

Chapter 116

"Alright, so maybe he can use me to get a rise out of Asher." I sighed under my breath, wincing when Brandon's fist slammed into Asher's jaw. My mate absorbed the hit with a straight face, his golden eyes bright with anger as he grabbed his brother by the throat and shoved him back.

Brandon, as cocky as ever despite the massive hangover he was sporting, quickly regained his balance. His dark hair was messy on his head and lacked the charm of naturally tousled hair. He narrowed his bloodshot eyes and snarled at his older brother, charging forward with enough force to knock a grown man off his feet.

It was clear Brandon was a glutton for punishment. He knew Asher would find him after what he pulled last night—especially after laying a hand on me.

He stumbled out of some sorority house I had no name for, directly across the street from the afterparty most of the University attended. Half-dressed and grinning ear to ear, he spread his arms

inning ear to ear, he spread his arms wide and said, 'hello brother.'

Even as Asher charged up the front lawn, past the crumpled beer cans, empty bottles of liquor, and torn streamers from last night's party, his grin never faltered.

"This is your fault, y'know." I frowned at Zeke, snatching the canned margarita out of his hands to toss into the trash. I gave him a dry look, "Don't pout at me, Zeke. You know damn well if you hadn't had pointed Brandon out, they wouldn't be fist fighting in the front yard of some frat house."

Zeke was perched on the bed of a pick-up truck that someone had driven into the front yard. Not only was he missing a shirt, but there were various words painted all over his chest and back in what looked like pink paint markers. At this current moment, he was scratching the words 'eat me' which were located just an inch above his pant line.

I sighed, avoiding the curious eyes of the hungover college students. The ones awake, anyway. "I can only imagine what everyone else thinks, watching their Alpha and his brother fight. Then they

Everyone else thinks, watching their Alpha and his brother fight. Then they can look to their left, and see another Alpha, shirtless and covered in pink paint."

"There were thirteen separate fights last night, Lola. Only seven of them were outside, and two were at the lake." Zeke laughed boldly, his muscular shoulders shaking before he winced and grunted from the harsh sound. He ran a hand through his messy hair, which smelled strongly of beer, and shrugged. "Most of us have grown up watching Brandon and Asher fight. Even if it wasn't their Alpha and his brother, this would be nothing new. Now when claws and fangs come out, then we'll worry. Right now, they're just fucking with one another."

The more I paid attention, the more I realized Zeke was right. Both Brandon and Asher landed some nasty blows, punches, and kicks that I knew would leave welts, but neither backed down.

Even though he was a cocky, insufferable jerk, it was obvious that Asher wasn't the only son of an Alpha. Brandon was just as much Killian's son as his brother,

much Killian's son as his brother, fighting back with a ferocity that a normal werewolf would lack, especially when it came to sparring with an Alpha.

"What happened to Carson and her gymnast friend you were becoming so fond of? It must've taken you a long time to realize she wasn't your mate, not that she minded." I teased, forever scolding Zeke's playboy ways.

"She left her phone in her car last night, had to uber back to the lake to grab it." He shrugged, his lips twisting into a wicked grin. "As for her gymnast friend, she's still asleep. You wouldn't believe how flexible—"

"I can live without knowing the details."

"Come on guys, already?" I heard a familiar soprano call out, her voice alone hushing the small crowd that watched. "Asher hasn't even been back a week and you're already fighting."

Cassidy looked good for someone who had stayed up drinking and dancing, especially compared to some of the rougher looking students. She had all of her clothes on, and wasn't rummaging

through the shorts, shirts, and underwear

her clothes on, and wasn't rummaging through the shorts, shirts, and random pieces of lingerie scattered along the yard.

Her sun-kissed locks were pulled into a high pony, the style showed off all the shades of gold in her hair, while mine seemed almost blue-black in comparison.

"What are they fighting about now?"

Cassidy approached Zeke and me. Her candy pink lips twitched into a grin as she looked over Zeke's chest, and the paint that covered him. She tapped a manicured nail against the back of his shoulder, where the word 'thicc' was written. "Well, at least someone had fun last night. I'm glad to see my compliment wasn't wiped off."

