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My hands trembled as I reached up and felt wildly for the seatbelt buckle,

My vision was tinted red from the blood that trickled down my face, but I

couldn't-wouldn't take my eyes off those boots.

I must've made some sort of sound when the stranger took a step forward,

because suddenly they started sprinting. The glass crunched beneath their

feet, the sound grinding against my teeth as they got closer and closer.

I knew how to keep a level head as my fear turned into full-blown panic, but

no amount of thrashing or struggling helped free me from the car. My fingers were slick with blood, making it impossible to find the button that

would free me. Spots danced in my vision and every breath took much more

of an effort than it should.. I knew I had punctured something when the remaining air in my lungs crackled.

Something gave beneath my fingers. The click of the seatbelt was the last

thing I heard before I slid from the seat and landed on the roof of the car.

My hands and face stung from the pieces of glass embedded in them, which

ratcheted higher with every movement I made.

I turned my head and looked out the shattered window, feeling my breath

come faster with each passing second. There were no scuffed boots sprinting

my way, only chunks of metal and shards of glass.

A wet cry tore itself from my chest as a face peered just outside of the car

window.

"Why..." I tried to ask, feeling my eyes roll as I passed out.

My eyes snapped open, and I lurched forwards, feeling a sharp pain blossom

across my chest and stomach. The instantaneous rush of adrenaline that surged through me, made my head throb until my vision turned blurry. I was battered by memories, bulldozed by the pain of a harsh impact. I remembered the c***h, the car that Asher had loaned me, crushed like an

empty soda can. He wouldn't care about the car-no, but he would be worried

about me. There was no mind-linking him with my head pounding like this,

so hard I could feel the vibrations in my teeth.

A face flashed in my mind, the last thing I saw before I passed out.

I slammed myself against the passenger door of the vehicle I sat in, barely

registering the pain as I wiped at my eyes, trying desperately to clear my blurry vision. The spots faded from my eyes, and even though I knew my captor, I didn't relax.

Asher was going to be pissed.

"You look like s**t." Brandon said from where he sat in the driver's seat.

His

posture was relaxed, and he didn't even bother looking my way as he dug

through the console with one hand and tossed me a lukewarm blood bag.

"Drink up, we still got another two hours left."

The first thing I did was glance down at his feet, which were in a pair of sneakers. No scuffed boots.

I tore into the bag with my teeth and downed the thick liquid, feeling my tastebuds explode with flavor incomparable to human food. Like a cup of hot

tea laced heavily with honey, the blood spread its warmth throughout my

body, and eased some of the pressure still weighing on my chest.

I met Brandon's eyes, uncaring that he watched me tear into the bag like an

animal, because I just now registered what he had said.

"Excuse me? Two hours from where?"

"That's kind of hot..." He ignored my question and looked towards the highway. There was the shadow of mountains off in the distance, but those

were the only ones in sight. The forest had thinned out too, becoming sparse as the buildings grew taller and the streets more crowded. Abridge sat up ahead, down below it was an even busier stretch of road. "...does my brother ever let you drink his blood?"

"Brandon don't f*g play with me. I'll send this car right off the side of the bridge with us in it." I snarled, "Two hours from where?"

I didn't have that deadly-calm voice Asher had when he was seconds away from tearing someone's head off. Mine would swell with power, like the tendrils of shadow that writhed and gathered, reacting to the rage in my voice-hoping I might be desperate enough to whisper their names.

"You're crazy enough to do that, aren't you?" He snorted, then shrugged.

"Don't matter anyway, we're too far away for you to do anything but tag along, Even my brother can't travel that fast. You and I are off to visit a friend of mine, Lola."

"Oh Goddess, Asher. He's probably destroyed half the pack by now looking for me." I groaned, feeling Maya begin to stir from my distress.

"Actually, when I stepped in all heroically and pulled you out of the car, I found your phone in the wreckage. Sent him a quick text letting him know exhausted you were after moving all of that furniture, and that you went out for drinks with that friend of yours, the perky brunette with the vampire mate." The blood was helping me heal faster, which was a miscalculation on Brandon's part. The more he talked the closer I found myself to running off the road. "He mind-linked the pack hours ago, finally found what was left of his car."

"Give me my phone." I snapped and held out my hand.

"Sure thing, sure thing." He nodded, too compliant for me not to know

something was up. I wasn't at all surprised when he tossed it in my lap and

added, "Battery died a few hours ago, and unfortunately I left my car charger at home. What a shame."

I covered my face with my hands and groaned, "he has no clue where I am,

no clue if I'm wait, what happened to the glass in my face and hands?"

"I picked out what I could." Brandon shrugged, then narrowed his eyes when

I gave him an odd look. "Don't go thinking I did you any favors. You're useless to me if you're not healed up and in tip-top shape. Also, pretty sure

I'm at the top of Asher's "most-wanted list" since I'm ignoring his mind-links. You know how paranoid he is, probably pieced it together already. I

meant to ask, what the h**l did you hit that caused that much damage?"

"An invisible fg wall." I groaned, sinking into the seat because what else could I do? "Courtesy of whatever witch or witches I've managed to p*s off."

"Well, then it's a good thing you're with me, because I just might be able to

get you some answers." His grin was cocky and self-assured but had the same lopsided tilt as Asher's. "Bet you never saw that coming."

"How are you going to get me answers?" I snorted, "I thought all you were

good for is getting drunk, pissing off Asher, and chasing after school-girls."

"Those are my best qualities. I'm surprised you noticed them. Think about

me often?" He lifted an eyebrow but must've seen the hint of murderous

rage still lingering on my face because he quickly dropped it. "I might not be

Alpha of a whole pack, but I'm not without my connections. I happen to have a friend who...dabbles in magic. She conveniently stopped answering

my calls the day you and my brother got into town. I want to know why."

"You kidnapped me and brought me outside of the pack boundaries because

a witch you slept with ghosted you?" I deadpanned.

Brandon nodded then asked, "how'd you know I slept with her?"

"I didn't." I grunted, "It was a lucky guess."

We stopped at a crowded gas station on the outskirts of some city. I wasn't

picking up the scent of any werewolves, but I could smell the ds on the humans lingering against the side of the building. It infuriated me how Brandon hopped out of the car, whistling as he filled up the gas tank.

The

a**e knew I wasn't going to run. Even if I did, what good would it do me?

"When you sneak off to borrow someone's phone, make sure you tell Asher

how I saved your life—and how I've behaved myself this entire trip."

Brandon

grinned, leaning against the side of the car as the numbers on the gas pump

climbed higher. I turned my back on him and gave him the middle finger for

good measure, "Hey! You owe me a life debt, now keep my feral as brother

from kg me."

„Asher. Who is it?"

I sighed the moment I heard his harsh voice, earning an odd look from the

cashier who hovered by the phone protectively, as though they had lost one

before to a needy customer. He was in full Alpha-mode, ready to storm the

borders of any pack if it meant finding me.

„Lola? Fg h*I, where are you?! Are you hurt? I thought since you texted you

were alright. Tristan told me about Holly's nightmare. I found the car the

damage doesn't matter. Are you with Brandon? Tell me where you are, I'll

come get you."

