

Alpha Asher by Jane Doe Chapter 134

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"You sure they'll be alright together? Mason's a good guy, but even he can take so much." I said, staring out the car window at the three of them. Brandon had a sly smirk on his face as he placed his hand on Clara's lower back, leading her into the lobby of the Crescent Inn. Mason walked on the other side of Clara and stepped forward to intervene when she turned and punched Brandon in the gut.

She gave him a few choice words before standing next to Mason, as far away from Brandon as she could get. "C**k-blocking Brandon will bring him some joy." Zeke chuckled from where he sat in the back seat. "Seriously though, he knows about Clara's witchy powers enough to stay out of her grasp.

He'll be alright." "I hope so." I sighed, "I've been through enough for one night and the night's not even over yet." I had no idea what to expect walking into Claire and Killian's house. If Flora were still there would she be angry with dad or reject him on the spot? Was there some part of her that even cared about finding a mate after everything she'd lost? And dad...I didn't want to think about how he felt, about what must've gone through his head when the bond snapped into place.

Nothing could've prepared me for the tension that coated the walls and floor, which made every soft-spoken word echo as though it had been shouted across the room. I hesitated in the doorway before stepping inside, using the feel of Asher's hand on my lower back as encouragement.

The first thing I noticed was the petite blonde woman sitting on the sectional beside Claire, a cup of tea resting in her hands. Next was Sean, who sat on a barstool by the kitchen island, his eyes wide as he watched Dad and Flora without a hint of shame. Dad sat on the end seat, angled towards the football game on the screen as he tried, and failed not to gawk at her.

He took his chance to look when Asher and I walked in. Flora's face was tinted a rosy shade of pink as she looked our way, confusion and just a hint of fear rounding out her almond shaped eyes. She startled slightly when grandma came gliding into the living room with plates stacked in her hands. It was impossible to feel anxious or unwelcome around grandma. My point was proven when Flora's shoulders relaxed, and her lips curved up ever so slightly. That whisper of a smile made the corners of her eyes crease, and I knew just by looking that a real smile from her would light up her face and transform it completely.

Plates of scones lined up by flavor, macarons stacked in neat circles, and fruit tartlets covered the table. Nestled within the free spaces were small teacups of sugar cubes and cream. This would've been normal for grandma if it hadn't been almost four in the morning, which was why Sean was the only one helping himself. "How's your tea, dear?" Would you like some more?" Grandma smiled down at her, holding out the glass teapot in her hands. "Actually, I would. It's very good." Flora's voice was soft and feminine, like the gentle breeze that provided a few seconds of relief from the early summer heat.

Grandma topped off Flora's cup and was about to reply when dad beat her to it. I ditched the disapproving expression I'd been throwing Sean these last few minutes and openly watched the scene unfold, hushing him when he snickered behind my back. "It's lavender...that's what makes it sweet. She uh...she makes it herself." He stammered, his voice gritty and rough. It was the oddest thing. Dad was nervous, sitting there blinking at Flora like he couldn't believe he actually spoke.

There was something 'd always find endearing about watching werewolves born and bred to become warriors, go speechless over the attention of a she-wolf, even if that werewolf was forty-five years old and my dad. "Oh, do you drink it too?" She asked him, her grip on the teacup tightening as she brought it to her lips. The color across her high cheekbones deepened when dad's lips parted but no response came out. "Of course he does. Never met a person who hasn't liked it. That, and my lavender cookies.

You can put lavender in just about anything and make it taste better." Grandma smiled proudly, shaking her head at dad when Flora looked downward to drop a few sugar cubes into her tea. "Actually, come look on this top shelf for me. I think I might have a spare container or two."

"Oh, you don't have to do that." Flora said softly, tucking a wavy strand of hair behind her ear. Dad stood and looked down at her with a mixture of guilt, longing, and disbelief. I had seen each of those emotions on dad's face at one point or another, but never at the same time. It changed his face, making it look younger while his eyes seemed to age. "It's not a problem."

