

Chapter 103

I had promised myself I'd go through those files as soon as we made it back to the house, but the moment I curled up into the warmth of Asher's teenage bed, my looming exhaustion swallowed me whole.

"What happened to those important files?" He asked, his voice gravely.

"This is the seventh three a.m. call in a month." I grumbled when Asher began to move me, his muscular arms forming a cage around my torso. His eyes dripped honey and were hooded as he watched me, "As Luna and Vampire Queen, I declare that just this once, we're going back to sleep."

His reply fell on deaf ears, because my eyes had already closed, and my mind plunged into darkness.

The last few weeks, my sleeping moments were plagued with strange dreams. Much different than Holly's nightmares, which tore her from sleep with screams of mania, these dreams were bursts of color and sound. Jumbled

were bursts of color and sound. Jumbled images that burned into one another, leaving me breathless and confused as I woke up each morning.

I wasn't sure what it meant, but deep in the recesses of my mind—buried in the hollows of my heart and the grooves of my ribcage, it felt like something was waking up.

When I awoke that morning, finding Asher still peacefully asleep, I made my way downstairs. The stairs were silent beneath my feet, unlike the constant creak in my childhood home. ①

'Someone's making breakfast?' Maya inquired, her ears perking as our mouth salivated. I could hear the snap and crackle of bacon hitting the frying pan as I padded down the stairs.

'Ugh, what if it's Brandon?' I grunted, coming to a halt.

'We can use the pan to knock him out, then take his food.' Maya shrugged, not at all deterred by our mate's younger brother. 'Really, it's a win-win in my eyes. And you know I'm rarely ever wrong.' ①

ong.' 1

As I rounded the corner with my eyes narrowed and shoulders tense, I was surprised to see Zeke leaning against the counter. All anger-filled thoughts about assault by frying pan left my head, and my posture relaxed just a tad.

Zeke's chestnut hair was a mess on his head, proof that he had just woken up. He was staying just a few houses down from us, which meant Asher's kitchen was the last place he should have been.

What I noticed first was the powder blue apron wrapped around his neck. The waist ties hung useless at his side, much too short for his muscular form. On the front pocket, embroidered in gold cursive letters, was the name 'Claire.'

A platter of steaming eggs sat on the island counter, flecked with salt and pepper as they teased my rumbling stomach. Next to it was an even larger platter, stacked with various pancakes. I noticed a few that seemed to have chocolate chips or blueberries inside, while another smelled strongly of banana.

"Morning." Zeke called out over his

"Morning." Zeke called out over his shoulder, cursing when the bacon grease crackled and popped. His lopsided grin made me snort, "Breakfast will be ready in ten."

He had pulled just about everything out. Various breads and jams lined the counters, but my rumbling stomach pointed out an obvious lack of cereal.

I opened a few cabinets, frowning when I noticed a row of colorful boxes on the top shelf. The counter jabbed into my ribcage, but my fingers were still far below the assortment of cereal.

"Zeke, can you grab me a couple boxes of cereal?"

His eyes swiveled from where I stood, my arms stretched upwards, to the cereal just out of my reach. Unlike when Brandon trailed his eyes over me, there was nothing sexual within Zeke's gaze. Zeke was an infuriating older brother that I had never asked for, eerily similar to Sean. 2

"I would, Lola—really, but I'm making sure this bacon doesn't burn. I'm sure you understand since I've been slaving

are this bacon doesn't burn. I'm sure
● You understand since I've been slaving
away at this for over an hour now." His
grin was sweet in the same devious way
Asher's was whenever he had something
planned.

His laugh drowned out my snarl, my
rough shove to his stomach had him
going even harder. I smirked at the few
steps back he took, pleased that I had at
least put some strength into the push.

Using the silver handles of the cabinet for
support, I pulled myself onto the
countertop. The marble dug into my
knees, but I was able to see the row of
cereal boxes. Grabbing the first fruity,
sugar-packed cereal I could get my hands
on, I began to inch off the countertop.

"What are you even doing here?" I asked
Zeke.

When a set of hands fell on my hips
squeezing lightly, I had wanted to believe
it was Asher's touch—because no one
else in this house would dare. I knew that
for a fact, which is why when I spun
around and landed a sharp kick to
Brandon's chest, I put extra effort into
making it hurt.

making it hurt.

● Surprise and delight exploded in his cyan eyes, making me wish I had kicked even harder. He stumbled backwards, the kitchen island making him halt.

His lips tilted up in a smirk, so similar to Asher's that it stoked the anger in my chest. He held some of those heart-breaking features my mate had, the ones that most likely won over countless she-wolves.

Asher's touch, whether forceful or gentle, were welcomed—but the touch of his brother, I wanted none of it. As far as I was concerned, he could take his oily smirk and frat boy personality and shove it up his ass.

“What is your fucking problem?” I snarled, relieved that I at least had the decency to lower my voice. There was no need for Claire or Killian to hear and come storming down. Or worse, Asher. As much as I was ready to see Brandon get his ass kicked, I really wanted some of the breakfast Zeke had made. “I’ve known you for all of twenty-four hours. Are you incapable of acting normal?!”

“My problem? I’m just attracted to the

My problem? I'm just attracted to the feisty, unattainable ones." Brandon sighed, truly wounded and at war with the world. I gave him a look that portrayed how much I believed his eternal struggle, which wasn't much. His next words, however, made me feel something more than just rage. His lips twitched into a smirk. His eyes, light where Asher's were dark, flicked down to my neck. "As for acting normal...you're one to talk."