„ He said you were paranoid enough to figure it out. I was hurt, but your brother...helped bandage me up. Maya still hasn't woken up and my phone is

dd, or I would've talked to you sooner." I chose my words carefully, glancing at the cashier whose nervous eyes flitted my way every couple seconds. „I know this sounds crazy, but I think he saved my life. We're hours away from the pack boundaries and believe me, I know. He's a reckless idiot who has a d*h wish, but he's taking me to meet a...special friend of his, one that might know more about what happened last night.“ „I don't like this one f*g bit. Going anywhere with Brandon-it's not safe. He would never hurt you, but clearly, I don't know who he associates with. I don't know what intentions his friend has, but if you have to hunt them down for information, that's already a red flag.“ An echo of pain settled in my chest because I knew that the harshness in his voice was there to cover up the worry, the fear of losing me the first time. It resurfaced from time to time, turning his eyes dark and giving his touches a protective edge. „Tell me where you are and we can speak with his friend together...I can't protect you there, Lola.“ From where I stood, I could see out the large windows, to the gas pump Brandon stood at. He caught my eye and waved, gesturing to the car with a dramatic flourish. Guilt lodged itself in my throat because I knew what I needed to do. I'll give you the address to the gas station we're at. We'll meet you here after we talk to his friend. She vanished on him the day you and I got into town—if she does have something to do with this, and she knows we're coming, she won't stick around for long.“ I swallowed, „I love you, Asher.

And I'll be here to tell you in person once I get the information we need."

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I handed the phone back to the cashier, hearing Asher's objections on the other end, wishing I could soothe that side of him that wanted to shield me from all danger.

"Tell him the address, then hang up." I told the cashier, deaf to her reply because it was Asher's voice that rang in my ears.

"So, should I keep planning my escape, or did you delay my d***h for the time being?" Brandon asked the moment I was within sniffing distance, unable to keep his mouth shut long enough to let me sort through the guilt that made me short of breath.

I rolled my eyes at him, watching as put the gas nozzle back into it's holder

and gestured to the car, "I'd open the door for you, but from what I've seen of you and my brother, you're not into the old-school romance type of stuff.

Are you?"

I stared at his knowing smile without so much as a fraction of embarrassment on my face.

"Those schoolgirls of yours a little vanilla, Brandon? Does it surprise you that much that there's women out there who want more than a few minutes of missionary, then a post-sx rant about living in your brothers shadow?" I didn't care I was being a bh. From how awful my night had gone, I figured I deserved a few minutes. "Mind your own business or you won't have to worry about Asher k*g you, because I'll do it myself. After we track down your friend."

I got in the car and slammed the door, savoring the coldness of the glass

against my warm face. Brandon didn't open his mouth again but did turn on the radio so that AC/DC trickled in quietly through the speakers. Dad would play this kind of music when Sean and I were kids, back when he could glide and run throughout the house. It was this fact and the headache I still had that helped me fall asleep.

This time when I woke up, I knew exactly where I was. There was no avalanche of memories ready to flatten me, only the renewed annoyance that I was here with Brandon.

The sun had vanished from the sky, so I knew I'd been asleep for a few hours. I jumped in my seat when the truck of the car slammed, and Brandon yanked open the driver side door and got in.

"Here, shower and change into this. Hopefully, it fits. We don't have much time." He said, tossing a shopping bag and a blood bag onto my lap. I looked out at the seedy motel we were parked out front of smack dab in the center of some nameless city. There were lights everywhere. From the cars that crept down the roads, nearly bumping into one another with every turn, to the skyscrapers and neon lights that flashed in various colors. "Where are we going?" I asked.

"My witch friend works at a night club. One that'll kick you out in a heartbeat if you show up dressed like that-with or without my jacket to cover the blood." He replied and tacked on, "oh, and I'll want that dry cleaned. Yeah?"

"Oh yeah, sure. I'll get right on that." I snorted, balling up his jacket so it'd at least sting when I threw it in his face.

I downed the blood bag while peeling my torn and b****y clothes off my body. My favorite pair of leggings were littered with tiny holes from the glass that had shattered and sliced me to bits. If it hadn't been for Brandon's

jacket, whose scent still clung to me like a cloud of noxious gas, the gas station clerk would've keeled over.

Somewhere halfway through my shower, I felt Maya finally wake up,

Even

with my enhanced vampire healing, Maya had to overexert herself just to

patch up the largest of our wounds.

After showering faster than I ever had in my life, I pulled out a thin scrap of

fabric and a pair of dangerously sharp stiletto boots.

„Cute shoes...” Maya yawned and stretched before shaking out her fur,

„...I’ve

been asleep for a while, haven’t I? Doesn’t seem like we’ve been kidnapped

or captured...what happened after the c***h?”

„Oh, we’ve been kidnapped alright, we’re just not trying to escape.” I sighed

and gave her a rundown of the last eight hours while I tried to figure out how to fit this scrap of fabric over my head.

„Of all people to find us, it had to be Brandon.” She huffed, needing no response to know that I agreed with her. „I guess anything’s better than the

witch that made us c***h.”

My bra was stiff and soaked through with blood. Naturally, that wouldn’t

have stopped me, but the dress Brandon had picked out was low cut with

spaghetti straps. There was no putting my white-turned-red bra underneath

that.

The fabric was skintight and the same dark shade as my hair. It would be a

pain to move in if I needed to run, but it was long enough to cover my backside.

“I’m keeping these shoes...” I told Brandon, “...hope your heart wasn’t set on

returning them.”

“Nah, you’re good.” He shrugged, glancing my way before pulling out of the

parking lot. “I stole them, anyway.”

“Of course, you did.” I replied, wondering why I had assumed any differently.

Half an hour later, we were parked on some desolate city street right out front of a blacked-out brick building. Most of the buildings down the street

were closed or shut down, apart from a 24-hr laundry mat. Instead of smelling sweat, d**s, and alcohol, all I could pick up was the light scent of

laundry detergent. There was no red velvet rope manned by a beefy bouncer, or lines of men and women eager to get in. Actually, we were one

of the only cars parked against the curb.

„Lola? I can feel you through the mind-link again. Are you safe?” A chill skated down my spine from Asher’s gravely voice. „I’m on a plane heading

your way. Tell my brother if there’s so much as a hair out of place on your

head, I’ll k**l him.”

„Maya’s awake and better than ever, and you got on a plane? And believe

me...” I gave Brandon a long look, „...he knows what’s at stake.”

„Stay safe, Lola. I’d lose my mind if anything happened to you.”

„I know, but I will come back to you safe and sound. I did the first time, and

I’ll do it again.”

I felt better knowing Asher had my back no matter the distance between us.

He would scour the world for me or b**n it all down hunting whoever brought me harm. I could feel such a large piece of myself missing hundreds

of miles away. The hollow feeling only made me that much more determined

to get this done.

“Where are we?” I asked, “There’s absolutely no one here.”

“This place is hard to find for a reason. It’d be too obvious if there were flashing lights and three hundred people lining up down the block.”

Brandon

replied with a casual shrug of the shoulder, “And don’t ask where we are

because I'm not giving you an address. The first thing you'll do is tell Asher."