He grumbled, heading through the kitchen and into the pantry. "And you-you can get taking these desserts to the basement. If any of them melt, you'll be helping me remake them. Got it?" Grandma said, lifting an eyebrow at Sean who was working on his second plate of blueberry scones and chocolate macarons. "Killian cleared the freezers out earlier so there's plenty of room." Claire and Grandma smiled at one another proudly. "You gotta quit stress baking, grandma." Sean shook his head, letting her shoo him from the living room. Once everyone found a reason to make themselves scarce, we were finally able to talk to Flora. Her eyes drifted up from the surface of her milky tea, past the curls of steam that filled the air.

Even with everything going on, they were strong. "You're the new Alpha and Luna..." She said as we approached, her eyes on Asher as we took a seat on the couch just a few feet away. "...before I was attacked, your father was Alpha. You look just like him." "We are." Asher nodded, his sharp features softening. "Thank you for coming out here on such short notice, especially given your situation. You've been out for a long time.

Has anyone filled you in on the present?" "The doctor that passed along your message filled me in on a few things...you being one of them, Luna." She took a steadying breath and sipped at her tea before continuing. The psychologist told me to take it slow, but I can't stand not knowing. I'm sure you have questions...and I'll try to answer them if you tell me how I woke up." "Last week, a witch broke into our home. She would've k****d me if another witch hadn't been there to stop her."

I explained, "the one that broke in had a mark on her hand...like the one that used to be on yours "It started fading the moment I woke up, but I'll never forget what it looked like. It's all I'd see in my dreams. The witch that saved your life...is she a friend?" Flora asked tentatively. "I'm beginning to think so." I nodded. "And did she...did she k**l the witch?" Her voice dropped to a whisper, but I didn't think she noticed. "She did." I replied and watched as Flora let out a great sigh of relief. The teacup in her hand rattled as she set it on the table. I swore I saw some of the weight leave her eyes, evaporating as relief took its place. "I was cursed because of a mistake my parents made, one they both paid for with their lives."

She began, and the soft tone her voice had taken on made me wonder if this were her first time saying it out loud. "They were Alpha and Luna of a small pack up north, and desperately wanted a baby. You know how rare it is for werewolves to struggle with having children, especially Alpha's. They were both too desperate to see that talking to a witch was where everything went wrong." "Not all witches are bad...there's a few here that are on our side. They're trying to keep the pack safe." I promised. "The world has changed since my father was Alpha, but the safety of our people always remains priority." Asher added, warmth filling the golden flecks in his eyes as they met my own.

"I believe you, that not all witches are bad... but this one was. She acted like she wasn't, pretended she was going to help them if they repay the favor someday. All she needed was some of their blood..." She shuddered, and her features grew solemn. Decades old pain was still fresh in her mind, because to her it hadn't been so long ago. "They gave it to her and within a month they were going to be parents. That favor the witch mentioned, she came asking for it when my mother was six months pregnant...but what she wanted, my parents couldn't give her." "What did she want?" Asher asked. "A baby, one as healthy and strong as I was. Her only catch was that my father had to be the one to impregnate her.

She never told them why, but they both refused anyway. They were offended she hadn't cared that they were mated, and that she wouldn't choose from any number of unmated males in the pack. The witch vanished for a while, and they thought that was the end of it until the night my mother's water broke..." The jagged breath she took made my throat clench, but I forced myself to remain stoic as I listened to her story, when all I wanted to do was cry for her. "...the witch was there that night.

While my mother gave birth surrounded by her midwives, she was down the hall...with my father." "He fulfilled his end of the deal, but why?" I glanced at Asher. Both of us were absorbed within Flora's past, even though neither of us had any clue how it connected to the present. "Believe me, it wasn't willingly...what they didn't know was that the witch that helped them practiced a dark kind of magic, powered by blood and d***h. Giving her my father's blood—it was what she needed to get into his bed." Her voice cracked and I watched as she visibly pulled herself together, swallowing back the tears until fury shined through.

"While she was giving birth, she could feel him mating with the witch...and then felt the mate-bond snap when she stabbed him in his heart. My mother stumbled inside seconds after he took his last breath...all she asked was why." "And did she tell her?" I cleared my throat, knowing if I hadn't my voice would've come out as a croak. I knew little to nothing about blood magic, other than it ran in Holly's

family down her mother's side. The thought of it affecting a completed mate bond...shoving it down long enough to take advantage of someone like that, it chilled me deeper than anything that happened so far. "She told her the child she was having with her mate—it would be the strongest blood witch to walk the earth."