His voice became whisper soft, and the teasing in it was anything but friendly. "It's easy to pretend your normal when my brother's hand isn't around your throat." 1

With those final words, Brandon grabbed a chocolate chip pancake and strolled out of the kitchen.

"Asher's going to tear into him when he finds out Brandon has a thing for you." Zeke snorted but gave me a reassuring grin. "They've been at each other's throats since they were kids. Feel free to kick Brandon's ass whenever you see fit, but just know he's only doing it to piss Asher off. Doesn't make it right, but

everything Brandon does is at his own risk.”

“As for why I’m here...” He continued, holding up an empty carton of two dozen eggs. Shaggy hair fell onto his forehead. “I didn’t have any eggs, and I wanted breakfast.”

Asher woke up half an hour later, his dark eyebrows inching closer together as Zeke recounted how I kicked Brandon across the kitchen. I had to give it to Zeke, he made me sound much more badass than I was. 2

“Don’t bother storming the house, he left half an hour ago.” Zeke shrugged, grabbing a stack of plates as he began placing some food onto his own. His voice was lighthearted and jovial as he bounced between sausage and biscuits, buttered toast, and roasted potatoes. “He’s still good at stirring up shit and running. Nice to see that when the world is changing, some things remain the same.”

“What exactly are you doing here, Zeke?” Asher asked after a few long moments of silence.

silence.

Zeke looked towards me, a plate in his outstretched hand.

Shrugging as I took it from him, I gave my rugged mate a grin. His hair was still messy from sleep, the long strands on the top fell over his forehead. Piercing eyes burned into my own, the golden hues swirling curiously.

“He didn’t have any eggs. We did.”

We had a grand total of twenty minutes to eat and enjoy our morning before getting to work. Asher and Zeke received a mind-link from Sean and Mason, who were helping with security detail for the announcement. Just a few minutes later, I felt a few tugs down the link between Giovanni and myself.

It wasn’t surprising that we were both being called on, especially today. Breyona and Mason, along with the enthusiastic help of Alpha Zeke, have somehow managed to keep the rumors and whispered secrets under wraps this past month. All that hard work, it was about to unravel during this announcement.

unravel during this announcement.

Even with all the excitement, Asher and I had a few tasks of our own to take on.

“What about her?” I sighed, holding up another manila folder with the same infuriatingly small print. This had been the sixth and final file I had handed to Asher. With each passing second of skimming through the young woman’s file, his scowl grew deeper. “Asher, we have to choose one. There aren’t any more candidates. These background checks are all we have. I know we were both expecting more, but I think we should work with what we’ve got.”

“You’re comfortable bringing a stranger into this pack, one with magic?” He questioned, golden eyes silent and still. He glanced down at the folder again, at the woman’s moss-colored eyes and soft smile.

By all accounts, she looked like an upstanding citizen. A preschool teacher for five years, but before that, there wasn’t a whole lot to go on. She had moved around a bit, never staying anywhere for over two years. It was that way for all the women—the witches

●y for all the women—the witches we had looked over.

Breyona's parents, both of which are historian's, were currently scouring the country for magical texts, anything that could help Holly and I begin learning.

When Asher had put out the request for a n actual witch—someone to come train Holly and I, I wasn't sure if we'd receive any kind of feedback. The fifteen candidates we had; they were more than I could've ever hoped for.

I had scoured their files, reading everything back to Asher. There were two I felt connected with. The first was the preschool teacher, her auburn curls and mossy eyes soft. She specialized in defense magic, but it was her background knowledge in blood magic that caught my attention. Blood magic itself sounded bad, but it was a part of Holly's heritage that she couldn't escape. Her mother, different from my own, was a blood witch.

The second witch was a middle-aged woman with laugh lines around her eyes and mouth. Her pale-blue eyes twinkled, like she held a secret the rest of the world

When she held a secret the rest of the world wanted in on. Her specialty was ancient runes and protective sigils. Not only did we need the added protection, but there was something about her that felt comforting. Perhaps, it was because she reminded me of grandma.

“Risk isn’t anything new to us. Our lives have been full of it, especially lately.

These women can help Holly and teach us how to use our magic. They can also help with any magical texts Breyona’s parents find. I think that’s worth letting them onto our land...” I told him truthfully, knowing that if there were anyone who would listen to my thoughts, it was my mate.

Asher was silent for a few moments, his creased eyebrows softening as he relented. “We’ll have the witches contacted and brought here. Wages and housing can be debated when they arrive. You can let your vampire assistant know you’ve chosen.”

“By vampire assistant, you mean Tristain.” I smirked. Asher had no problems with Giovanni and was even on first-name basis with the man. “But yes.

problems with Giovanni and was even on
last-name basis with the man. "But yes,
I'll let him know." 3


"Can you blame me for not liking him,
Lola?" The way his voice naturally
lowered when he felt threatened, the
honey in his eyes darkening to a rich
caramel, it sent a skittering of excitement
down my spine.


This past month had been hectic, so
much so that those intimate moments
with Asher and I were few and far
between. I could feel the frustration and
need building within him, feral and wild i
n comparison to the man that seemed so i
n control.

"I don't blame you at all. He can be
insufferable." I agreed, my breath
quickenning when his eyes flicked down to
my lips. No matter how badly I wanted to
crumple under his rough touch, I stood m
y ground. "But he's been more than
helpful this month, especially with
winning over the other vampires."

"I'll feel better once this announcement i
s finished and I can steal you away for the
rest of the night." He grunted; his fingers
tangled in the silky strands of my hair. I

●ngled in the silky strands of my hair.
shivered under his touch and felt my leg
clench at his words. “I think I’ll spend
the night reminding you that no matter
whose Queen you are—you were my Lun
first.”

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