I raised an eyebrow, "can you blame me?"

"No, now let's go."

I realized two things as Brandon opened one of the double doors and stepped inside, looking over shoulder to make sure I followed. The first thing

was that this place was more than just hard to find. It was virtually impossible unless you already knew about it. I couldn't hear the thundering

music or smell the scent of alcohol in the air, until the doors had closed behind us. The second thing I realized was that I should've asked more questions, because there was a distinct charge in the air that I had felt once

before-when Rowena did that ritual to reveal my binding mark.

"Magic hides this place." I whispered, staring open mouthed at the club around us, which was much larger on the inside than the building should've allowed.

The ceiling alone was nearly fifty feet above our heads, with rows of lights

that danced between purple, blue, and pink. Circular platforms were placed

in clusters around the club floor, where naked women covered in a healthy

amount of body glitter danced freely.

A balcony wrapped around the back of the club, leading through a set of glass doors that took you outside. The bar itself sat at the center of the club,

acting as the beating heart that kept the alcohol flowing.

We were boxed in by a red velvet rope, in line behind a group of women that

were flirting with one of the bouncers. Brandon linked his arm through mine

before I had the chance to object and steered us towards the second bouncer, a guy with a shaved head and trimmed goatee.

"Aye! Heard about some mess on your brother's land. Wasn't sure when

you'd be back." The bartender grinned, slapping Brandon hard enough on

the back to make me wince. My movement caught the bouncer's eye, "Well, now. Who's this little number? Never seen you bring a girl up in here." I instantly bristled and opened my mouth to let this a*e know exactly who I was when Brandon chuckled and pulled me closer to his side. "She's spoken for." Was all he said, which wasn't nearly good enough. The bouncer's eyes widened, "you went and found your mate?" "Fk no. Lilly and I are just fk-buddies, right?" Brandon smirked, sharing one of those „bro-smiles" with the bouncer. Some neanderthal male bonding I could handle, but it was Brandon's next comment that made me momentarily see red. "It's actually my brother she wants-" I wasn't sure what type of man Brandon's bouncer "friend" was, so after placing a solid punch to Brandon's gut, I slipped past the two of them and charged into the club. The bar was closest, so I veered in that direction. I stopped short of the bar and looked around, feeling ridiculous because I had no clue what Brandon's friend looked like. Now that I was much closer to the women dancing on the platforms, I noticed they weren't naked at all. Well, at least not entirely. Little heart shaped pasties covered their n*s, and what some would call a thong and others dental floss, circled their hips. Little gems placed on their neck, shoulders, and legs sparkled under the color changing lights. "Little she-wolf, can I get you a drink?"

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I spun around, nearly bumping into the narrow chest of some man. He placed a hand against the front of the dress shirt he wore, drawing my attention to the rings speckled on his fingers. There were a few on his other hand, which clinked against the glass of alcohol in his hand. There was a big part of me-and Maya that felt infuriated being called „little she-wolf." We were proud of our title, both of them. We had bled and fought

to claim them both, even if they weren't what we wanted at first. It went against my instincts to hide my position-especially to another werewolf. "She's good. I can get her whatever she needs, thanks." I wouldn't say I was relieved to hear Brandon's voice, but it did make me feel better that I wouldn't have to chase this guy off myself. Unfortunately, whenever you mixed alcohol, anger issues, and copious amounts of testosterone, you were left with a person that couldn't take no for an answer. The stranger lifted one of his dark eyebrows but never once took his eyes off of Brandon as he asked, "this guy bothering you?" "She just punched me in the gut hard enough to make me puke, which I would've done if I weren't the son of an Alpha." Instead of becoming defensive, Brandon grinned. "Now she can either punch you in your bird chest, or you can walk away and try your luck with some other unfortunate soul." "I don't need you to defend me." I told Brandon once the drunk stranger stumbled away, muttering under his breath about „ snobby s***s and their boyfriends." Brandon groaned like a child, "you're as boring as Asher." "I'm boring? I'm sorry I don't live to entertain your immature a*s." „ I snapped, lowering my voice to a hiss when a few nearby women glanced my way. "By chance, what do you find fun, Brandon? Is it kidnapping people in the middle of the night to take them out of pack boundaries knowing said person has vampires and witches after them?!" "You want to know what I find fun?" He snickered, meeting my eyes for a second before focusing on something further back in the club. When a flash of recognition sparked in his eyes, I spun around.

I could see the back wall of the club in between the sea of dancing bodies,
and the roped off area labeled as "VIP." Right next to that section was an unassuming door that read "Restricted – Employee's Only." There was another cluster of circular stages back that way, larger than the others in the club. Where the others had three women dancing, this one had six. One of those six was a girl not much older than me, with thick thighs, tanned skin, and wildly curly hair. The golden body glitter across her shoulders and b*s didn't twinkle as much as the others because she had stopped dancing to stare Brandon's way. Maya's ears perked with interest when the dancer's wide brown eyes darted down to us. Even with the flashing lights that changed color every few seconds, I could see this girl visibly pale. She stepped off the stage and beelined towards two human bouncers talking just five feet away. "Is that your friend?" I asked without looking away from the girl. "She's looking at me like she knows me." "Yeah, that's her..." Brandon frowned, just as confused as I. When the two bouncers leaning against the wall looked at us and started walking our way, giving Brandon's friend the chance she needed to slip through the employees only door, I knew I needed to act fast. "Lola, what are you-" "She knows something," was all I said before I kicked off into a run. People were already veering out of the way, spotting the two meat-head bouncers before seeing my whopping five-foot three-inch self. The only thing I had learned from those fake friends I ditched Breyona for was how to walk, run, and sprint in a pair of stilettos. Out of all the things I'd been trained in, this was one I didn't think I'd be using. I could hear Brandon keeping up behind me, but it wasn't him who'd hit the bouncers first. Just by looking at them, I could almost anticipate their moves. The one with the larger arms would try to grab me, thinking I'd be easy to subdue because of my small frame. The other, whose arms were longer and muscle more dispersed, would snatch me up if I managed to get

away from the first one.

I remembered my favorite of Chris's training lessons and let the fond memory float to the surface of my mind. He had taught me to keep an eye on my surroundings, that too many warriors make the mistake of relying on their muscle and skill, when there's so many other ways to win a battle. A group of already drunken men booed and groaned when I snatched a full pitcher of beer off their table, all without breaking my stride. The strong-smelling alcohol didn't have time to drench my hand, because I was already hurling it at the beefy one's face. A painful crack was heard, followed by an explosion of ice and beer. I avoided his flailing grasp and kicked the other as hard as I could in the b***s, ducking when he swung that long arm out at me.

In the chaos of it all, I swore I could hear Brandon laughing.

As I'd hoped, his fist missed me and collided into his coworker's face. It bought me just enough time to sprint past the two of them, through the employee door Brandon's friend had vanished behind.

There was no time to stop, so I had no choice but to take in my surroundings as quickly as possible. With Brandon right behind me, we darted into the employee's only section, which happened to be a narrow

hallway that ended with a sharp left turn. There were girls giggling back here, and men talking over up-beat music. The sound trickled down the hallway, coming from all directions.

