasn’t our day.” Nina tried to leave but Emma stepped into her path.

“It rarely is your day I think...” Emma said. “When’s Mr. Karmekov having tryouts again?”

Nina shrugged, “You’ll be the first to know when he does.”

“Funny, how he refused to pick me for the team even though you girls keep losing...what do they say about insanity again?”

Nina shrugged. “Better luck next time Ems.” Nina side stepped her again and was too quick for Emma to block her path this time. She shook off her triggering encounter and hurried to her locker.

The lunch rush was at full swing when she stowed her gym bag in her locker. Snacks were tossed from the vending machine to waiting hands. Lunch trays and brown bags occupied hands as they looked for a spot to have lunch. That was never a problem for Nina and her friends. Nina cut across the courtyard where the others would be waiting. Everyone was there sitting around the fountain that was really *their* fountain now. The creepy sculpture of the baby blowing water out of its mouth had long stopped working and was now covered in moss and grime. It was still their favourite spot. Luke and Damon sat on top the concrete rim while Clover, Ethan and Lindsey were on the soft grass scarfing down sandwiches and granola bars. Roman, Noel, Jessie and Eirene had a different lunch period, much to their chagrin. Nina thought it was a blessing in disguise. It made them look like less of a cult since they did everything else together.

Ethan looked up when she arrived. He was holding a sandwich and an apple out for her. “Hello you, figured you didn’t have time to get lunch.” he said.

“Right as always.” she said taking them from Ethan with a smile. She slowly eased herself down to the grass and hoped they failed to notice she was wincing in pain. But everyone was busy with their food. They had skipped breakfast for their extracurricular activities and hunting mythological beast really worked up an appetite. Clover and Damon were splitting a grilled cheese. Lindsey and Luke were the poster children for healthy households and were having a veggie stir fry and loaded baked potatoes respectfully. She looked down at her own sad sandwich from the cafeteria that was probably stale. Ethan and Alan were on their own and pretty much hopeless when it came to their nutrition. In fact, she was usually the one feeding Ethan with lunches her dad packed.

“I know feeding a chef’s daughter a cafeteria sandwich is a punishable offense but it was all I could do on short notice.” Ethan said.

Nina laughed, shaking her head. “It’s perfectly adequate, thanks babe.”

She leaned against the fountain between Luke’s dangling legs, thankful for the backrest. It took some pressure off her wound. It felt worse than it did one minute ago but she ate her sandwich with a small smile and tuned into the conversation that was already in motion when she sat down.

“Anyone else have to go to the career fair Monday?” Luke said. “Bennet is forcing us to go, attendance is half the grade.”

Damon shrugged, taking two bites from the grilled cheese. Clover scrunched her face up. “Why is it the only things we ever get invited to at this stupid school are school related?”

“Not this again,” Damon said.

“Yes, this again.” she said, pouting her lip-glossed lips.

“What’s got her so upset?” Luke said.

“She didn’t get invited to Brady’s party. Me and the guys got invited but we’re not going without you, obviously.” Damon said. He popped the small piece of bread left into his mouth and dusted his hands from the crumbs. “You don’t even like Brady.” he said.

“So? I’m the hottest piece of ass in this school and if not for you lot, I would run this school.” Clover said, seemingly fed up of the half-eaten sandwich in her hands, she extended it to Damon.

“I’m only pissed because this is the party to be at. Besides Ethan, Brady’s family is like the richest in Copper Hill. I heard they have two Jacuzzis in their backyard. Two. Jacuzzis.”

“Sorry to bring down your social standing.” Ethan said in a dry tone making Clover roll her eyes at him.

“I doubt this fair is going to have a monster hunting booth, no use in going.” Ethan said.

“Bennet can kiss my perfect, heart-shaped ass.” Clover said. “I’m ditching. Who needs a career fair when I already know what I’m going to do after high school.”

“Which is?” Luke said.

“Be a kick ass nymph slash sexy bartender...like Coyote Ugly.” She flipped her hair over her left shoulder, eyes sparkling with confidence.

“What’s a Coyote Ugly?” Luke said.

“It’s an old, obscure movie she probably came across in a BuzzFeed article that has her feeling edgy this week.” Damon said. Clover pinned him with glare sharper than a dagger. “First of all, fuck you.” She pointed at Damon. “Second of all, it’s Nat’s favorite movie, we’ve watched it like a hundred times.”

“So, what’s it about?” Lindsey said.

“Sexy bartenders wearing low-rise jeans who dance on counter tops and spray beer at gross men.” Clover said. Luke’s eyes squinted at her synopsis.

“Why do I get the feeling you’re missing the point of the movie?” Luke said. Clover shrugged. “I left out all the parts that didn’t matter.”

“Umm, anyway...wouldn’t it be sweet if monster hunting paid better...or at all.” Luke said.

“Speaking of monsters...give us the goods nerd, what was that thing today?” Damon said. Ethan twisted on the grass, so he was facing the fountain. He consulted his manilla folder and settled on a page. “It’s apparently an Erymanthian Boar.” Ethan said.

“I knew it looked like that thing from the Lion King.” Lindsey said. They all laughed because everything Lindsey said was inherently funny.

“There’s not much information on it to be honest. According to the myths it was Hercules’ fourth labour. He captured it and brought it to the king of Mycenae. And as always, we don’t know how it stumbled out of a myth to a forest in Copper Hill, Maine. My guess is they will take the remains back to the factory and run some tests. Wouldn’t hold my breath though. Not like those tests have ever been conclusive.”

Nina ate in silence but listened intently. She doubted the test would reveal anything about the creature’s origins either, they never did. Ethan was right, most of the archives they had on the Monsters had been destroyed in the fires of 1999 along with anyone who could replace those files from memory. It was Copper Hill’s biggest tragedy that they would never be able to escape. The fire took Nina’s grandmother who was also a wood nymph. In fact, it took out all their grandparents making them the only surviving nymphs now. When it came to the mythological, they were flying blind basically. Alan’s life and fortune were devoted to filling the gaps that had been lost by the fires but he was only one man.

“If you asked me, all these creatures we fought are just enhanced versions of animals we have right here today.” Ethan said. “Maybe any resemblance to Greek mythological

creatures is strictly coincidental. Maybe every weird thing that happens in this town is the result of unethical animal testing or something.”

Luke snapped his fingers. “Like the Python last month.” Ethan nodded shuffling around the files in his hands. “I’m saying if you guys are nymphs and we kill creatures out of myths every single week then where are the Olympians? Where are the Muses or the Fates? Why just nymphs? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“If you need me to help you believe I can always set fire to your awful clothes? Would that do?” Clover said. Ethan glared at her.

“Pretty sure we already knew the answers but it was lost in the fires of 1999.” Luke said. “Now back to your Boar theory.”

“Yeahhh, I’ll take Pumba over that thing from today.” Lindsey said. The others laughed but Nina was afraid that she would bleed out right there if she laughed. She was in a lot of pain now and she was beginning to consider cutting class just to get to the forest. The forest at the heart of Copper Hill was the source of every mythological thing that happened in Copper Hill, that much they knew. Not many knew about it but the ones who did were privy to the very scary and exciting world that lay just below Copper Hill’s mundane, small town surface. She would be able to heal there. She just had to wait. Taking another bite into the sandwich, it tasted like cardboard in her dry mouth. She couldn’t even identify what meat she ate anymore. Unsure if that was a side effect of her wound or the cafeteria food. She gave up and put the sandwich on the grass beside her thighs. Even the open space of the courtyard began to feel suffocating and she was getting dizzy by the second. Stilling her mind, she tried to focus on something else. The others, what were they talking about something? Focus on that.

“Where’d you get it?” Damon said, pointing to the folder in Ethan’s hand.

“Dad’s library,” Ethan said. Nina began sweating profusely and sunk further so she was almost on the other side of the fountain, out of sight from her friends. She didn’t want them to worry when she would be fine by tomorrow.

“Whoa-ho, stealing from Alan, that’s bad ass.” Damon said, “Even Alan scares me.” Ethan shook his head and shoved the folder back into his worn, grey messenger bag.

“Not steal, I just copied a few pages from the index.” Damon made a loud puff sound.

“You were so close to being cool.” He and Clover snickered, they kept a record of every ‘bad’ thing Ethan and Nina did for their own amusement. She’d never been affected by Clover and Damon’s teasing though and she didn’t think Ethan was either. He waved them off and said, “Dad doesn’t want me helping with his research so I’ve taken it upon myself to keep my own record and go about my own research.”

“Nerd.” Damon said. “How does your version of rebellion include research. You gotta admit that’s pretty lame.” Ethan rolled his eyes.

“You still love me, right?” He turned to look for Nina but she was slouched against the fountain. “Nina?” she heard him call again. Nina was straddling the line between conscious and unconscious, her wound felt like it was on fire and she didn’t even have enough energy to scream for help.

“Shit,” she heard Ethan’s voice. He gently slapped her face but she couldn’t focus on his voice or his face. She heard Clover snickering from behind Ethan.

“Let her sleep weirdo.” Clover said

“Something’s wrong, she’s burning up.” he said. His worry called the others to action and they all huddled around her.

“The Boar,” Nina said incoherently. “The Boar got me.” They all struggled to hear her above the chatter of the lunch period. “Did she say she wants more?” Lindsey said.

“The Boar? Nina, sweetie we killed it.” Ethan said.