"They're fighting because Brandon here won't get off Lola's back. The Alpha's brother has a crush." Zeke joked dryly, shrugging when I gave him a look.

"Oh, goddess. Well, I can't blame you for not getting in between them. Twenty years growing up with them and I haven't had any luck diffusing that bomb." She sighed, pulling herself up onto the tailgate beside Zeke.

onto the tailgate beside Zeke.

Again, I had that urge to ask Cassidy about what might've happened between the brothers but couldn't bring myself to ask while we were surrounded by so many people.

"I hope they work it out themselves, especially with how much they seem to hate one another." I shook my head, thinking of my own brother. Annoying at the worst of times, and a protector at the best. Thinking back to a comment Cassidy previously made, I inclined my head. "You said at least someone had fun last night? I thought you were hanging out with that one guy—Lars, I think."

"Lars." Cassidy spat the word like it was a curse. With her surfer-girl looks, I hadn't thought she could look threatening, but I had been more than wrong. Her seafoam eyes flared with irritation, "Bastard had a girlfriend, probably more than one. I'm a lot of things, but I'm not getting into it with another she-wolf over a guy, especially one like Lars. So not worth it." ①

"He had a girlfriend? What a piece of shit." I scoffed, surprised at how easy it

bit." I scoffed, surprised at how easy it was to get sucked into girl-talk with Cassidy. She talked a lot with her hands, and was passionate about life, but they were qualities I slowly began to find amusing. "If you find yourself needing a little payback, you've got a Luna on your side."

"Oh, don't promise me that. The power will go right to my head." She dramatically swept her ponytail over her shoulder and sighed, "Besides, he was kind of an asshole. He asked me all kinds of questions about you, and the other Vampire's on your side."

"He asked about me and the Vampires?" That was worrisome, though we did expect retaliation of some sort. It was natural for everyone to be curious, but then why did Cassidy's words put a sour taste in my mouth?

"Just whether or not I thought you were dangerous or if I knew of any plans you were keeping from the pack. Oh, and if you were moving a hoard of vampires into town—his words, not mine."

Cassidy rolled her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest. "He did say

Cassidy rolled her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest. "He did say something about 'hot vampire bitches,' so I don't think he was completely against the idea."

"You think men like that would be able to shift into pigs, and not werewolves." I shook my head, cracking a smile when Cassidy let out a hysterical laugh.

Asher and Brandon's fight ended without a victor. Just two bloody, battered brothers still hell-bent on hating one another. Brandon snarled his threats and stalked off, while Asher internalized his, letting them shine through his rage clouded eyes.

"I'm going to go find Brandon, make sure he doesn't do anything stupid." Cassidy sighed, hopping off the back of the truck to dust her blue jeans off. "I'll see you around Lola!"

'Lola, Asher. You need to get to the lake. Now.' Mason's voice flooded my head, the tone of urgency caused my eyes to snap over to Asher, whose anger had halted in its tracks.

His busted lip and eyebrow were already healing, and while I hated the thought of

his busted lip and eyebrow were already
healing, and while I hated the thought of
him being in pain, his injuries were one
hundred percent self-inflicted.

“What? Why do you both look like that?”
Zeke frowned, no longer protesting as we
dragged him to the car and sped off.

It was clear something had happened
when we arrived at the lake. The dirt lot
everyone had parked in was roped off
with thick, yellow caution tape. The
various trails that led to the lake and
docks were also blocked off, guarded by
warriors with stone-like faces.

College students lingered around the
borders, talking in hushed tones with
phones pulled out and camera's rolling.
Their eyes and attention fell on Asher
and I. Rumors were whispered,
suspicions and praises, all mixed into a
chorus of voices that felt impossible to
dissect and focus on.

“Mason, what's going on?” I kept my
voice low, knowing there was a crowd of
college students listening to our every
word.

Since his mate was murdered in a sour
deal between myself and the shadows,

●al between myself and the shadows, one I still blamed myself for relentlessly, Mason hadn't been fairing well. He had been grieving these months, and even though he deserved all the time in the world, Breyona and I worried for our cheerful best-friend. We missed his dimpled grin; one we hadn't seen for a long while now. Mason had found friendship and understanding in my brother, who had also lost his mate months prior.