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"Are we on the same page with this?" I asked Asher, holding back my third yawn. One more and he threatened to carry me to bed, even though we both knew neither of us would be getting any sleep. The sun would be rising in an hour or so, which meant we had no choice but to start our day.

There was too much to do, but I refused think about that right now. I was happily curled up in Asher's arms, surrounded by his scent and the soft material of the sectional we sat on. We'd been silent since getting home, both of us lost in our thoughts as we replayed the sad ending to Flora's story. Almost ten months Flora's mother had until the witch gave birth to a little girl.

One week later, Flora and her mother watched as their housed was engulfed in flames, destroying what sliver of home they both had. After that, life grew dark for the widowed Luna. Flora recounted the numerous times they moved over the years, always somewhere new. They stayed longest in other packs, but somehow the witch always managed to find them. It wasn't good enough that she had k****d Flora's father.

The witch was spiteful and wanted the life of the child she had helped create, and the mother that carried her. Time dwindled as they ran from the witch, but over the years Flora's mother learned to spot signs of her magic. Her taunting changed each time, always something horrible and new. Storms would blacken the sky, or rodents would scurry inside their walls.

They'd wake up covered in spider bites, or find their dreams haunted by pale-faced figures with torn out eyes and distorted mouths. The witch was toying with them, sending these things their way as a warning. Telling them to run before she got too close. Some nights Flora swore she could hear a voice laughing in the dark, whispering for her to hurry. That morning she woke up covered

in deep scratches. They moved the next day. After so many years on the run, Flora's mother was growing tired. Just once, she let the witch get close. She left Flora at a friend's house under the guise of going on a date, but really she planned to face the witch head on. The mistake she made was thinking the witch was acting alone. Flora never knew what made her mother turn around that night and come rushing back to her friend's apartment, but she had nearly been too late.

A fire took the lives of seven people that night, one of them the friend that had been watching Flora. Her mother found her running down the street burned and covered in ash, breathing so hard it felt like her heart was ready to burst. It was

another two years before the witch was able to get close again. During that time, her mother's mental health was declining.

She had only survived this long because of Flora, but the damage that comes with losing your mate is irreversible. She grew suspicious of everything and hateful towards the witch that had destroyed her life and taken her love. Flora's mother sought out countless witches, seeking answers on how they were found so easily. It felt like the time between moves was growing shorter and shorter. She never knew if her mother found what she was looking for, and just a few weeks later they found themselves approaching the borders of Alpha Killian's pack. It was the first time Flora let herself feel hopeful.

She could tell the pack was well protected, that the people there cared about keeping one another safe. There were warriors everywhere. Children and teenagers training, boys and girls of all sizes and ages. She'd been too excited to see the look on her mother's face, dull and void of life as she pulled Flora towards a quaint blue house. That night was the last time she saw her mother.

The words whispered in her ear, the hug that felt much too cold, it was her last memory of the woman that had lost so much. 'This should've never been your life, Flora.

Make a new one for yourself, make us proud.' I shuddered in Asher's arms, chilled even though the fireplace was running, and the heat of his body surrounded me like a cloak. Tears pricked the back of my eyes, and the weight of my emotion was lodged painfully in my throat. While Flora's mother never returned, the witch did. The house Flora had been dropped off at was a children's home. The owners, who were mates themselves but unable to have kids, promised Flora's mother they would take her in.

Years passed and while Flora grew to love the kind-hearted people who raised her and treated her as their own, she missed the woman she had been through so much with. She spent those years wondering, staring at her curly blonde hair and soft eyes as she tried to pull up the fading memory of her birth mother.

She was twenty-five when the witch found her and had been out getting groceries for her adoptive parents. They were getting up there in age, so Flora would often run errands for them. That night, Flora never made it home. 'I stood my ground, because I knew I was going to d*e...'

Flora's soft yet fierce voice replayed in my head. 'I demanded she tell me what happened to my mother, why[1]why she never came back for me.' 'What did she say?' I had asked at the time. Flora had this faraway look in her eyes, and I knew that she had left the present for the past. 'She told me my mother was d**d...and that it had been at her hands, as it should've been all along.' Her voice held both sadness and longing, happiness, and horrible loss. 'She said my mother bought me some time by leaving me...but that it had been in vain. I wasn't afraid anymore...because I knew I would be with them again.'