Nina's wound burned, she lifted her sweat shirt and heard them all gasp. She had completely bled through the band aid. The edge of the wound was black and sticky and smelled like decaying flesh. "The Erymanthian Boar must have some kind of venom. When did it bite her?" Ethan said.

"I didn't know that it did. She was fine." Clover said.

"And she didn't say anything?" Luke said.

"That's Nina for you." Clover said.

"We have to get her out of here." Damon said.

The others murmured in agreement, but no one suggested an actual idea. That was usually Nina's role. It was also the last thing she heard before she blacked out.

"Do we just leave? It'll look like we're just cutting class." Luke said. "Call Alan."

Ethan ignored them all and looked down helplessly as Nina lay motionless on the ground, beads of sweat covered her forehead and neck. Ethan felt the heat radiating off of her and panic fled his veins. She was fading.

"We don't have time for my dad to get her excused. We need to get her to the forest and quick." Ethan said. If Nina was the unofficial leader, then Ethan was the unofficial brains behind their operation, and they all knew better than to question their resident nerd.

Ethan knew he wasn't strong enough to lift her for such a long time and he also knew he wasn't fast enough to get her there in time. He had passed the academy fitness exam by the skin of his teeth. He looked up at Damon who was by far the strongest and most skilled of the protectors.

"Take her and go, we'll deal with the fall out after. I'll take all the blame." Ethan said. Damon scooped her up like she weighed nothing.

"Like I'm going to let you have all the fun, nerd." He turned to Clover and said, "I need a distraction."

Clover grinned. "That's my specialty." She sauntered out of the courtyard, her eyes glistening with specks of gold. Ethan's glutes were clenched, Clover was as stable as a bomb and you never really knew what you were going to get with her. But he'd thrown caution out the window when Nina stopped responding to him. Soon after she disappeared, a junior came screaming into the courtyard. "Fire."

Ethan sprang to action and pulled the fire alarm. That would definitely come back to bite them in the ass, but no one was thinking about the repercussions. The students began running about the courtyard, some went to their lockers and some tried to salvage their lunch. Basically, everything they're not supposed to do in an emergency which Ethan counted on. In the chaos of students and staff, Damon slipped away with an unconscious Nina lying limp in his arms. Returning to the fountain like the school had not erupted into chaos. Ethan leaned against the side of fountain, half sitting and half standing. All he could think about was Nina. Knowing the forest would heal her was one thing but seeing her unconscious and feverish was something else altogether. Luke patted his back and Ethan nodded at the reassurance.

"What now?" Luke said.

Clover looked over at the principal making his way to them. "Consequences, which is totally uncalled for, I distinguished the fire before it could actually burn anything. All I made was smoke. The teachers probably assumed it was a smoke bomb."

Ethan straightened as Mr. Dunkleman approached. He didn't flinch, this was simply another way nymph business interfered with their daily lives.

Nina's green eyes fluttered open slowly. She saw nothing but green and brown and knew where she was immediately. The clearing in the forest, the nymph's headquarters for lack of a better term. She had spent more time there than she had at home. She turned her head slowly and saw the log benches they had made when they were thirteen. A small smile graced her lips. She felt better already as she felt the wound begin to close. Sinking her fingers into the ground she felt the life force of the forest vibrate under her skin. She could reach out and sense them all, the Willows, Aspens, Sassafras and Oaks all pulsed beneath her fingers. She felt the way their roots extended and entwined beneath the ground. How they enveloped her in a warm, welcoming embrace. Her heart thumped in her chest as she felt them reach out to her, calling to her. She hummed contently. She was home. She was at peace. A coolness washed over her skin and she could finally take a proper breath. Turning her head up to the sky, Damon was standing above her with a peculiar look on his face.

"Welcome back," He crouched down beside her and placed his hand on her forehead.

"From where exactly?" she said, slowly trying to sit up.

He shrugged. "Death's door? I don't know but that's what people say. You passed out in the courtyard."

She shot up, hurting her side a little. "Did anybody see?"

Damon scowled and said, "So your concern is not that you almost died but is our secret safe?" He nodded, wearing a knowing smile.

"We handled it." Her face wrinkled, unsure of what 'handled it' meant. "What does that mean exactly?" Looking up at him all she saw was mischief on his handsome face. "Don't look at me that way, Fellowes." she said.

Grinning, he said, "What way is that exactly?"

She poked an accusing finger at his chest. "With that charm girls out of their panties look." He grabbed her finger and gave it a squeeze, laughing. He dropped his hand and patted her head like she was his pet kitten. She relaxed under his touch, it brought her back to their childhood, playing duck duck goose in the backyard. There was even an intimacy there with him that she didn't even feel with Ethan. Simply because she had known Damon so long, basically all her life.

"We should get back," Nina said. She lifted her sweat shirt and saw that the wound was almost completely healed. It looked like a small cut now compared to the big gash that was there earlier.

"School's probably out." Damon said casually leaning against a tree trunk with a twig dangling from his mouth. Nina looked confused as she consulted her wrist watch. "It's only one."

"Yeeahh, about how I got you here..."

"What did you guys do?"

"What was necessary. Don't spaz out and go all Nina on me but Clover had to start a little fire." Nina's heart almost stopped. Clover and little did not fit into the same sentence. The nymphs lived by many rules, but the most sacred rule was their discretion. It was the only thing they knew for certain since the fires of 1999. The nymphs were to be kept a secret at all cost, tucked in and hidden away in the forest of Copper Hill. Besides the obvious reasons, Nina always wondered what or who they were hiding from. She wondered if they would ever know.

"So, the minute I black out, you start fires in public." The very thought made her side hurt all over again. She winced a little and Damon's eyes followed her hands as it gripped her side. "Why don't you finish healing before you throw a fit?" He shuffled against the tree, making himself more comfortable.

She stiffened at his sharp tone but didn't protest. She still felt like she ran a very long marathon. So, she laid back against the grass and felt the heady effects of plant life on her

entire body while the energy of the forest did the rest. She had never been able to describe it to Ethan, only her fellow wood nymph Jessie. It seemed Jessie's own connection with the forest manifested differently than hers but it was still profound in her own way. To Nina, it was sacred. The connection she had knowing if she reached out to any plant life she desired, it would meet her halfway. She closed her eyes. She could stay like this forever and never need another thing. Damon laid down next to her with a hand behind his head. She would deal with whatever the consequences were after because in that moment it was just her and the forest

Clover had counted how many people were in the godawful portrait above the principal's desk dozens of times and each time she got a different number. It was one of those war painting with men in funny looking hats and drawn swords on a large field. It had been a way for her to tune out the lectures she seemed to get like a twice a month or so. She wasn't keeping track.

"You've been given the moniker 'the problematic sophomore' you're going down a very slippery path Miss Hayes. I've called in your guardian for a little chat." Clover was frozen in position still counting the heads in the painting.

"Sir did you know there are thirty-five heads in that painting?" Dunkelmann's face shrunk and tightened before he smoothed it out in a perfunctory smile.

"You can wait outside Miss Hayes."

Clover returned the smile and sat outside his office. She waved to Wendy the receptionist before she sat down. With the phone cradled between her ear and shoulder Wendy shook her head at Clover as she scribbled something down. It was almost twenty minutes before Natalie showed up. She wore jeans, a green windbreaker and her press pass hung from around her neck. Clover braced herself for impact. Her legal guardian pinned her with a glare before she swung the door open to the office. Clover followed dragging her feet the short distance.

"Ahh Ms. Rizzoli. Sorry to pull you away from the paper but Clover's behaviour is getting out of control."

"I understand. But you have to understand why she acts out..."

"We have given plenty grace about Clover's situation. But that cannot extend any longer."

"I will have a chat with her Mr. Dunkleman. It won't happen again."

"I've heard that before. Perhaps the court should have appointed an older woman as her guardian."

Natalie's eyebrows rose high on her forehead.

A grin tugged at Clover's lips. He'd done it now.

"Clover go wait outside." She wanted so bad to give a smug look to Dunkleman but he was too coward to look up.

She grabbed her knapsack and left the office altogether waiting on the wall near the water coolers.

Five minutes later Natalie came out checking her wrist watch.

"I would kill to be a fly on that wall." Clover said.

Besides herself, Natalie's lips curved into a small smile.

"He won't bother you for a while. But you still have detention tomorrow."

"How'd you get him to back off?"

"Honey-bee I'm the best reporter in Copper Hill, assume I know everything about everyone."

Adjusting a curl on Clover's head she said, "Seriously though, I can't be pulled out of work for this nonsense. At least stop back chatting your teachers to their faces. Do it behind their backs. For me?"

Clover sighed. "I'll try."

Natalie grinned, "That's my girl. I gotta go. Sloppy Joes for dinner?"

"Sounds good." Clover said, lying through her teeth. Natalie was a lot of things, but a good cook was not one of them. But how could she tell the woman who had taken her in that she was an awful cook? She watched the short woman walk away with a small smirk.

Begrudgingly, she had to go back to class. Again, she saved the day and again she was getting shit for it. Nina and Damon went missing and naturally, their friends were expected to answer for them. Joking that Damon had a period emergency had landed her in detention. Ethan had tried to placate the situation by speaking to Miss Gaines in the corner. When he had rejoined the line, the others turned to him and he shook his head.

"There's nothing she can do now. It's not a big deal it just looks like they cut. I just hope it doesn't get back to dad." he had said. Clover shook her head at the thought. That was highly unlikely, Alan had eyes and ears everywhere. He also had a gigantic stick up his ass if anyone asked her.