"Not here, just follow me." He shook his head, looking a tad pale as we veered past the various trails and straight into the forest.

I had no clue where we were going, but still paid attention to the various scents I picked up. Both Asher and my own were strongest, but there were at least forty others who had passed through this cluster of woods.

The blood-chilling, teeth chattering feeling of unease filled my stomach as we stepped into a little clearing, a small patch of grass carved out of the forest. Tall tree's provided endless shade, drooping downward until their branches

●opping downward until their branches reached a few feet above our heads. There was something familiar about this spot, though I couldn't put my finger on it.

I noticed her first, so much like Katie that my breath caught in my throat and my legs stopped working. I came to a stop, feeling every gust of wind, which grew colder as a cluster of clouds passed over the sun.

There was a tremor in my hands as I approached, from both fear and unbridled rage.

"Lola..."

"Not again." I whispered, unable to pull myself away from Carson's glassy eyes.

It made no sense. Tyler was dead; my father was dead. This shouldn't be happening again, not here—not in the capital of Asher's pack. As my eyes took everything in, processing every extraneous detail, I realized that this—this was so much worse.

A large puddle of blood had soaked into the earth, proving Carson had been moved and positioned against the base of

oved and positioned against the base of a great oak tree. Like Katie, and those who had been murdered after her, Carson's slender throat was torn open, her torso littered with gashes that had long stopped bleeding.

Eyes that had once held light and laughter, lips that had once smiled and revealed joy, they were empty now—so empty. The cereal in my stomach curdled as I looked down, towards the photograph in her open hand.

The polaroid was covered in dried blood, but I could still make out the picture. An inexperienced Luna and a cheerful sorority girl, leaning against one another like best-friends, posed for a camera just out of sight.

I realized where we were the same moment, I noticed the note nailed to the tree, just above Carson's head.


"We were here last night, Asher." I said without looking at him, without looking at anyone other than Carson—the girl who had been murdered, all because of her association with me. "In this clearing."



Those feelings Holly and I keep having—

Those feelings Holly and I keep having—the nightmares that would wake her up screaming, it made sense now. Whatever was happening, it began with the witch breaking into our home. This senseless murder, it was just the beginning.

“What does it say?” Asher asked, placing a steadying hand on my shoulder, one I needed more than I’d admit.

Knowing Carson’s face would sear itself into my mind, along with everyone else we had lost, I faced my mate and spoke with a strong voice, “A Queen without control of her Kingdom is not a Queen, but a pawn.”

 Comments

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Chapter 117

"It's happening again?" Sean frowned, emerging from Claire's kitchen with a plate of sandwiches in his hand and a bag of chips in the other.

Sean looked better than he had these last few weeks. He was eating again, and the dark circles around his eyes had faded almost completely.

Moving on from a fallen mate was impossible, but finding a way to live despite the pain, only the strongest could do such a thing.

He took a seat beside dad on the couch, setting the plate on the table for the two of them. Dad and Sean needed to keep their hands busy when they were stressed.

It was exactly why grandma was out back right now, pruning Claire's rose bush. I knew she was listening in on us, because every so often she'd throw a comment of her own through the sliding glass door.

The breeze that wafted through was pleasant, at least. Even though the room was heavy with emotion.

was heavy with emotion.

“Exactly like the first time?” Dad questioned, his eyes flitting to me.

I had come clean about the notes I was getting from Tyler, and how he had confronted me that day at my secret swimming hole. This was all before his death, which begged the question. Who was doing this? 2

“Not exactly. The death is the same. Just a s bloody and gruesome.” I swallowed, but it did nothing to ease the knot in my chest. It brought back that photo, the one where Carson and I had posed like long-lost friends. “It’s the details that changed. Like the note and picture at the crime scene, that was new.”

“Last time this happened, Tyler and the Vampire King were behind it. Seeing as how they’re both long confirmed dead, they aren’t responsible. That leaves the witches, or the Vampire’s against Lola.” Zeke chimed in; his playful mood nonexistent. The sly glint in his eyes had long ago turned dull, souring until only guilt filled them. As those eyes met my own, I knew the same light shined in my own.

OWN.