I followed my gut and darted down the hall, knowing that checking every single room would only slow us down and waste precious seconds.

Almost all

of them had signs that read "available" or "occupied". The ones whose sign was flipped to "occupied" had several sounds and scents emerging from beneath the doors, all of which I ignored.

We took that lefthand turn just as the door we had come through burst open. I could hear their heavy footfalls and knew there were too many for

Brandon and I to take on in a fight.

There were only single doors lining the hallways, but up ahead there was a set of two. Both were open, pinned against the wall so that music and laughter spilled out. We made another sharp turn and darted into the room.

A circular table larger than the bar in the club sat in the middle of the room, surrounded by expensive white leather booths. There had to be at least twenty different men, and nearly the same number of dancers. Glasses of wine and beer littered the table, along with money and bottles of expensive champagne.

I didn't pay attention to what the dancers were doing, or how some of them weren't really dancing at all. All I cared about was the set of doors farthest to us, and the sign that read „dancer dressing-rooms.“ The thundering sound of feet were growing closer, so much that I could hear a few of their gruff voices.

Without hesitation, I beelined straight for the doors. The circular table wasn't very tall, which made it all too easy to leap onto it to continue running. The drunk men not groping and tasting the dancers complained, cursing as they pulled their wads of money and bottles of alcohol away. For good measure, I sent a few of those expensive champagne bottles flying their way with a little kick from the toe of my stiletto.

“...you're f*g crazy...” Brandon huffed, laughing as he hopped off the table behind me and followed as I raced towards the dancer's dressing rooms.

This hallway was identical to the one we had just come from, only the doors that lined the walls had plaques with names printed on them.

“What’s her name?” I hissed quietly, slowing to scan each name, all while

keeping my ears peeled for the approaching bouncers.

“Clara.”

Either Brandon’s witch friend was confident in her abilities, or she actually

thought we wouldn’t go chasing after her, because the door to her dressing

room was cracked open. I could hear her in there, rummaging through something as she spoke quietly under her breath.

I crept up to the door, staying flat against it as I turned my head and peeked inside. Not only was her back to the door, but she was crouched and

digging through a leather trunk. Something sparkly in her hand caught my

eye, a slinky dress she shoved into the suitcase at her feet, shoved onto the

small pile of clothes she hastily packed.

If she was anything like the witch that broke into my house, or made me c***h Asher’s car, I knew that I’d only have one chance at this.

Barreling through the doors with my hackles raised would give her too much

time to react. Instead I slipped inside, taking care not to open the door anymore than it already was. I wasn’t much closer, but it was enough.

She heard the creak as Brandon tried slipping through the door, I could tell

in the way her shoulders tensed. The moment she went to stand, I lunged at

her.

The girl must’ve had no form of self- defensive training because her only plan of action was the little baggy of purple powder in her hand. It coated

her fingertips from where she had tried to pinch some. I wasn’t sure what it

was, a weapon or some kind of defense, but I disarmed her the way I would

any other opponent and sent the cloth baggy tumbling to the floor.

“You...” I took a deep breath, hating myself for skipping so many training sessions. She flinched, uncomfortable with the sharpened points of my claws

against her carotid artery "...are just who we were looking for, Clara."

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She opened her mouth to speak but stopped when I brought my finger up to

my lips. The thunder of combat boots sounded outside the door, never once

stopping as they continued down the hall. I gave Brandon a confused look,

but it was Clara who spoke.

"They aren't allowed to come into the dancers' rooms..." She swallowed.

I could feel her slender throat move beneath my hand. The glitter on her cheeks sparkled every time she looked between Brandon and me.

"Lola, I'm at the gas station. Fill me in, what's going on?" Asher's voice broke

through my thoughts, like two streams merging into one.

"Found his friend, going to get some answers. I don't have time to explain

everything, but once we're safe. I'll give you a run down." I promised him,

holding back a sigh as his grounding presence washed over me, reminding

me to stay fearless and in control.

I'd been looking at Brandon when I felt a prickling sense of awareness crawl

up my spine, like someone had grazed the back of my head with their fingers. I narrowed my eyes at the witch, positive she had used some kind of

magic on me when the feeling vanished.

"Alright, we found your friend. Now what?" I asked, waiting for something

anything to happen. Once I was sure I felt no different, I pushed the issue

from my mind to deal with later.

"Your guess is as good as mine, I didn't think we'd make it this far. I'm definitely getting blacklisted after this."

My head snapped towards him, and I stared at him in disbelief. I'm not sure

why I was so surprised, everything he did was on a poorly calculated whim.

He proved that much by kidnapping me instead of taking me to a d**n hospital.

“You stormed all the way here with no plan and your biggest worry is getting blacklisted from the club?” I scoffed.

“It’s a really good club, and I did have a plan. Find Clara and ask why she ghosted me when you and Asher came back into town.” He replied, fully convincing me there was no way he was the son of an Alpha.

I wondered if there was a time when Brandon took anything seriously.

The

way he had laughed as we ran, it sounded like he was having the time of his

life. I knew that I was going to be the one to get us out of here, and that fact only made me resent him more.

“I won’t let Asher k**l you. That honor is going to me.” I promised him, frowning at the girl whose throat I had pinned to the wall. “Look, I’m sure

you’re nice and all, but you’re coming with us. We’re bound to get caught if

we stay here. I’m positive there’s an exit back here, so lead the way, Clara.”

I wrapped my hand hard enough around her wrist to bruise, keeping my nails elongated to remind her that one swipe was all it took. Not a single part of me enjoyed this, digging my nails into this girl’s skin as she led us down the hall, but I could feel how jittery she was and knew that she’d take

off if my grip slipped in the slightest. Something had her thoroughly freaked

out, and it wasn’t me.

I liked to think Brandon was taking my promise seriously. His eyes scanned

each door, drifting down the hall to search for any movement. The slightest

sound and he would turn his head.

I hesitated when my stomach unexpectedly dropped, the silence that stretched down hall after hall was suddenly unsettling. The sound of music

and cheering, it was so distant that it no longer felt real.

The feeling persisted, even when I spotted the flickering exit sign hung from the ceiling at the end of the hall. Just below it was a metal door propped open with a cinderblock. The scent of stale cigarettes and days old garbage hit me the moment we stepped outside. We stood in a narrow alley way lined with garbage bags stacked on top of one another. Half were bursting at the seams, with little claw marks dragged down the sides. I looked around, listening for the rats that had torn open so many of these bags. I heard nothing; not rats, or the sigh of a gentle breeze. "Somethings wrong." I said the words out loud the same moment Maya said them in my head. "I can feel it too..." Clara whispered. Brandon was smart to look worried, "can your witchy senses be a little more specific?" We crept out of the alley way, emerging onto the same street Brandon had parked on-or I thought it was. I looked down the street and spotted the 24-hr laundry mat. The neon sign had been turned off, along with every light inside. The door that had been propped open was now shut. "Aw, come on!" Brandon's voice echoed, making Clara and I jump. "Keep quiet." I hissed, "we just said something doesn't feel right-" I noticed it then, the reason for Brandon's outburst. This was the street we had parked on, only his car wasn't where we left it. I wasn't above stealing a car, not when this sinking feeling in my stomach told me to hurry up and get moving, but there wasn't a single car in sight. Brandon threw his hands in the air, but his voice was significantly quieter this time. "I just upgraded the exhaust." "S***w your exhaust-"

I was cut off by Clara's low whimper. Both Brandon and I noticed her stiff posture, the way her jaw was clenched and eyes wide as she stared down the street.