Great, Clover thought. She would be stuck in school on a Saturday with the walking encyclopedia and Florence Nightingale. Things couldn't get worse. She eyed Miss Gaines from the corner of her eyes, how useless was she? The point of having the council embedded throughout their society was to avoid situations like this. Miss Gaines was one of two council members in the school. Unfortunately, the school's principal was not on the council and she resented that she didn't have a get out of detention free card.

Being sent back to class was annoying. No one could settle, the school vibrated and buzzed with untamed energy. Students were whispering their theories and passing notes back and forth. No one could focus and everyone was talking about the nerd who pulled the alarm for attention. Clover hated her schoolmates, they were clueless sheep. The running rumor was that she and the others got high in the forest every night. They were so wrong, they only got high on Fridays. She ignored the dirty looks as she strutted down the hallway as if it were her personal runway. Whether they were looking at her because they hated her or because her new jeans lifted her butt, she didn't know or care for that matter.

Rummaging in her locker for her History textbook, she ignored the presence she suddenly felt behind her. When she spun around clutching the book to her chest, Emma stood behind her. She felt heat rising from within her chest, that was just the reaction Emma got out of her.

"You know Clo, I swear I saw you with a lighter by the trash can. I wonder if the principal would be at all interested in what I have to say?" Emma said. She knew Emma was all bullshit, there was no lighter involved. Clover shrugged. "By all means go tell him...ooo but I wonder if he's interested in stolen Chemistry test papers at all?" She blinked, nostrils flaring as Clover pinned her in place with a nasty glare. A satisfied smile on her own face.

"Do you think that'd be of interest to him Em? I even have pictures." Clover's fake smile fell and her gaze penetrated through Emma. It was the least she could do. If she couldn't set her on fire...because that was bad form apparently.

"Run along, baby spice." Clover said. With a huff, Emma spun on her feet, whipping her pink-streaked pony tail. Clover and Damon were making out in the deserted Chemistry lab when Emma and her friends sneaked in to take pictures of the mid-term. Emma walked away and Clover rolled her eyes at the girl's back.

The wannabes were the worst. That annoyed Clover even more, there wasn't even an archery team to be jealous of. It was all a cover for them to leave school when there was something that needed to be killed. It was a sham. They were jealous of a sham. It was a

damn shame though, Emma was totally hot before she opened her mouth. Clover fixed her tangled curls the best she could in the mirror in her locker then slammed it closed.

Lindsey met her in the hallway outside their History class. She smiled when they made eye contact, her best friend was a sight for sore eyes. Nothing was ever complicated with Lindsey and that was the energy she needed.

“There she is,” Lindsey said, looping her hands through Clover’s as they made their way into the class. Their seats were next to each other, naturally. Clover couldn’t seem to relax the deep-set frown on her face when she dropped down onto the seat.

“What’s wrong buttercup?” Lindsey said. Clover sighed, where to start.

“I’m ready to blow this joint.”

Lindsey laughed. “Well, we do have to come back at some point but I got you covered for today.”

Clover was about to ask her what she meant when a cloud of sand blew in through the windows with a strong gust of wind. The class screamed and hysterics ensued. Lindsey winked at her as she said, “Oh my gosh my asthma.” Dissolving in a fake coughing fit. Clover almost snorted. “Oh no my eczema.” Clover said. Mr. Song evacuated the class immediately. On the way out, Clover hugged her from around the waist. “You’re just the best-est wind spirit around.” Clover said. Lindsey laughed and hugged her back. “I’m the only one around.”

Lindsey left her to find her twin brother Noel, she had ballet class on Fridays. The twins would meet them in the woods later that night.

Clover ran home and called Damon on her way, he was her protector and he was off playing Nina’s knight in shining armor. Clover wouldn’t stand for it.

“Isn’t your highness healed yet?” she said into the phone when he picked up. He chuckled. “Jealous much?”

“Extremely,” she said, letting herself into the small, flat house.

“Was only making sure the wound was fully healed.” he said.

“God forbid a hair on her head was hurt.”

“You’re cute when you’re jealous, you know.”

“So, there is something to be jealous about. Do you have a crush on Nina or something?”

“Everyone’s has a crush on Nina...at some point.”

Clover’s throat closed up. “I didn’t tell you that to throwback in my face asshole. Besides...that was years ago. I’m no longer into annoying virgins.”

“No wonder there’s so much tension between you two.” Damon said. Clover threw the keys on the kitchen table then ascended the stairs to her room.

“Shut up, you know I only have eyes for you. And Mackenzie and Dylan and Rodney...”

His low chuckle came over the phone again. “You can calm down. I’m already on my way. I’ll come pick you up in about an hour. Have to pick up some liquid refreshments first.” he said.

“Mmm, in that case you’re forgiven.” Clover said. “Nat’s going to be home late, we have the house to ourselves.”

“How bout that, best news I’ve heard all day. See ya in a bit babe.”

Clover ended the call and threw herself on her bed. Damon’s words about Nina resounded in her head. It was a childhood crush, nothing more. She had confessed it to him during a game of truth or drink they played with some girls from the private school in Omera. She smirked as other memories of that night surfaced, those girls really did know how to party.

Nina and Damon parted ways at the top of their street, he left to pick up Clover and she walked home alone. She texted Ethan that she was okay but even he was tied up, he would probably have hell to pay with his dad explaining everything. Her mom was on the couch when she breezed through the doors.

“You skipped school,” her mother called after her.

“Nymph business.” Nina said, going straight to her room. Unless her father was home to play peacemaker, she usually hid in her room if it were just she and her mother in the house. Nina’s grandmother was also a wood nymph. But she wasn’t around much and her mother resented anything nymph related. Because it always skipped a generation her mother would never know what it was actually like to be a nature spirit.

Her mother followed her up the stairs with an expression that told her this conversation as far from over.

“You know nymph business can’t be your excuse for everything.”

“Well it was today. I don’t know what you want me to tell you?” Nina said.

“I want you to take accountability for your actions.”

She didn’t need this after almost dying today. But she would have more hell to pay if she divulged that information.

“I will. Tomorrow at detention.” She walked off without another thought hoping that was the end to the conversation.

When she got to her room, she quickly shut the door. Once inside, floral and earthy fragrances of the plants and flora she kept danced with nostrils. Pressing her head against the closed door she inhaled deeply and exhaled the tension away. Nina ditched her bag and shoes at the door and dove unto her bed. She must have dozed off for a bit, when she woke, her phone was buzzing next to her. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes she answered Ethan’s call.

“It’s good to hear your voice,” he said. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I fought a giant and lost.” she said. She heard him laugh. “I’m just tired. A good night’s sleep will make me brand new I suppose. What was the fall out?”

He groaned. “Detention. Could be worst. You, me, Damon and Clover. Saturday.”

“Ugh, no. We’re supposed to go shopping in Omera.”

“I know, I know. This should have never happened, including you keeping it from us. From me. I mean it Nina.” he said.

“I know. I’m sorry.”

She wasn’t.

“It won’t happen again.”

It would.

“I love you.”

She did.

“I can’t protect you from things I don’t know about.” he said.

“You’re cute when you get into protector mode.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere.”

She smiled to herself, he played tough but he was just a teenager. They all were. That was a topic of much contention in the council. When it was decided that the nymphs needed protection outside of the forest, Alan had decided their peers would be the best to train and protect the nymphs. It would look suspicious and weird if armed, grown men followed teenage girls around. That, everyone could agree on. If the goal was stealth, no one would give a second look to a bunch of teenagers who seemed glued to the hip. The academy was established a few months later.

She just wanted to assure Ethan. He hated weapons and fighting but he insisted he train to be a protector because it would give him a first-row seat to all the supernatural happenings his dad had tried to shield him from.

“Your dad home yet?”

“No,” she sighed, “I’m hiding out in my room until he gets here. I’m starving.”

“I can bring you something later. You up for tonight?” he said.

“Protecting me from hunger, full service protector Ethan Karamekov.” She laughed, “No, it’s fine. You’ll have Alan to deal with. And yes, I’m up for tonight. I’ll be alright in a bit. Besides we have to hold up our terrible reputation of being delinquent teens in the woods.”

“I’ll see you in a bit.” he said.

“Bye.” When she hung up, her eyes fell on the makeshift plant stand in the corner of her room. She dropped the phone on the bedside table and heaved herself off the bed. She would tend to the plants and hopefully by the time she was done her dad would have made it home. She had over two dozen unique flora crammed onto the old wooden bookshelves. It was a form of training, bringing to life exotic flora, most that didn’t even grow in North America. This week she worked on Wild Morning Glory. It looked like nothing more than a white flowering plant. It was probably all anyone would see it as. But when she looked at it she saw it all. The regions they were indigenous to, ideal growing weather and how far along to maturity it was. Not that she could share it with anyone, especially not social media. Sooner or later plants indigenous to Asian growing in her bedroom would draw attention.

She placed her hands around the plant pot until she felt its life force. It was especially challenging because the plant lived up to its name. It grew wild and untamed with large roots. Nina had been slowing the growth process, slowing down its journey in the long life it would have. When she was ready, she would transpose it to her backyard and allow it to grow freely. For now, she wanted to exert her control.

“What are you?” she said to herself. There was a strange weed growing out of a few of the plants. They weren’t there this morning. She plucked them out immediately and replaced some soil in a few of the pots. Almost dying was a figment of her memory now that she was surrounded by plant life. It was as natural as breathing for her, nothing ever felt more right. She never assumed her power was controlling plant life, she saw it as asking Mother Nature for help and always getting it.