I had been posing with her for several minutes, and in all that time, I hadn't felt anything out of the ordinary. There had been dozens of drunken college students watching us, eying the popular sorority girl and their Luna.

It had been my brief association with her that got her killed, but it was Zeke who had seen her last—who had watched as she got into an uber and headed back to the lake in search of her cellphone.

'We're striving for peace, Lola. There are always going to be vile people who want to destroy that. They'll do whatever it takes to get their way, but that's when we need to stand strong, not back down. What happened wasn't your fault, and we're going to do everything in our power to make sure what happened to Carson doesn't happen again.' Asher's voice was the last thing I had expected, his raspy voice swirling through my head.

I felt my throat constrict as I registered his words, my eyes darting to where he stood against the kitchen doorway. Even as everyone talked, his gaze remained trained on me, on every movement or

Everyone turned, his gaze remained
●ined on me, on every movement or
expression I made. ①

“Did either of you see anything, hear anything out of the ordinary?” Killian asked, his dark hair was longer than Asher’s, but just as untidy from the number of times he ran his fingers through it. Claire sat stone-faced at his side, a hand on his bicep.

“While I was at the party, no. There were just a bunch of students, nothing more. There was some drunk asshole that tried to pick a fight—Devin, I think, but I doubt a college frat boy is our murderer.” I replied, looking into Asher’s golden-flecked eyes. “What about you? Did you feel anything off when you went after Zeke last night?” ①

“Devin Armstrong?” Killian grimaced, eyes passing between me and his son. “He’s Judge Clint’s son. Causes him some trouble every now and again, but the boy wouldn’t murder someone. Not with Clint breathing down his neck.” ①

“I went straight to the after party looking for Zeke, then the nearest police station when a pack member told me he had been arrested.” Asher’s baritone filled the

...when a patrol member told me he had been
rested." Asher's baritone filled the
room, always robbing me of breath. "Third and fourth shift patrol teams were switching out the time of her death, but neither saw anything."

"Your sister...the nightmare's she's been having. Is there any chance they could tie into this? What about Tristan and his vampire connections? They have to know something." Zeke asked, pulling my attention away from Asher. His eyes were dark with shadows, that only he could banish. The same ones that still haunted me after Mason's mates' death. I didn't take it personally when his voice turned hard, "If there is a chance...we owe it to Carson to find out."

"She's your sister, and she has been through a lot in her short life, but this is bigger than that. If she knows something about Carson's death, or how to prevent any more, we need to know." Asher was first to break the silence since we had left Zeke and the others, on our way to see if Holly knew anything about last night. 1

Zeke had been right, and so had Asher, even though my chest ached at the thought of upsetting Holly. Part of me

●ought of upsetting Holly. Part of me had been excited for a sister, and still was, but now all I wanted was for her to get better. To taste sunlight and freedom after years in the dark.

Breyona, Giovanni, and Tristan were all at the house when we arrived. The first vampire had been sleeping peacefully, until Breyona padded upstairs to wake him up. The second, who peered at me with pale eyes, leaned against the kitchen counter.

“You woke me up with your panicking earlier.” Tristan remarked dryly.

I jumped a good inch as Asher’s snarl crackled beside me, the once empty house filled with hostility and aggression. The hand I placed on his arm only did so much to curb his rage. At the very least, it kept him from lunging at Tristan. 2

“A girl was murdered last night.” His voice still oozed malice, but at least it was contained. I gave him a warning glance as he took a step towards Tristan. “It’s pretty fucking convenient the details of her murder match up to the ones in Lola’s old pack. Remember them? The

...the murder match up to the ones in
● la's old pack. Remember them? The
innocent werewolves that you helped
kill."

The last thing I felt like doing was
breaking up a fight between an Alpha and
a Vampire, but I wasn't going to let them
kill one another. Not when I needed their
help figuring all of this out.

"I'll never deny my part or what I've
done. My mistakes will follow me to my
death, but I know what side I'm on now
and who I support. Doubt me again, and
—"

"Enough. You're both arguing like
children." I snarled, jabbing a finger into
Asher's chest when he opened his mouth t
o snap back at Tristan. I looked into my
mates' eyes, seeing, and understanding
the anger and fierce protectiveness that
lived there. It leached some of the
harshness out of my voice, "We can pick
this argument up after we figure out who
murdered Carson. I know you're angry
right now but fighting one another is a
waste of our time."