There were two hooded figures almost a hundred feet away, standing beneath the golden glow of a streetlight. All could see were the dark clothing they wore, and the pale skin of their hands as they hung at the figure's sides.

Brandon inched backwards until he stood at my side, "...well, that's not creepy or anything. You think those are the as that took my car?"

Suddenly Clara gasped and tried to pull away, only she wasn't trying to run

but instead positioned herself behind Brandon and me.

"...you know what, just keep me from getting k****d and I'll tell you what I

know." She stammered.

What worried me was her sudden shift from wanting to run to begging for

protection...as if she knew that running from those two would end badly.

"Are they after you?," I frowned, trying to find the reason for her fear if she

weren't the one being hunted.

Her eyes never left the two strangers, "no, they're after you."

The streetlight closest to us turned off, followed by the next one and the next one.

"They're witches..." Brandon trailed off, his voice uneasy.

Clara glared at Brandon, but the fierce expression was ruined by her fear,

"did you really think you could bring her here without someone noticing?"

Little by little the street was plunged into absolute darkness, increasing the

feeling in my gut until I was one hundred percent sure of its source. The only streetlamp still lit was the one the strangers stood beneath, and

within

half a second, that one went out too.

I took a step back, unable to peer through the darkness that had swallowed

the witch's whole.

„Twenty feet closer than they'd been standing, a small ball of flame appeared out of thin air, crackling from the sudden rush of oxygen. It was the size of a softball and appeared to be growing bigger.

“Woah, what kind of magic is that?” Brandon asked the same moment I realized the ball of flame wasn't growing bigger, it was just getting closer.

Clara's jaw went slack as she shouted, “elementals!”

I grabbed hold of Brandon's shirt and took off down the street to our right,

letting go only when I could hear the heavy thud of his feet behind me, Clara

had slipped out of my grasp, but I knew she wouldn't try to escape.

I understood exactly why she wouldn't have survived on her own when the

compacted ball of fire hit where we'd been standing, sending a plume of

flame nearly six feet into the air. It was like the street had been doused in

gasoline.

After a few turns and a shortcut down an alley, we were able to stop. I spotted a few cars here and there. Most were rusted pieces of scrap metal

limping on their last legs. We'd be better off shifting and carrying Clara on

our backs.

„Not happening. I'm no horse.” Maya bristled, her grumbled complaints fading into the background of my mind.

“Why haven't the human police been called?” I asked, “someone had to see that fire out there.”

“In this part of the city, you hear something like that you stay away from your windows and turn your television up. You don't call the cops.”

Clara

shook her head, searching with her eyes as she caught her breath. “We can't

run from them, they'll find us before long...oh, I knew I should've called out

today..."

"You're a witch too. Why don't you do something?" Brandon asked Clara, who frowned.

"My magic doesn't work that way." She shook her head. I caught the reluctance in her eyes and knew she was holding back when she tacked on,

"...I have to be up close to do anything, and they'll kill me before I get the chance."

"Why can't we run from them? What is an elemental?" I asked a bit harsher

than I meant to, but I could hear the manic quiver in her voice and knew that it would only get worse the more flustered she became.

"It's a rare type of magic...so rare that any witches able to use it are taken

as kids...sent away to train." There was more to the story, I could tell from

the tone of her voice but now wasn't the time to ask. "...and they wouldn't

send elementals after you if they didn't have another witch tracking your location."

They were just trying to tire us out, wear us down until we slipped up and

eventually got caught. She was right, running only bought us a handful of seconds.

"If we can't run, what can we do? I...can't use my magic right now." I could

feel panic bubble and threaten to rise, but I had kept my cool too many times to give up now. "We have no weapons, nothing at our disposal.

Only our wolves and..."

The word slipped past my lips as I caught sight of the writhing tendrils of darkness slithering down the alley way, "...the shadows..."

I'd realized too late that they weren't running towards me, but away from

the sudden ball of flame that shot down the alley, illuminating every crappy

backyard and rat-infested dumpster it passed. At the other end of the alley,
the second stranger stood. There was no flaming projectile thrown away,
only the sickening snap and crack of the asphalt splitting open, making the
ground tremble as it neared closer.

“Through the backyard!” Brandon shouted, and without warning he grabbed
Clara by the waist and tossed her over the chain-link fence to our right. I felt the dull sting of metal digging into my hands as I flung myself over and
grabbed Clara’s arm before she could fall. We avoided the scattered toys
that littered the backyard, jumping the front fence just as another flaming
projectile was thrown our way.

This one hit the fence we had just hopped over. We stood so close that I could feel the heat lick at my cheeks and forehead. Wasting no time, we took off again, turning corners and darting down alleyways to throw them
off.

I felt Clara’s hand brush my shoulder as we ran and turned my head to glance at her.

“Shadows...you can control the shadows.” She panted; her voice held just a
flicker of hope. “...use them, use them before they catch us.”

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“What? I can’t do that. You have no idea what you’re asking me to do.”

My
surprise slowed my pace, and my legs groaned miserably as I pushed them
harder, forcing us to keep up.

“They’ll want something in return, right?” She huffed, continuing without
waiting for an answer. Her voice cracked, desperation bleeding through.
“Don’t use them to k**l them, just to get us away a distraction or something

that “I’ll help us get a head start. I assume you’ve got somewhere safe to go?”

I nodded, “there’s no way they’ll mess with us once we’re back in pack territory.”

“Good, because you’re taking me with you. I was safe and sound until you

two busted into my dressing room—for the most part, anyway. What matters

is I was out, and you two dragged me right back in.” I had no clue what she

meant, and neither did Brandon from the confusion that creased his eyebrows and made his pace slow. “You have to use them to get us out of

here, or we’re not going to live past tonight.”

Frustration crackled and spread throughout my chest like a sparkler, and even though I was sure it was my imagination, I swore I could feel the shadows waiting-eager to hear me ask for their help after months of ignoring their presence.

I skidded to a stop, spotting a couple dumpsters surrounded by a wooden

privacy fence. It was meant to keep the rats and racoons away but judging

from the scraps of trash piling up in the drainage ditches, it wasn’t working.

Brandon grimaced from the smell but followed Clara and I into the small area without complaint.

I no longer had to try; the darkness was apart of me as much as my Vampire side. The ability to control the shadows would never be a good one

it would never be one of pure intention or without temptation. There was

always that knowledge that anything—anything I wanted was within arm’s

reach. All I had to do was pay the price.

I felt their cold wash over me first but gave them no reaction. Clara shuddered, and the shadows hidden within every corner of the alley and trash area we stood in writhed. A thousand voices, a thousand razor blades

slashing across the gritty surface of a chalkboard, all coalescing together into one ear-piercing voice.