Ethan knocked twice before entering his father’s study. The study seemed to have an intimidating, robust life of its own. A heavy, Mahogany desk sat in the middle of the room. His father sat scribbling something on a folder page, barely acknowledging his presence. Behind the desk, lined on the entire wall were bookshelves made out the same Mahogany wood. Large volumes of books filled up the shelves. Topics spanning from Greek mythology to Biology and evolution. Ethan had read the majority of them. He’d spent his childhood on the floor of this study, while his father worked. He stood still looking at his father now, his eyes were casted downward at the papers in front of him. He looked up, pushed his glasses up his nose bridge and straightened when he noticed Ethan.

“What happened today?” Alan said.

With his hands behind his back Ethan begun the retelling of the day’s events after they returned from school. Alan’s face remained a blank canvas as he listened, which unnerved Ethan all the more.

Alan reclined in his chair; it made an awful squeaky sound that made Ethan cringe. “And do you think that was the best way to handle the situation?”

“It was the only way to handle the situation Sir, Nina could have died if we didn’t move fast.”

Alan thought for a moment and laced his fingers together on the desk. Ethan drew in a sharp breath waiting for his father’s ruling.

“I’m inclined to agree.” Alan said.

His brows drew together. “Sir?”

His father’s eyebrows rose on his forehead, he even looked amused. “I agree with you. Is there a tidbit you’re leaving out that would make me not agree?”

He shook his head. “No sir.” Ethan turned on his heels, his father didn’t do frivolous conversation.

“Ethan,” Alan said.

Ethan flipped around. “You did everything right. Nina did not. She should have disclosed that she was hurt. Tell her I need to see her tomorrow. After your stint in detention.”

“Dad it wasn’t her—” Alan raised a hand cutting him off mid-sentence. Experience told him there was nothing that he could say to change his father’s mind. Ethan spun on his heels to leave when he heard his father’s voice again.

“You’re meant for than this Ethan. Running around in the forest trying to prove something to whoever...it’s got to stop.” Ethan froze as the words hit his back. He had never been good at standing up for himself with his dad, or anyone for that matter. But there was always a silent rebellion that hummed below the surface. If Alan thought he was going to tear him away from Nina and his friends, he had another thing coming.

Ethan left the office with his hands shaking. He walked straight out of the front door. Putting as much distance between him and Alan was the only thing that would settle his nerves. Copper Hill was a ghost town that time of night. Nothing but street lights and empty sidewalks. The only night life to boast of was the life of the forest.

With distance, the fear subsided. He berated himself for reacting that way in the first place. He had been through worst verbal abuse while training. It just hurt more coming from his father. Replaying his father’s words in his head, he walked to Nina’s house on autopilot. Like a thief in the night he moved in the dark to the side of the house with Nina’s bedroom window. He climbed up the lattice with ease. After a soft tap on the glass, Nina appeared in the window. She was always beautiful. Her features were delicate and small. She wore a white sundress tonight. Her heart-shaped lips were painted a glossy peach and her dark hair fell like a curtain around her face. The nymphs all had a striking, ethereal beauty to them. No doubt a product of their godly heritage. If not for being a protector, Ethan knew he would have no business being around a group of such beautiful people. She opened the window and he climbed in.

“Hello you,” she said. She turned her back on him and went to her vanity.

“You about ready to go?” he said. She whipped her head around to face him when she heard his voice.

“You spoke to your dad.”

He opened his mouth to ask how she knew but thought better of it and closed it. Ethan lowered himself onto her bed with a heavy sigh. “It went as well as you’d think.” He pinched the bridge of his nose and shut his eyes.

“Alan being Alan?”

Fighting a tension headache, he rose into a sitting position and stared at her back. “Damn it Nina, why couldn’t you just tell me you were hurt?” She looked taken aback, he had never yelled at her before. After a moment of thick silence, she abandoned her hair brush and moved to stand in front of him.

“You know why. They have to respect me as a leader. I have to be strong Ethan. I didn’t want you guys worrying.” she said.

“The others, fine. But it’s me. We’re supposed to be in this together.” She didn’t respond to his words. “He wants to see you tomorrow by the way.”

Her face tightened but she didn't let him see the worry for too long before she replaced her grimace with a small smile. She slipped into his lap and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. He buried his face in her neck. His anger dissipated immediately. "I'm sorry I couldn't protect you."

"Stop." She stroked the back of his neck and he felt the tension slowly leaving his neck and shoulders. It was impossible to stay mad at Nina. She was such a gentle soul. Her touch was romance itself. And why did she always smell so damn good?

"I know Alan, remember. Besides, I'm the one who decided to hide my wound. I can take it."

He squeezed her tighter to him with one hand. His fingers curled around her chin and he got swallowed whole by the depth in her eyes. Rubbing his thumb up and down her jaw, hunger pains seized him. His lips sought out her own. Hungry and desperate. Between her tender words and her wild, floral scent, he couldn't keep his hands off her. He tilted her head up and pressed his lips to hers forcefully. She opened her mouth to him and their tongues met in a heated dance of give and take. Though he admitted he took more than he gave. Nina didn't seem to mind. Her body relaxed against his own, pliant against his instruction. Blood pounded in his ears as his grip on her waist tightened in a possessive lock. She moaned softly into his mouth and he was again struck by how lucky he was to be with her. She was soft and flowery on top of him. There was only Nina. And there would only ever be Nina.

His body jolted awake, his craving urgent and carnal. He deepened the kiss. His hand winded to the back of her neck, pulling her down to him even though there was nowhere left to go. He was lost to everything but her. Her long black hair fell over the sides of his face. A secret intimacy shared between them. It was just the two of them behind the privacy of a curtain. He wanted to stay like that forever. His tongue flitted in and out of her mouth over and over again just so he could hear the little moans and mewls that escaped her lips. Moving his hand from her waist to her knee he felt bold and invincible. He inched it up her thigh rubbing lazy circles on her soft skin. Her own hand clamped down over his stopping his ascent and breaking the spell. When he opened his eyes, she was staring at him with those brilliant green eyes.

"A genius in your own right but still just a horny teenage boy." she said with a grin. She tucked dark hair behind his ear tenderly. He looked up at her, dazed and in love.

"What do you even see in me?"

She slid off his lap slowly. His fingers found hers and gripped them in a feeble attempt to stop her.

"You didn't answer my question." he said.

"It was a stupid question." she said. "We should go,"

"Yeah, I'm gonna need a minute." He gestured to the tent pitched in his khaki slacks. Giggling, Nina nodded and floated back over to her vanity. She ran a brush through her hair giving him time to cool off.

Five minutes later, dragging his feet, he followed Nina out the window. When they made it to the clearing in the forest their friends were all there minus Eirene and Luke who were probably at the river. Lindsey was sitting in a split while Noel was trying to mimic her flexibility for whatever reason he had missed. Roman was cheering on Noel and Jessie and Damon seemed lost in a conversation. He could only catch a piece of it as he passed them.

Jessie's hands were animated as Damon told her something. "Damon for the one hundredth time, I'm not growing weed for you."

Damon woke up and immediately hit the floor for fifty pushups. Before he even relieved himself for the morning, he was doing pull ups with the contraption attached to his

bathroom doorway. His dad puttering about downstairs and his controlled breathing were the only sounds resounding through the two-story home Saturday morning. He almost vibrated with energy after his pull ups. Reluctantly, he finished his morning exercise and showered. After picking out his finest black muscle tee and black jeans, he jogged downstairs following the smell of bacon. With his dad in the shower the only thing that greeted him was a plate of eggs and bacon and a protein shake. He was halfway done with his breakfast when his nose was assaulted by the pungent cologne his father bathed in before leaving the house.

“I’ll see you tonight.” Damien said before taking his leave. Damien Fellowes the II was a simple man. He ran the only gym in Copper Hill and trained potential protectors in the basement of said gym. He had been training Damon since the age of five. As Damon ate his eggs, he played with a throwing star on the counter. He was learning to master them for fun. He couldn’t count how many weapons he had trained with. Everything, except for guns. The council had rejected it completely. Reminding his father that they were only teenagers. Human weapons or not, their parents did not want them to touch guns. It was how the ‘archery team’ had come about. It was their weapons of choice, bow and arrows and cross bows. Damon was partial to the spear though. He liked having more control over his weapons. With the bows, there were a number of factors that could affect the outcome.

He scarfed down the last of his eggs and threw one of the stars across the room. It lodged into the calendar on today’s date. Saturday April 24th 2019. He left the house with his messenger bag and his protein shake.

The last one to arrive to detention, Damon strolled into the classroom with a relaxed smile. Besides his friends there were two others in detention. Both of whom Damon knew since pre-school. They weren’t close but Tony and Basil were almost always the usual suspects for any pranks pulled in school. As he passed by Clover’s seat, he tipped her chin and made kissy lips at her knowing she would hate it. She batted his hand away and rolled her eyes. He knew she secretly loved it. They were joined at the hip since the age of thirteen, there wasn’t much she could hide from. As he slipped into his seat behind her, the mass of golden curls on her head hid everything else in front of him. Just last night he’d had his hands tangled in the mass of curls. He smirked at the memory. He’d throw himself in front of a bus to make sure not one curl would ever be out of place. If it wasn’t the academy’s brain washing then the years they’d spent glued to each other since did the trick.