The anger that turned the air thick and
humid fizzled out when Giovanni

mid fizzled out when Giovanni emerged from upstairs, followed by Breyona. His curly hair was messy from sleep, even though his dark eyes were bright and alert.

“Someone was murdered?” Breyona asked, her eyes wide as she paused at the top of the stairs.

It took ten minutes to explain what happened to the three of them. The only one unable to hide their reaction was Breyona, who grew paler with each gruesome detail. I held back a laugh turned sob when she flung her arms around my neck. If my balance wasn't so good from training, I would've tumbled backwards.

“Oh, Lola. That's so horrible to hear.” She frowned, pulling back after a few long seconds. “You know this isn't your fault, right?”

“So Asher keeps reminding me.” My smile was brittle, turning towards Giovanni and Tristan. “Think any of your contacts will know about this attack?”

“I'm still in touch with a few families that haven't chosen a side. If this was the

But haven't chosen a side. If this was the work of Vampire's, I have a feeling they might know who. Getting them to tell, that will be the fun part." Tristan replied, his angular jaw still clenched. He brushed a strand of his now short hair out of his face, his eyes the color of storm clouds. "It'll take me some time to get a hold of them. They're trying to stay off the grid." 1

"By off the grid, you mean as far away from me and Asher as they can get."

Tristan didn't dignify my comment with a response, not that he needed to. I could tell I had hit the nail on the head.

Unfortunately, his frown lines were going to worsen, because I had no choice but to bring up Holly.

"There's something else. We need to talk to Holly about her nightmares." I told him firmly, instantly seeing the disapproval in his eyes. I shut him down with a hard look and continued, "She's been seeing things in those nightmares, and there's a chance it could have something to do with tonight's attack. We have to try, Tristan."

I hated the pleading edge in my voice,

ated the pleading edge in my voice, and even more so the way his eyes narrowed, and his posture became tense. It took him a few long seconds to reply, "I can't promise she'll open up. She's been closed off lately, even to me. She won't admit it, but this witch is her last chance." 1

"Get her to come downstairs, and I'll talk to her." I told him, knowing from experience the only one she allowed inside her bedroom was Tristan, and that was only for minutes at a time.

Shortly after our father's death, I had convinced Holly to talk to a therapist. This was before she had closed herself off to the world, barely venturing out at night even though she could walk during the day with little discomfort. Therapy was slowly helping, revealing the fears she had about the outside world.

The start of her nightmares, it had sent her reeling backwards. It's been over a week since I've seen her face, and even longer since she's seen sunlight.

Tristan vanished upstairs, his faint knock on her door the only sound I could hear. We waited for the better half of an hour,

waited for the better half of an hour, our breath held as he finally emerged and came downstairs. The crease between his eyebrows had vanished, but his eyes remained troubled.

“She’s coming downstairs. Lola, if you push too hard, I have no clue how she’ll react.” I took Tristan’s warning as truth, because at the moment, no one knew her better.

I could hear the soft tap of her feet first, a steady rhythm as she rounded the corner and followed in Tristan’s footsteps.

As I saw her face, I was reminded of all the features I had gotten from our father. The raven hair and pale eyes, our full lips rounded ever so slightly at the top, they all belonged to him.


Holly had lost weight since I had last seen her. The roundness in her face had vanished, revealing her high cheekbones and sharp jawline. Her skin had paled, making her hair and eyes look even more startling. I could see the hesitation in the way her eyes flitted from face to face, and her fingers toyed with the hem of her t-shirt.


●y her eyes flitted from face to face, and her fingers toyed with the hem of her t-shirt.

"It's good to see you, Holly." I kept my voice neutral, hating the soft and delicate tone people would use when they viewed you as wounded.

I hoped she would notice the difference, and see that no one here saw her as weak. There was no easing into this, not when Holly's nightmares sent her spiraling into fits of terror or rage. Those long nights were just as horrifying, and there had been nothing to prepare her then.

"A college student was murdered last night, and I need to know if you've seen anything about her death, or the people who caused it."

 Comments

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