„...now you call on us...“ „...to free you from danger...“

„...to vanquish the puppets that hunt you down...“

I paused, “puppets...why would you call them that?”

Brandon gave me an odd look, and Clara began to before she looked down.

Anyone could see the shadows. It was something I realized a long time ago,

back when Mason’s mate had lost her life to a deal I’d made. Only the Vampire monarch could use them—haggle with them, but anyone could see

them. Tristan had claimed that working with my father, always being in such

close proximity to them, over time he found himself able to see them.

The

same had happened for Breyona and Asher, even though I hadn’t called on

them since.

„...the puppet master pulls the strings...“ „...meddles with fate...“

„...hides from us...“

I shuddered; I couldn’t help it. Whoever-whatever was behind this, they were hiding from the shadows. Immortal, ancient, all knowing and the mastermind behind all of this was somehow avoiding their gaze.

“What’s your price for concealing us from the elemental witches long enough

to get a car, and get the h**l out of here?” I asked, knowing anymore information given on their part would come at a price.

They would give those little slivers of information to tempt, to entice me into

making another deal. It was what they thrived on, the sacrifices made in the

name of shadow and darkness.

„...our price is blood...blood from the alpha’s second-born son...“

„...enough to temporarily sate our thirst...“

I looked up at Brandon, “they want your blood.”

“No way, not happening...they’re not getting my blood.” He shook his head;

his voice left no room for argument.

Three minutes later, the pavement surrounding the dumpsters glittered from

a coating of fresh blood. Since there was no direct lighting on it, the thick metallic substance almost looked black.

“Uh, I’m gonna be honest with you...I’m getting a little woozy here.”

Brandon grumbled, holding his arms out so that the blood trickled down his hands and onto the ground. He dipped his head and instantly jerked back. It was more than refreshing seeing something other than cockiness on his face, even if it was fear. “...those things, they’re taking my blood.”

I glanced down at the tendrils of shadow, each taking their turn as they slithered through the puddle of blood on the pavement, taking more and more with each pass.

“Alright, that’s enough for you all. Now it’s time to hold up your end of the deal.”, I told them, knowing Brandon had given more than enough. He stood there, only partially green in the face as I left wound after wound on his wrists. Thanks to our advanced healing, I had to reopen the slashes every few seconds.

They devoured the rest of his blood, leaving the pavement cleaner than it had been before. They were bloated as they circled our feet, fulfilling their end of the bargain with whatever ancient magic they possessed.

“It’s like ice water, but worse.” Clara’s teeth chattered, wrapping her arms around the robe she wore.

This time the cold pierced deep, past flesh and muscle until my head ached with a pain similar to brain freeze. Suddenly, the colors around us faded, becoming muted and washed out. The green of the dumpster now looked like muddy water, but the shadows behind it- I could see every one of them.

Not only that, but they clung to the three of us like an aura void of all color.

We emerged from our hiding place; onto the alley we had been running

down. As we reached the end of the alley, Brandon flung his arm up at the last minute. I realized why as I ran into it, stumbling backwards and out of the way of the elemental witches as they turned the corner. There was no seeing their faces beneath those hoods. All I could make out was the curve of their chins, and how their physiques appeared thin beneath the layers of blacked out clothing.

Clara gasped and slapped a hand to her lips, pulled out of the way by Brandon.

"I thought she said they came this way." One of the witches spoke in a soft soprano, which felt completely out of place given both had tried to k**l us.

The second's voice was raspier, but still noticeably feminine.

"Clearly they're hiding." The second replied sourly, "...she said this would be easy."

The witch with the attitude held her hand out, making a tiny flame sprout

from her palm. It flickered and crackled in the night, casting a little golden

halo that drifted farther and farther as they walked down the alley.

I took a step forward and the feeling hit me like a freight train. There was no

stopping myself, even if I wanted to.

I looked back at Brandon and Clara, "find us a car and meet me back here."

Clara looked more than worried, but instead of trying to convince her kidnapper turned savior, she looked up at Brandon.

"If you're taken or k*d, you know you're signing my dh certificate, right?" He said dryly, not an inkling of humor on his face.

"Then you better find a car and get here before I come back." I replied.

He glanced at the witches down the alley and nodded, "don't be an idiot,

Lola."

"Don't plan on it."

As I watched them turn and walk down the street, I realized that
might've
been the first semi-decent thing Brandon's said to me so far.
It didn't take me long to catch up with the witches, but during that
short
amount of time their entire demeanor had changed. The one with the
soft
soprano had a cellphone placed against her ear and was pacing along
the
sidewalk as she spoke in a hushed voice.
The second witch stood a few feet away, trembling and snarling like a
newly
turned werewolf. There was a scent clinging to them, but it was odd to
say
the least. The one on the phone smelled like fresh soil, and the one
ready to
combust reminded me of a campfire.
"She's lost connection to her. It's like they vanished into thin air." The
first
witch said softly.
She sighed when her companion let out an angry screech, hurling a ball
of
flame towards a decrepit shed that looked to be standing on its last legs.
The entire structure was engulfed in flame, which inched closer to the
drooping tree branches hanging feet above.
"I mean, come on. We're constantly told how special our magic is, but
we're
the ones locked away! We never get to see any action!" She hissed.
"Instead
she sends out these witches that possess a shadow of our power. We
could
infiltrate that stupid pack ourselves."
The aura of darkness that surrounded me pulsed, sending a rush of cold
down my spine that let me know I had no more time left to spare. I
began to
back down the street, closer to the alley I emerged from when the
soft-spoken witch replied to her companion.
It was her reply that made me stop in my tracks, invoking fear that felt a
thousand times colder than the shadows that hid my presence.
"You know why she sent them instead of us. „They blend in better, and

they'll have everything set up when she's ready to slip past the borders. By

the time the tribrid realizes she's there, it'll be too late to fight back."

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"Make sure he's not d**d back there." I grunted, glancing in the rearview

mirror to see Brandon slumped over.

Clara unbuckled her seatbelt and turned around. I could smell her sugary sweet perfume as her curly hair brushed against my shoulder. A few muffled

jabs sounded from the backseat, and it took me a few seconds to realize she

was poking and prodding at him.

"Get up, Brandon. You lost some blood, quit being a baby. Not all of us have

supernatural healing." She scolded him, "you're lucky I don't just throw you

out of this car-hunting me down and making a mess of my life."

Brandon groaned and mumbled something unintelligible, which was proof

enough that he hadn't died in the backseat of this rusted mustang. I'm sure

he'd throw a fit knowing he expired on cracked leather that smelled strongly

of tobacco and cat p**s.

"I've called dibs on k*g him." I told her, swallowing a manic giggle when she

sighed deeply. "And I am sorry we made a mess of your life, but you have

information on something that affects thousands of people. I hope you understand that I can't just let that go."

Even though I knew little to nothing about her, I didn't mind Clara. She was

a bit skittish, but anyone who talked to Brandon like that had to have a good

personality-even if she did make the mistake of sleeping with him.

I wasn't nearly as stone-cold as Asher, but I had learned enough from him

to know that the leader of a pack needed to put their people first, and getting this information was what mattered most to me. If protection was

what she wanted, we'd provide it-but only on the condition she tell us everything she knew.