Mr. Greenidge ran detention. He was a hard-ass with no life so Damon found that it fit. He probably didn’t have anywhere else to be on a Saturday. Confiscating phones, headphones and tablets, Mr. Greenidge took his job way to seriously. He then told them that their behaviour would land them in jail or worst one day. Damon would love to see what worst looked like. He was sure living in Copper Hill was as close as it got. Knowing Mr. Greenidge wouldn’t stay in the room long made detention more fun than one would think. Greenidge would spend the majority of the day in the AV room directly across the hall watching the history channel and grading papers. Once he left, the energy in the room became instantly more relaxed. Clover jumped up to his desk top and Tony and Basil sneaked out of the room altogether. Nina and Ethan angled their desk to face his and Clover’s. Detention virgins, they were adorable.

“Consider yourselves devirginized. Are you doing okay? Remember discomfort isn’t uncommon the first time and it gets better the more you do it.”

Clover’s head fell back as she laughed, exposing the neck he’d left hickeys on last night. “If it begins to feel good, feel free to let me know by moaning my name.” Damon winked at Nina and she laughed despite trying to stifle the giggles from escaping her mouth.

“I feel like a criminal.” Nina said.

“You’ll get used to it. Really.” Damon said.

Nina shook her head. "I'm not going to get used to it. I don't plan on making passing out in school a habit."

"Too bad, we'll miss you in these parts." Clover said. Nina rolled her eyes but didn't respond. Ethan was quiet, his head was down, his eyes deep into whatever he was reading.

"What's got him so..." Damon said, pointing at Ethan. Nina's eyes followed his hand and she smiled.

"Research." she said. Damon shrugged, when he turned back to Clover, she was toying with the throwing star.

"I'm getting really good." he said. She touched an edge with her fingertip and he snatched it out of her hand.

"Be careful," She frowned. "These things are no joke, they're super sharp."

"Oh please, like I'm scared of a little—" A loud screech drowned out her words. Damon spun around to face the window. He'd heard that sound before. He pulled Clover down with him as an Erymanthian Boar came charging through the window.

Clover screamed as glass shattered above her. Damon threw himself over her and squashed her flat to the ground. He'd clearly forgotten he was all muscle and weighed a ton. She would survive the falling glass but she'd get smothered by his weight. She couldn't see but she heard the heavy galloping. It tore through the door of the classroom on a destructive path she couldn't see from the floor. Damon flew off of her and helped her to her feet, Nina and Ethan were just as stunned.

"If nobody else is going to say it...what the fuck. Seriously what the actual fuck, they're not supposed to do that. Are they supposed to do that? Since when do they do that?" Clover said. The beasts usually stayed in the forested areas of Copper Hill. They had never had the opportunity to come into town. It was always easy to contain and kill them in the middle of nature. The game had completely changed.

They heard the loud noises as the Boar continued to charge through the school, probably bulldozing everything in sight.

"I have no..." Ethan was lost for words. They were really screwed.

"Great, our nerd is broken." Clover said. Nina flashed her a warning look and she ignored it. "What do we do?"

"We do what we do. Hunt." Nina said. Damon perked up behind her, he was always looking for the next fight.

"Ethan and I will look for Tony and Basil." She didn't say Mr. Greenidge because the Boar tore right through the AV room, it was unlikely he survived.

"Clover and Damon, track it. Corner it. We'll meet you as soon as Tony and Basil are out. And if we can, we kill it." They nodded. "And guys, don't get bitten. It really sucks." Nina said.

The foursome separated into pairs in opposite directions. Clover and Damon headed west to the gymnasium.

"What's the plan?" she said.

"We head to the gym so I can get my cross bow, I can't see my throwing stars taking down that thing." Damon said. Clover nodded, walking beside him. The school was eerily silent and it was unnerving. She could even hear the leaky water fountain and it was slowly driving her crazy. Damon was in hunter mode and didn't say a word.

It wasn't possible for that Boar to move without a sound which meant it was waiting for something.

Cutting through the silence she said, "You know what I'm sick of?" Damon smirked and let her speak.

“Nina always bossing us around, who died and made her the queen?” Damon kept to the walls, peeking around corners before continuing on passed the last science lab.

“That’s Nina for you. They’ve been like that forever. Remember third grade on that field when our tour guide fainted. She took charge, called 911, and lead us back to the park. I say let her have it.” Damon said.

“What? No. Why? Because of your big fat crush on her?”

Damon chuckled. “You’re never going to let that down, huh? What do you want me to say Clo? She’s my next-door neighbor.”

“Exactly,” Clover said. “She’s literally the girl next door.” Damon rolled his eyes.

“Is somebody projecting?” He smirked, eyes gleaming of devilry.

Clover nudged him in the abdomen but it probably hurt her elbow more than it did his rock-hard abs.

“I don’t have a thing for Nina.” Damon flashed her a knowing look. “Anymore.” He laughed and ruffled some curls on her head.

“I’m just messing with you, I get it though. She’s a babe.” Clover cringed as the words left his mouth.

“Sure, she has a pretty face. Don’t we all? Last I checked that didn’t make her Copper Hill’s most desired. Must be that virgin magnetism I’m always hearing about.”

“Clo, since when have you been jealous? That’s the one thing we don’t do? Because last weekend I did a lot worse than escort girls home. We both did.” he said.

“You’re allowed to screw any and every other girl on this planet as long as it isn’t Ni—”

Damon stopped her with a raised hand and put a finger over his lips silencing her. She listened for what he heard. The faint trampling sounds slowly grew in loudness. The Boar was on the move again and not far from where they were by the sound of it.

“We have to keep moving.” Damon said. Clover fell into step beside him, trying to keep up with his long strides. He looked over at her and must have caught the fear etched into her face hidden by false bravado. He wordlessly looped his fingers through hers and squeezed her hand.

“Look, if not Nina, then who? Do you want to lead? Cause I sure as hell don’t need that kind of responsibility. Especially with the shit show that this town is becoming. Who’s balls you think Alan’s going to have on a chopping block once this is all over?” She thought about it, he was right. Alan was always harder on Ethan and Nina. Even when the council meetings were over for the other nymphs, Nina and Ethan stayed back to get an earful from Alan and the rest of the council. If it were her, she would have turned them to ash if they spoke to her that way.

“Then why does there have to be a leader. I’m just as powerful as she is. Maybe even more, I mean bushfires burn trees down all the time, right?”

Ethan and Nina went directly to what was left of the AV room. Ethan went and ahead of her and blocked her path before she could get a glimpse of Greenidge.

“You don’t need to see that, trust me.” he said. She fought passed him, some sick need to know how bad it was. Nina’s hand clamped over her mouth as they found Mr. Greenidge’s body. His face had been smashed in, his bones broken and sticking out in all the wrong directions.

“The Boar must have trampled him.” he said. It had tried to do the same to Jessie yesterday. The room was trashed, broken camera lens and monitors had been strewn all over the floor. And in the rear wall, a gaping hole that lead to the other classrooms and the

courtyard. Nina stooped down and looked around for their phones but couldn't find it. He noticed the discomfort on her face almost immediately.

"You're hurt?" he said. She stood up and faced him, her face softening. "I just hurt my side when you pulled me to the ground. I'll live."

"Yeah you will. You're strong. I know." She smiled in response and resumed looking for the phones. Ethan felt a strain between them. He was constantly trying to take care of her but not be smothering. And he usually failed. But he had to, Nina thought she was Superman and she wasn't. The nymphs might be able to heal in the forest but they had not tested the extent of it. Could the forest reattach limbs, or bring them back from dead? He wouldn't bet on it, so he would continue to be the buffer between Nina and her detrimental pride.

"This is useless, we should head to the office, use the landline and call dad." Nina nodded, pouting slightly. He had gotten her that phone for her sixteenth birthday in February.

"I'll get you another one." he said, staring her out of the room.

"Will you replace the pictures as well?" she said.

"Don't be a smart ass. We'll tell the clean-up crew to keep an eye out for the phones." The cleaners would have their work cut out for them. He didn't know what story they would spin for the mayhem that was done to the school.

The office was passed the courtyard and Ethan was worried they would run into the Boar. He was weapon less and there wasn't enough plant life around for Nina to manipulate. His heart sped up at just the thought, it took all of them to take it down yesterday, how would the four of them manage? Was it the same boar? More than one monster in the span of a week was a lot and almost never happened. His mind was racing with a thousand questions and theories. He shook his head, Nina needed him to be focused.

They followed the path of the destruction the Boar left when they heard movement coming from the staff room. Nina looked at Ethan looking around at the slabs of concrete around them, she would be useless. "Fresh out of weapons." he said.

Nina looked around at what was around them. "Maybe the janitor's closet might have something pointy. Wait here." she said. She sprinted away before Ethan could protest.

Moving as quickly as possible she ran over to the janitor's closet only to encounter something way worse than the boar. Pink streaked blonde hair appeared from the Biology classroom.

"Of course, I hear a raucous and you're here." Emma said, by way of greeting.

"Emma you need to get out of here now, there's a deer loose in the school. What are you doing here anyway?" Her features hardened.

"That's none of your business." She folded her arms. "What deer?"

Nina grumbled, she did not have time for this. She grabbed Emma's thin wrist and all but dragged her out to the front of the school. Emma resisted of course but she weighed almost nothing, she didn't stand a chance.

"I'm not playing around Emma. A deer tore through the school it's like sick or something. Maybe rabies."

Nina wasn't sure but she seemed to buy it a little, at least she wasn't wearing that smug look anymore.

"Aren't you coming? Isn't it dangerous?" Emma said.

"I'll be right behind you, I'm just going to get Ethan." Emma seemed to resign and began descending the steps. Nina couldn't stay to make sure she got far enough from the school, she couldn't leave Ethan hanging. Sweat beaded down the back of her neck. She felt sticky and overheated, between the adrenaline and running around, she was having a hard time catching her breath.

When she got to the janitor's closet, she rifled around but only found a rake, mops and brooms. She grabbed the rake and the broom and hurried back to the staff room where Ethan stood guard.

"Was that Emma?" he said, taking the rake from her hand. Nina shook her head, barely catching her breath and said, "I'll tell you later." More movement from behind the staff room doors put his other questions to bed.

He pushed her behind him as he approached the staff room door. When he swung open the door Basil and Tony were cowering with cans of shaving cream at their feet. "Did you guys get detention just to fill the staff room with shaving cream?" Nina said. Tony grinned his answer before Basil pushed his shoulder.

"Dudes did you not see the monster? Or was that the little bit of weed we smoked this morning?"

"What monster? Oh...that...it's a deer must be rabid or something." Ethan said.

"Deer get rabies?" Tony said.

"Totally dude." Ethan said. Nina tried to hold in her smirk at his attempt at a stoner.

"But dudes, you should probably get out of here. Animal control is coming and they're probably bringing the cops."

"The cops?" Basil said.

"Yeah, lots of cops." Ethan said.

"What about Mr. Greenidge? He'll bust us for cutting." Tony said.

Nina and Ethan exchanged looks. "Ugh, no he just dismissed us because of the rabies and all. You can leave."

"Awesome." Tony and Basil high fived.

"Come on." Nina coaxed them out of the staff room while Ethan kept a watchful eye out.

"Because of the rabies, maybe you should go out this way...ughh it's contagious." Nina said. She ushered them back to the classroom they had detention in. The boys climbed out through the hole in the wall and ran away. Nina was relieved. All they needed to do was find a phone.

"Let's go," Ethan took off jogging and Nina was close behind.

Nina felt like she was dragging her limbs, forcing them to move. Her side was tingling. Where the Boar had bit her yesterday felt achy and uncomfortable. She figured she had not stayed in the forest long enough to heal. She would head there soon as they got this boar out of the school. She followed Ethan across the courtyard. As they crossed the yard, she noticed something, the weeds that had plagued the plants in her room. How had they gotten here? She was lying on this grass yesterday, it had not been there. She was sure of it.

"What do you think the council is going to come up with this time?" Ethan said. She was still looking at the strange weeds, she was very confused.

"Nina," Ethan said her name and finally whipped her head back around. "Hmm?"

"I said what do you think the council's going to come up with? To explain all this? Are you okay?"

She nodded slowly. "Yeah, it's nothing, gas leak meets freak earthquake seems like a good one."

She didn't even realize they had reached the office with the tingling in her side and the strange weeds. It seemed to be the only part of the school the boar had not plundered yet. Ethan went to the landline phone immediately. He called Alan while she took a seat on the plush chair opposite the receptionist counter. Her bones were tired and heavy, she didn't know if she could get back up. She could hear Ethan talking to his dad but she could tell it wasn't good news he was getting. His face fell as he listened to Alan. Then he relayed what had happened and what they told the others to get them out of the school. She felt feverish,

just like she did before. She wiped at the sweat quickly before Ethan could notice, they didn't need her deadweight right now. Ethan hung up with a heavy sigh.

"This is worse than we thought, we have to find the others." he said. Nina nodded, either he was in a rush and didn't notice or she didn't look nearly as bad as she felt.

Damon unlocked the weapons vault with his scanned finger print. He lit up at the very sight of their weapons. Ten crossbows, spears, daggers, arrows and knuckle spikes. It was like Christmas. Especially with Alan not around hovering over his shoulder talking about responsibility. He grabbed his cross bow, quiver and two handfuls of arrows. He also put a dagger in his boots and some knuckle spikes around his fingers for good measure.

"I'm ready," he said. The Boar was coming, he heard it breaking through concrete and the heavy thuds getting louder and louder. He looked around for a vantage point, just as his dad taught him.

"I'll go high." he said looking at the bleachers. He turned to Clover and said, "Distract him, I'll blind the son of a bitch and you turn it to ash." She nodded slowly but he could see the fear behind her eyes. They were never alone, it had always been the ten of them. He knew there was quite a gap to be filled but he believed she could do it. If only she saw herself the way he saw her.

"Hey, look at me. We're going to be alright. I'm not going to let anything happen to you." He held her by the back of her neck. He wanted to kiss her but they would get carried away and the boar was almost here.

"I know." She nodded, reassuring him with a smile. He positioned her by the far end where she could easily escape if he didn't manage to slow it down, which was unlikely. He ran up to the bleachers and drew a bow.

The Boar was a large beast, the size of an adult elephant. But it wasn't the size of it that was daunting. Its thick, brown hide was almost impenetrable. They had found that out the hard way yesterday. He knew the only way to slow it down was to go for the eyes and nose or any other exposed soft tissue.

The Boar charged through the gymnasium doors leaving more destruction in its wake. Clover's fists were already on fire and it drew the Boar to her like a moth to a flame. Damon pulled back the bow with a steady breath. He aimed for the quickly moving boar and released the arrow as gently as he could. The arrow shot up and out and landed right in its eye. It made an awful screeching noise. The Boar was disoriented and began slowing down. He shot another arrow that landed on its snout. That finally did it. The creature changed course for Damon.

"Clover now." he said. Clover sent fireballs its way. The large creature shook its body like the fire was nothing but a tickle. Its coarse hair was ablaze but it didn't seem to slow it down much. Luckily, the big clunky creature was having a hard time climbing the bleachers. Its feet kept getting stuck between the bleachers.

Clover could feel her energy waning. She felt like she needed a large meal and a long nap.

"Clover stop, you'll wear yourself out." Clover turned her head to the gym's entrance. Nina was yelling at her. Clover was too tired to be annoyed. Nina rushed to her side while Ethan ran to the weapon's cage to get his own bow.

"Listen to me, instead of throwing out so many fireballs you need to focus your energy on one." Nina said.

"What are you going on about? One fireball is not going to take it down."

“Focus your energy, raise the temperature. Hot, like the hottest you can.” Nina said.
“I can’t do that.”

“Yes, you can. You do it all the time. You can control the temperature. When you light Damon’s cigarettes versus melting pennies...I’ve seen you do both. It’s under your control. You can do this.”

It had never occurred to Clover. It was purely instinctual but Nina was right. If she used the same intensity to light Damon’s cigarettes, she would have melted his face off.

“How hot are we talking?” She looked to Nina, positioning her hands in front of her.

“Like a thousand pennies Clo.” Nina said. Clover nodded, her eyes glowed gold as a ball of fire grew between her hands. Nina took some steps back as the hairs on her arms began to singe. Clover’s own blouse began singeing but she couldn’t actually feel the heat on her skin. The small ball of fire wasn’t any larger than a tennis ball but it was so hot her blouse had almost burned right through. She screamed knowing it couldn’t get much hotter. She hurled it at the boar. The ball of fire, on contact with the Boar burned a hole straight through its side. She saw Damon with his mouth hung open through the hole left by the fireball before its lifeless body collapsed to the ground.

Clover fell to her knees in exhaustion and Damon ran down the bleachers to her side. He shed his flannel shirt and draped it over her bare shoulders.

“You did good kid.” he said, pushing back sweaty hair off her forehead. She was still warm to touch. She grinned.

“We have to go. I just talked to Alan, the others are in the forest with two more Boars.”

“What? How’s that possible?” Clover said. Two was cutting it close but four in one week. That was unheard of.

“We have to go.” Ethan said. “The school is empty and the clean-up crew are on their way.” Clover knew she couldn’t go another round anytime soon. And Nina was looking worst for wear too. Maybe Nina had a round with the boar before it got to the gym.

“Let’s get the other bows and get going.” Damon said. But as he turned to go to the weapons cage, Nina was almost green in the face and everyone was officially worried.

“You okay there, Woodstock?” Clover said. Nina didn’t seem to hear at all and collapsed to the floor screaming bloody murder.

“Nina,” Ethan hovered over her holding her face. It was even hard for Clover to see her like that. Ethan lifted her shirt and the wound from yesterday was back, nastier than ever.

Nina woke up thinking she was trapped in a sweat box. But when she opened her eyes, she was surprised to find herself in her well-ventilated bedroom. The sheer white curtains were even blowing so she knew there was wind but she felt like she was burning up. Her side still ached but it was a dull pain she could stand now.

“She’s awake,” she heard Ethan’s voice from beside her.

“Nina, glad you’re with us again.” A male voice said. It was Doctor Suresh something, Nina couldn’t remember. She vaguely remembered him from the last few council meetings.

“We couldn’t take you to the hospital. That’s not an ordinary wound.” Ethan said.

“Hospital? Take me to the forest.” Nina said.

Ethan shook his head. He looked like he had aged ten years since detention. She didn’t know how she had succeeded in doing exactly what she set out not to do, worrying everyone.

“I gave you something for the pain and some anti-biotics but I’m afraid that’s just a temporary fix. I’ve never seen anything like this toxin. If it continues…” he said. “It will shut down your nervous system.” Ethan’s nostrils flared at the doctor’s words.