"I understand, that's what makes this worse." She sighed, buckling her seatbelt while providing no further explanation.

I had to remind myself to put the car in park when we pulled up to the gas

station, because instantly I spotted the dark tinted windows of Asher's SUV.

He was already out of the vehicle, taking long strides as he headed straight

towards me. I had just enough time to lift my arms, wrapping them around

his neck as his slid around my waist.

My fingers were tangled in the shorter strands of his hair, my forehead tickled by the longer pieces on top. Only the tips of my toes grazed the ground, but it all paled in comparison to the explosion in my chest when his

lips met with my own.

I trailed my hands to his face, feeling the sharp edge of his jaw beneath my

fingers. Our kiss wasn't the desperate, tearful kind you saw in the movies.

We weren't clawing at one another as if we couldn't get enough. His lips

moved softly, savoring every taste and touch, until we were both forced to

pull away for air. When he rested his forehead against my own and stared at

me with eyes of liquid gold, relief finally blossomed in my chest.

"We were attacked-"

"You're safe," was all he said.

Not a question or statement, but reassurance because he could see and feel

how shaken up, I was. Whether it was the sudden lack of adrenaline or the

information I had yet to process, he could tell my nerves were fried.

Touching him, feeling the warmth of his arms around my waist and his

breath across my cheek, it chased away the sense of dread I felt the moment I heard what the elemental witch said.

I nodded, "I'm safe."

Asher's eyes flared with interest when he noticed the tight dress I wore, "why are you wearing that?"

Brandon chose that moment to startle awake, banging his head on the roof

of the mustang as he sat up. The SUV Asher had gotten out of pulled forwards, next to the car we had commandeered. I was surprised to see Mason and Zeke inside, both of which got out and greeted me with relieved smiles.

Brandon pulled himself out of the mustang, a hand against his head. He steadied himself against the side of the car, groaning when Asher looked his way.

"We gonna do this right here? Cause I'll still make you work for it." He grunted, clearly in no condition to fight.

"I call dibs on k*g him..." I told Asher, patting his chest. "...besides, we have a lot to talk about."

I looked at Clara as I said this, who had just gotten out of the passenger side. The sheer robe she wore ended around mid-t***h and was cinched tightly at her waist. She shuddered with every chilly gust of wind, brushing

back the curls that covered her face. I noticed how she glanced hesitantly

towards Mason and Zeke before inching closer to them. It was her paranoid

glances down the street that kept me from thinking she were up to anything sinister.

Mason shrugged out of the jacket he wore and held it out to Clara, an unreadable look on his face as she murmured a „thank you“ and slipped it on.

Some of the concern I'd been feeling for him eased when Zeke grinned at

him over Clara's shoulder, making him roll his eyes.

Even though I wasn't cold, Asher pulled his leather jacket off and draped it

over my shoulders. I was drowning in the fabric, but I'd never complain about being surrounded by his scent and lingering warmth.

We ditched the mustang and headed to the airport Asher had landed at. Taking the pack's private jet wasn't best of options, since just about every

werewolf had a love/hate relationship with airplanes, but it was our fastest

mode of transportation.

The airport was packed with people, rushing about with suitcases rattling

behind them, as though it weren't nearing one in the morning. With just a

few short words to a service desk clerk, the six of us were led through a set

of doors and down a long stretch of hallway.

I kept my arm tucked around Asher's waist, molding myself against the side

of him while also keeping Clara in sight. We were led to a small waiting area,

free from all the people that had been traversing around the airport.

Zeke was the only one who remained standing, looking more and more nervous as the seconds ticked away.

"Are you sure we should get on a flying metal box with a witch?" He cleared

his throat, his eyes flickering towards Clara. "...no offense, plane crashes are

a fear of mine."

Asher contemplated what he said and nodded, "he's got a point."

It was true, there was plenty room for concern since we had no clue what

Clara could do. There was no point in asking Brandon, not when he was especially clueless about most things. It wouldn't surprise me to hear he

knew nothing about the girl he'd been sleeping with-other than her being a

witch.

I had no gut feeling telling me she'd magically c***h the plane or send it freefalling mid-flight, but that brought little comfort. What I hadn't

expected

was for Clara to defend herself. Her face held bravery, but there was no

missing the flicker of intimidation when she met Asher's stare with one of her own.

"The witches that attacked us saw me with your girlfriend, the only reason

I'm here and not running far from all of you is because I have no way to protect myself when they come searching for me. I wasn't raised a snitch,

but those witches won't just k**l me and be done with it." She huffed, trying

to calm her shaky voice.

The way her hands trembled, and leg bounced, all of it told me she was telling the truth. This thing that was going on, she had wanted no part of it.

It wasn't just Brandon and I she'd been avoiding. All it took was one look

shared between Asher and I to know we were on the same page.

"Mate. Lola is my mate, not my girlfriend." Asher said, both correcting and

distracting her.

"What's the difference?" She asked curiously, no longer bouncing her leg.

I tilted my head at her, "you've been hooking up with a werewolf and don't

know what mates are?"

When I turned my head to give Brandon a questioning look, he shrugged and said, "she's adopted," as though that explained everything.

"There's a huge difference." Asher replied, "One is based off a crush, the

other a bond that brings together who halves of the same soul. A bond like

that leaves a mark."

"I was raised by humans, and as long as Brandon was single, I had no reason to care about werewolf stuff-not until recently, anyway." She

explained. Her eyes homed in on the mark that stood out against Asher's

pale skin before they searched for mine. I knew what observation she had

made before she said it, "you have two marks...is that normal?"

“No, it’s not normal at all.” I sighed; thankful I was spared from explaining further when the attendant popped her head in to let us know the plane was ready.

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I’d never been on a plane before, much less a private jet that could easily double as an apartment if you ever found yourself without somewhere to live. I shuddered at the thought of being on a flight long enough to make use of the walk-in shower and king-sized bed in the back of the plane. The only positive things about this flight were the tiny bottles of liquor that chased away my gnawing worry, cuddling up to Asher for the next hour, and the fact that there were no shadows forty thousand feet in the air. Everything else—down to the turbulence and the pitch-black sky, I absolutely hated.

“Asher might be alright with waiting until this plane lands to ask what the hell happened, but I’m not. Give us the details, starting why you’re dressed like a movie star and this one... isn’t dressed.” Zeke leaned in; his hands clasped tightly together. I didn’t miss the way his eyebrows were creased, or the way the vein in his neck stuck out. Asher rolled his eyes, “you didn’t give me the chance to ask.” “Sorry, but you were taking too long.” He replied, glancing around the plane with that same look of unease on his face. I found it curious that an Alpha would fear plane crashes, but I wasn’t going to tease him for it. We all feared something. “I need a distraction before I spend the rest of this hour tweaking.”

“I’m „not dressed“ because I’m a performer at a club—well, I was a

performer..." Clara explained, giving me and Brandon long looks that let everyone know we were responsible for her sudden resignation. She turned

her attention to Asher, "...until your mate decided to beat up two bouncers

and storm the employees only area to hunt me down."