Nina was in shock. She was going to die. She had too much to do, it couldn’t be true. The nymphs would never survive without her. She didn’t know why but she had never considered death a possibility for her. Not this soon anyway. How could she be so reckless? “We’re not going to just watch her die.” Ethan said. Nina wished he would stop yelling at the doctor. It wasn’t his fault any of this was happening.

“I didn’t say we would Mr. Karamekov. Now that you’re awake, I’m going to the hospital to find some stronger antibiotics. There isn’t a manual on mythological beast toxins but we will figure it out.”

“Thank you, Doctor Singh.” Nina said, catching the name tag on his white coat. When he left, Ethan paced the other side of her room. His long gangly frame was rigid and his hairy arms hung limp at his sides. How was he more stressed and she was the one who was dying.

“Will you sit with me?” Her voice was small. Ethan couldn’t meet her eye but he still rounded the side of her bed to sit next to her.

“It’s so warm.” she said. He reached over to the nightstand and placed a cool compress on her forehead. She slipped over to lean against his chest. It didn’t help with the heat but it did help with her morale.

“Where’s mom?” she said.

“Your father is downstairs keeping her at bay.” Ethan said.

“If I survive this she’s never going to let me live this down. All this nymph business is bad news… I could just hear her now.”

“When you survive this. I’m not letting you die.” he said.

A wry smile graced her lips. He was always so arrogant when he spoke like that. Ethan thought he could think his way out of any situation and while it had worked in the past, she didn’t know how it was going to get her out this time.

“The others will come through, they will get rid of the boars and we’ll get you to the forest to heal.” he said.

“We tried that didn’t we? Besides how are they going to kill the Boar when they just keep coming back?”

“I think the forest is reanimating the Boars, just like the forest has that rejuvenating effect on you guys. The Boar that was killed in school’s gym is still dead”

“You need to go help them.” she said.

“Like hell, I’m not leaving you.” His fingers found hers and entwined his own with them.

“There’s nothing to be done for me right now. And dad’s here with me. I’m going to be fine.”

“I don’t want to.” he said.

“Go. Do what you do best, observe, analyze.”

“How can I focus when you’re here fighting for your life?” he said.

“Ethan, if you want to help me you need to be there. You’ll figure it out.”

He fell silent and she knew she had finally gotten through to him. The only way to reason with Ethan was through logic. Maybe he would really figure out a way to stop the boars. She barely felt his lips on her warm cheek. He got up from the bed and picked up his cross bow that was leaned against the side of her closet. When he left Nina was free to cry. She tried to take deep breaths but the pain made her breathing jagged and rough. She couldn’t even do that.

Nina’s dad Clay Callisto, slipped into her room once Ethan had left. The short man who led with his protruding belly rounded the side of her bed to sit on the edge. Worry was

etched into his face but he still found the strength to give her a smile. She got her optimism from him. “We’re going to get this sorted bug, don’t you worry.” he said.

“How do you know?” she said.

“Because, I have one tough daughter.”

She forced a smile. He was always saying that. “When you were just seven years old you and Damon used to climb the big Pine tree behind the house.”

“I remember. You guys cut it down because you thought it was dangerous.” she said.

“It was dangerous. You fell off one day, twisted your ankle.” Clay looked at her socked feet on the bed. His eyes looked cold and distant but none of this rang a bell for Nina.

“I don’t even remember that.”

“We didn’t know it was sprained until the end of the week when it became swollen. You played on that swollen ankle for almost a week. Didn’t cry once.”

He touched the top of her head but even his optimism couldn’t hide that he was alarmed by her temperature.

“I’m gonna get some frozen peas, sit tight.” Nina could only nod faintly. Heat nipped at her under arms and the back of her neck. She lost faith with each passing second. When her bedroom door slowly opened again, she expected to see her father. Instead, her mother emerged from behind the door. In her yellow day dress and a top knot bun, she led with a scowl and stood at the foot of the bed with her arms folded. Nina didn’t have any spare energy left in her to brace herself from her mother’s disdain. If she died, she did not want the last thing she heard to be another lecture from Acacia Callisto.

“Do you see what this nymph nonsense is doing? You’re barely sixteen for crying out loud...you should not be in that damned forest running after things you do not understand.”

“Nymph nonsense? I am a nymph mother, I can’t quit it any less than you can quit your stupid resentment for Grandma and all nymphs.”

“I do not—did not resent your grandma because she was a nymph. I resented her because that is *all* she was. And I see the same thing in you. You sleep, breathe and eat this...”

Tears pricked at her eyes and slowly rolled down to her cheeks. Her mother would never understand.

“You don’t have any hobbies, any friends outside of the nymphs. It will consume you if you let it. Look where you are Nina.”

“You don’t understand and you never will because you’re not one of us.” Her words were not meant to hurt but she knew it did. Her mother’s gaze fell as the pain flashed across her delicate features.

“You’re right I don’t. But I’m not going to sit by and watch it kill you. Not again.”

“Again?”

“Your grandma, Nina.”

“She died in the fires of ninety-nine.”

“And how do you think that fire started? A fire so hot it almost took out half this town?”

Realization hit, her mouth fell open. “Clover’s grandparents started the fire?” It made sense but why didn’t Alan tell them. Did he not know? Was her mother the only one who pieced it together?

“I didn’t—” Her father re-entered the room. He looked nervously between the two of them. Her mother shook her head and left the room altogether as if she couldn’t stand the sight of her any longer.

Damon shot arrows in the boar's direction as fast as his arms would allow. He looked back at Clover stooping in front of a tree trying to catch her breath. His focus was split and it was making his aim nonexistent. Sparing one final look at Clover, he returned his attention to the Boar. He aimed for the creature's eye and it snarled and whined. With the distraction he made a beeline for Clover. He rubbed at her back and helped her stand up straight.

"Talk to me?"

"I can't keep this up much longer." she said. He had to get her somewhere safe. He hauled her over his shoulder and she went willingly. She was too spent to be anything but agreeable. As he ran back toward the cover of the thick forest, he was glad to see reinforcements. Lindsey and Noel were running in the opposite direction toward the clearing. He felt the wind picked up with Lindsey's presence as he tried to find a safe place for Clover. When he felt they were a comfortable enough distance away from the fighting he laid Clover down against the trunk of a tree. She was barley awake.

"Stay, rest. Don't come back until you have some energy." He rose over her and felt the warm touch of her fingers around his. "Don't you dare die, asshole." she said. He smirked and gave her a finger a little squeeze. "I'll try."

Her eyes fluttered closed, but her pulse was strong beneath his fingers.

He ran back to the clearing where the fight still raged. He squinted his eyes against the strong wind and dust that picked around the clearing. Lindsey's hands were outstretched as she circulated the air until a twister had formed around the boar. Damon looked around for the other creature. Noel slung his quiver over his back and said, "Eirene and Luke lured it down to the river." Damon nodded, that was smart. Eirene would be given the upper hand; the boar wouldn't know what hit him. He hoped she drowned it. For what they were doing to Nina, he wouldn't stop until they were both dead. For good. Finding a spear abandoned on the floor, he picked it up and twisted it the weapon until the spear head was right side up. Lindsey's twister had the Boar ten feet off the ground, floating. Noel and Damon seemed to have the same thought. Noel pulled back his arrow and gave a nod to Damon.

"Lindsey, on my mark." Noel said. She didn't give any indication to Damon that she had heard him but Noel continued as if she had. He wasn't one to question their twin telepathy, so he continued with the plan.

"Now Linds," he heard Noel say. Lindsey stopped her ministrations at once. The wind stilled immediately and the Boar's decent was hard and fast. When it was almost to the ground, Damon pulled back and with all his strength he lugged the spear toward the boar. It penetrated it's left eye and stuck out like a giant splinter. Noel shot arrows against it at the same time. The Boar fell lifeless. Damon raised a hand to ward them from approaching it. "We need to cut its head off or something, to make sure it stays down." He spoke in a calm controlled tone. The boar was barely down for a minute before it began to move again.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me." he said.

Emotionally taxed from the fight with her mother and physically drained from the toxins swimming inside of her, Nina was finding it very hard to see the bright side of this situation. Was this really it? She knew deep down the antibiotics wouldn't work on her. Not like they were supposed to. Modern medicine didn't stand a chance to mythological illnesses. She adjusted her side in the bed and winced from the sharp pain in her joints. It had spread, she knew it had. She closed her eyes pleading with whatever entity nice enough to listen to her. She didn't want to die.

She saw movement from the corner of her eye on her shelf of plants. The weeds were back. Again. It felt like she was being taunted. Plants were supposed to be obey her. Though

she had never seen the process as such. Whatever she asked of Mother Nature, Mother always answered and provided. She had never seen it as dominion, more like symbiotic.

“I don’t understand.” she said. “Why do you keep doing this.” Close to manic she got up from the bed. She was barely able to stand without the support of the nearest wall. She slowly plucked the weeds out of her plants. But it grew back instantly. She plucked again and again and it kept growing back.

Plants were supposed to listen to her, she didn’t understand what was happening. She yanked it out again this time the weed was crushed between her thumb and index finger. It mushed instantly and looked like pesto on her finger tips. She knew instinctively what it was for. It was medicine. More than that, it was an antidote. Excitement sparked inside of her. She grabbed her mortar and pestle from the bottom shelf. She plucked more and squished them in her mortar. When the paste was thick enough, she scooped them out with her fingers and lifted her t-shirt. She almost gagged at the sight of the grotesque sight of the venomous toxin. She lathered the paste unto the wound. It stung and tears pricked at her eyes. The wound burned like it had just been struck with lightning. She was blinded by white heat. She gripped the rickety shelf as it got more and more intense until it stopped. She gasped, looking down at the wound. She took the damp towel that had just been on her forehead and wiped at the wound. It looked like a regular bite. The black sticky goo was gone. Along with the fever. She was going to cry again, of elation this time. Almost going slack with relief, a lone tear rolled down her eyes. “Thank you, mother.” she said, voice but a whisper.

It was then her father and Dr. Singh appeared in the doorway.

“What in heaven’s name.” Dr. Singh said.

Completely ignoring their gaped expressions, she looked back at her plant pots. More weeds grew, over taking the pots. She heard them loud and clear. She knew exactly what she had to do next. She plucked as many weeds as she could fit into her hand and began squishing them beneath the marble pestle.

When Ethan got to the clearing in the forest, he had to brace himself against a tree as Lindsey was trying to sweep up a boar in a mini twister. Clover was hauling fireballs at another but they were small sparks of light against its thick hide. Damon and Noel were trying to take it down with arrows but nothing seemed to slow it down.

“You can’t kill it. Not here. The forest will just bring it back.” he said over the whistling of the wind. Damon looked back at him for a split second.

“So what do we do with it?” Damon said.

“Try and contain it. For now.” Ethan hunkered down to get a better look. The Boar was not concerned with Damon and Noel. They were only focused on Clover and Lindsey. He moved behind the trees to not draw attention to himself as he observed and watched.

Nina came running through the forest, a bowl in her hands.

“What are you doing here?” he said. She looked fine, he didn’t understand. Relief flooded his chest. He resisted the urge to run to her and take her in his arms.

“Lindsey, enough.” Nina said. Lindsey looked at her strangely. “Trust me.” Lindsey dropped her hands and the wind stopped with her. The Boar charged at Lindsey and she braced herself for impact. With a wave of her hand, the trees around them cracked and the entire forest seemed to moan. Nina summoned vines around the Boar. Keeping her hand up, the vines slithered until the Boar was up in the air suspended from a tree branch. They were finally able to take a breath.

“How long will that hold?” Damon said. He was already drawing his bow.

“No Damon don’t. It will only come back.” Ethan said. Damon dropped his weapon. “Well we can’t leave it hanging from a tree, forever can we?” he said.

“We’re not.” Nina said.

“Noel, Damon quick.” Nina opened the bowl and revealed a green paste that looked like someone’s sad attempt at guacamole. “Dip the arrow heads in this.” They did as told.

“Shoot now, I’ll explain later.” Nina said. Alan appeared in the clearing with Damon’s dad. Damien was holding a spear. It seemed back up was no longer needed. Alan exchanged looks with Nina and she gave him a nod to try and assure him. Noel and Damon aimed for the Boar’s head. This time the arrows broke skin. The Boar decayed in front of their eyes to dust. Nina receded the vines and branches with a wave of her hand.

“No carcass this time.” Ethan said. Nina shook her head.

“They are gone for good. I’ve been seeing these weeds all around since the first Boar attacked. I’ve never seen it before. It was Mother’s way of helping me. It neutralized the toxin in my wound. So, I figured...”

“It was the only thing that could kill them.” Ethan finished.

“Thank nature for me will you.” Noel said. Nina smiled.

“I’ve never experienced anything like this before. I can sense where things grow for every other plant. But this one, it doesn’t grow...or even exist on earth.” She folded her arms but didn’t make her inference as to where she suspected it did.

“Eirene drew the boar to river. She and Luke are there now.” Damon said.

“Lindsey go take it to them, stay low.” Nina gave the bowl of the antidote to Lindsey. The wind picked up and lifted the small blonde off the ground, she was out of sight a minute later.

“Everything is changing. Since when did the forest start healing the monsters?” Clover said. Alan exchanged a wearied look with Damien then his face hardened to the stoic mask he always wore.

“Clover is right. Things are changing. And we must change with it. Council meeting tomorrow night.” Alan and Mr. D turned around and disappeared to the path leaving the nymphs and their protectors in the clearing that used to be their safe haven.

“What now?” Clover said.

Nina didn’t want to be alone after the day they’d had. Maybe it was a subconscious effort just to assure herself they were all okay. Even though she had been the one to have a near death experience. She was only worried for the others.

They all met in Damon’s basement after the battle. The entire house was truly a bachelor’s pad but the basement was complete with a pool table, seventy-five-inch TV, Xbox, dart boards, and a fully stocked fridge. Damon and Luke were in the middle of a heated pool game while the others were piled onto the sectional couch in front of the TV. They sat thigh to thigh so they could all fit. They were watching Game of Thrones. At least the others were, Nina was half asleep on Ethan’s shoulder. They all smelled like forest and dirt having come to the basement straight from the forest. With the exception of Clover who ‘would not have it’. She showered upstairs because she had a change of clothes in Damon’s drawers. Even Nina could go right next door to her house for a fresh set of clothes but she didn’t have the energy.

“Let me walk you home, you need sleep.” Ethan said. She shook her head against his shoulder and shoveled a handful of popcorn into her mouth hoping the salt would wake her up. She didn’t want to leave. In that basement, failing grades didn’t exist. Nor did the tension that was always simmering between her and Clover. And especially her strained relationship with her mother. None of it mattered. They weren’t even nymphs and protectors. They were just a bunch of teens who’d been forced to grow up together. A group of people who only had each other. Nina held on to those moments.

Tired of squishing together on the couch, Noel got up and dragged the bean bag from the corner and dropped his frame onto it. Damon and Luke joined them eventually. Damon took Clover's seat and she climbed into his lap and curled her body around him.

"So, what do you guys think it means?" Luke said. They had not spoken about it. They had allowed the sounds of chewing and the clack of the pool cube connecting with the balls to fill the void instead. But the ignorant bliss had worn off.

"Simple," Ethan said. "Someone or something is orchestrating the whole thing and they just upped their game. How'd they know we were at the school? Why try to expose us now, after all these years?"

His questions resonated with them. Nina didn't have the slightest inclination. She just knew she had found an otherworldly plant today. That she was sure of. If someone was playing games with them, they had no choice but to play along to get the answers they wanted.

"We practically grew up in that forest, if some big bad wolf was lurking don't you think we would have crossed paths by now?" Luke said.

"I don't have all the answers yet but whatever quiet danger our grandparents might have dealt with in the past is finally coming to a head." Ethan said.

"Can we please not talk about it. I'm so over it." Clover said.

"This isn't something we can just ignore." Nina said. "Things feel a lot more real doesn't it?"

Roman nodded. "Everyone is in danger now."

"That's why we're here. To protect them. And we will protect them." Nina said. Though she wasn't as sure as her words were. But if she was confident, so would everyone else. Faking it had now become a mantra.

"On that note, I'm getting out of here." Noel said. Lindsey was close behind him after she hugged Clover. Roman and Jessie were the next to leave. Followed by Luke and Eirene. Nina didn't want to go home and have round two with her mother. So instead, she stretched out on the now spacious couch. Ethan and Damon abandoned them on the couch for a game of darts. Nina and Clover were still slung over the couch trying to regain their strength. Nina had eaten her weight in popcorn and could barely move when Clover's weight shifted on the couch next to her. She looked down as a text message made her phone ping on the coffee table. Her heart fell when she saw who it was from (Don't answer, aka Emma) *Sick Deer? I'm not a complete idiot. Istg, I'm gonna get to the bottom of whatever you guys are up to.* Nina's breath hitched in her throat. When she looked up Clover was watching her with a strange expression.

"What is it?"

Nina placed the phone on the table with a heavy hand. "Emma, she was at school for whatever reason today. She doesn't buy the deer story."

Clover scoffed. "She's smarter than she looks. Why don't you leave Emma to me? I'll take care of it."

"What does that mean exactly? Take care of it?"

Clover smirked with a little shrug. Nina looked down as a small bout of silence engulfed them. Nina was grateful for the few moments Clover went without insulting her. She wondered how Clover would take the news that her family had been responsible for the most devastating thing to happen to their town. Fire was the most volatile element of them all. She wondered if that could happen to Clover someday, if she would ever lose control.

"About earlier today. Thanks for that. I didn't realize how much you see me." Clover said with a small smile.

"Of course, I see you. You're very powerful Clover, maybe you'd like to train with me one of these days. Power is nothing without control." Nina said.

Ignoring her preposition entirely, Clover said, “I’m glad you’re okay you know,” She stretched and rose from the couch. “You’re not allowed to die until we have that fight and find out who’s the better nymph.”

When Nina looked up, Clover’s eyes were sparkling. Nina wasn’t sure if she had just been threatened or given well wishes. Clover left her with that thought and went to cheer on Damon in his game. Clover was surly on a good day but Nina had never imagined she might ever take out that aggression on her physically. She must have been interpreting her words wrong. Even though putting Clover in her place was an appealing thought to some part of her hidden deep within. Nina would never attack another nymph. Clover would have to wait on that fight forever. She reached for the bowl of popcorn even though she shouldn’t but Clover’s words had left her restless. Her phone buzzed on the coffee table next to the bowl of popcorn. Next Ethan’s phone and finally Clover and Damon’s. She read the text from Alan and a cold chill ran down her spine.

*Archery Practice
Five minutes
Copper Hill Forest.*