"You should have seen the looks on their faces when she threw that pitcher

of beer-" Brandon began, ready to shovel a handful of chips into his mouth

when he paused. Asher was glaring daggers at his brother, his eyes pitch black, and arm draped protectively over my shoulders. "Anyway, we would've been back sooner rather than later if it weren't for the creepy sister

witches."

"Creepy sister witches?" Zeke repeated, just a flicker of fear in the Alphas

eyes.

"Yup. One threw fireballs and the other made the ground crack open."

Brandon nodded, mimicking throwing a fireball only it was a sour cream and

onion potato chip.

"So what you're saying is not only did you put Lola's life at risk once by kidnapping her from the scene of an accident rather than taking her to the

hospital, but you also put it at risk numerous times afterwards, and for what?" Asher's voice was as flat as the lack of color in his eyes, so dark that

his pupils had vanished. He swiveled his eyes to Clara, who paled. "

What

was your reason for taking Lola this far away from pack boundaries, knowing

there are people after her?"

"Woah, woah. Technically, I saved her life twice-three times actually."

Brandon retorted. "First, I pulled her from that wreck and made sure she had a blood-bag. Then I let her nearly bleed me dry for a pack of demonic

leeches, and I didn't take off with the stolen car when she wanted to follow

the creepy sister witches. Three times, brother. And I'm not even asking for

a thank you."

"You called on the shadows and followed the witches?" Asher frowned, not

with anger but worry. He knew I'd always feel guilty for what happened to

Mason's mate and Breyona, and that I'd never again use them lightly.

"There was no other option. Those witches said someone was doing a tracking spell on me. They would've caught up to us eventually, then who

knows where I'd be." I shuddered, remembering all too well what it felt like

to be imprisoned by my father, to have my every breath and move watched.

"The shadows made us invisible, so they couldn't see or hear me. One of the

witches was on the phone, she said that the witch doing the tracking spell

lost us. The other was pissed, started going off about how they're locked up

and never get to see any action, and how this mysterious leader of theirs sent out other witches instead of them..."

"Sent out?" Zeke repeated, "What does that mean?"

"It means there's witches in our pack...hiding, blending in for goddess knows

how long." „ I looked up at Asher, seeing the same hurricane of emotions in

his eyes that raged within my own. "They said that these witches blend in

better, that they'll have everything set up for when "she's" ready to slip past

our borders, and that once I realize she's here, it'll be too late for us all."

"Oh-I knew they were planning something... I just didn't know it was this

big..." Clara swallowed, still nervous even though I alone kept Asher rooted

in place. "...they must've been planning this for some time."

"Explain." Just that single word charged the small space between us with

Clara's fear and hesitation. Not once had I ever felt a shred of fear towards Asher, but I knew the affect he had on those around him. Clara must've truly been desperate, because she found the strength to ask a question in return.

"How do I know you won't k*ll me as soon I tell you what I know?" She asked, doing a remarkable job at hiding the tremble in her voice.

"You don't, but we don't make it a habit just kg people." I replied before Asher could. I wasn't the most sensitive, but Asher had the bedside manner of a rogue. "So long as you're not trying to harm our people or anyone we care about, there's no reason to k*ll you. You said you wanted protection; we can arrange that if you help us in return."

"I...I don't have much information. It is enough for them to k*ll me over, though." She murmured, fearful even as she talked about them. "It started a month or so ago...whispers in the witch community, talking about some big event going on. I remember wanting to go, but I was busy at the time. A performer friend of mine went, came back...different. Told me how things were finally changing for us witches, and that when the time came, all of us needed to be on board. A week later, she gave me an official invitation to one of their gatherings. There's no address to give you-I never went. The whole thing felt...off to me. Kiersten was always one of those happy-go-lucky people, and after that meeting...she turned hateful, especially towards non-witches. She tried one last time, came to my house with another witch. They told me about the glory days for witches, when our power put us at the

top of the food chain, even above werewolves. They told me how we could have that again, there was just one obstacle in our way..." Her eyes settled on me, and a chill worked its way down my spine, turning my nerve endings cold.

"A tribrid with the power to achieve that vision. They made you out to be this...monster, said that you sided with the werewolves and were even working to enslave vampires. When they mentioned taking over werewolf packs, I knew something was wrong." She continued, "I threw the invitation away...and Kiersten, she stopped talking to me. For days she just watched me...until she didn't show up for work. Turns out she quit, and I haven't seen her since. All I know is there's been new people coming to the club, which is strange since you can't come here without being invited by a regular. These new people would always come to watch me dance...only me."

"You think they were sent to watch you?" Mason asked.

Clara nodded, "I think Keirsten vouched for me, and promised this woman I'd be on board, but I wasn't. My magic isn't the kind that fights in wars."

"You mentioned before you have to get up close to use your magic." I recalled, thinking back to when I had her pinned against the wall. That whisper soft touch at the back of my head, it had been her magic. I was now sure of it. "If I remember correctly, you and I were pretty close back at the club. What exactly can you do?"

"You felt that?" She chuckled nervously, tucking a few ringlets behind her ear. "My gift stems from spirit magic...it just works a bit differently. I can slip into someone's mind, sort of like what vampires do. It's not for very long,

but there's a lot I can do while I'm in there. I've never used it to seriously hurt someone...but I have used it to stun some of the handsy customers. I'm a novice at potions, more likely to singe my eyebrows off than actually make anything successful. I've also tried some small spells that have worked... well, all except for the love spell."

"You were going to stun me like a witchy taser?" I lifted an eyebrow. "Well, you were about to rip my throat out." She replied, bringing her fingertips up to the exposed skin.

I was two seconds away from saying „fair enough," when my brother's voice

popped into my head. Since Dad was settling in just fine at Claire and Killian's, Sean was spending more time running patrol and training with Mason and the other warriors. I had asked him a handful of times how he

was doing since losing his mate almost a year ago, but Sean always had a strange way of dealing with things. He was always able to keep his emotions

in check, which is why I instantly became worried when I heard how stunned he sounded.

„Hey, uh Lola...you and Asher on your way back?" Sean asked, his voice filling both mine and Asher's heads.

„Yeah, we're on the plane now. Why, did something happen?" I asked warily, locking eyes with Asher.

„Well...uh, yeah. Something did happen. I mean, I'm not sure how it happened-like at all, but it did..."

„Sean...what happened? You're not making any sense." I replied.

„Uh, that woman from the hospital-the cursed one...yeah, she stopped by

today looking for you two. Asher's mom told her you'd both be back tonight...so she's here now."

„We'll be there in forty-five minutes if she doesn't mind waiting." Asher told

Sean.

I frowned, „Sean, that's all you had to say? You sound a little freaked out."

„Sorry, I keep getting distracted...and uh, no that“s not all I had to say.
When
the woman- Flora, came here the first time she left before Killian or dad
got
back...when they did get back, dad started acting strange.“ I couldn“t
help it;
I assumed the worst. My mind conjured up every bleak and dark
scenario it
could. Like freight trains veering towards the edge of a steep cliff, I was
ready to plummet- but then I slammed on the breaks, and felt my jaw go
slack. „...she got here a couple minutes ago, and it just happened...he
always
assumed she must“ve died...but she didn“t. Dad“s mate was just
cursed...“

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