I was sure of the witch's cruelty when Flora's lower lip trembled and she said, 'she knew I wasn't afraid anymore and laughed at me...she said I wasn't going where my parents were, that she had something even worse in mind.' "If by 'this' you're

talking about the likelihood that Holly's birth mother is the 'strongest blood witch to walk the earth' and Flora's half-sister, then yes we're on the same page." The gravely sound of Asher's voice and the feel of his stubble against my face pulled me back to the present. I groaned and sank deeper into the couch, "She's the mastermind behind all of this, she has to be. How messed up is it that Holly's grandmother tried to k**l me?" "All of this is messed up." Asher grimaced and the sharp angles of his face became even harsher. I could feel his frustration as he ran his fingers through his hair.

"We've always prided ourselves on how secure our pack is, but it seems like the only thing we're able to protect our people from is rogues. Did the witches you spied on say anything about when the others infiltrated the pack?" "I'm sorry, they didn't." I frowned at the cold anger in his eyes and kissed along his jaw until it had no choice but to thaw. There was nothing I could do to ease the suspicion in his voice or his need to protect, "we can't know for sure that Cordelia and Rowena aren't the witches here to hurt you. Inviting them here was a huge risk."

"If Rowena was out to hurt me, why would she k**l a powerful blood witch to save my life? She and Cordelia are working to get rid of this magical block I have so I can be useful and help protect our people." The sharpness of my voice caught Asher's attention, even though it hadn't been intentional. There was a small part of me that felt powerless, useless unless I called on the dark power of the shadows. We were stumbling around in the dark, and what we desperately needed was a light.

He looked down at me, concern mixing with the caramel tones in his eyes. My anger vanished, leaving me exhausted and frustrated. I grumbled but didn't fight when he grabbed me by the waist and pulled me onto his lap. Once I was straddling him, all I wanted was to bury myself into the sweatshirt he wore, but he refused to let me move. "You don't need magic to protect our people, Lola." The sweet side of Asher that no one else got to see, he broke through every barrier I put around myself.

He would never see me as a problem, as a magnet for all this trouble and chaos. He told me what I needed to hear, and what I refused to believe. "I'm not saying it wouldn't help, but magic isn't what makes you useful. You're a passionate and fearless Luna. You handed yourself over to your father to protect the pack, while I was ready to b**n it all down just to keep you by my side.

Even with this magical block going on, you're too stubborn to give up." "Stubborn? I'm sure you could've picked a better word than that." I teased, but my voice failed to d***n out the way my heartrate skyrocketed. There was never a moment where I wasn't thankful for Asher, and the unwavering support he always showed. I relaxed in his arms and peered up at him through my lashes, "does that mean you're on board with the witches training me?" "You don't like stubborn?" He cocked an eyebrow. I let out a surprised squeal when his arms wound around my waist, much too tight for me to break free.

I fell against his chest, still giggling as he said, "how about manipulative, or mischievous?" I'm sure my laughter sounded delirious from how long we'd been up, but it was normal moments like these that I longed for. The tantalizing curve of his smirk was just a few inches from my own lips and even with my stressed, sleep clouded mind I longed to close the distance between us. "I don't want to

make decisions for you, and I won't walk away if you choose to do something I don't agree with. If undoing this block and learning magic is what you need, then I'll do everything I can to help. We're in this together, which means I trust your judgement."

He said softly, stealing my breath and any future response when he placed a hand on the back of my head and guided my lips to his own. I was wrapped in Asher's arms, drowning in his taste and scent. Even though I was exhausted in more ways than one and worried about what the upcoming weeks would bring, I savored the break in between the waves that crashed over our heads and took us further from dry land. Even as the waters calmed and the skies cleared, a sense of foreboding lingered in the air. There was a storm headed our way, and we had no clue when it would be here...

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Even though the sun was up and he'd surely be heading to sleep soon, we went to talk to Giovanni first. I was eager to get my hands on the magical text he managed to get, especially since Cordelia called and said she'd be back this afternoon to perform the séance.

I put all of my focus towards getting this binding removed so I could get ahead of these witches and hopefully stop this mess in its tracks. There was every chance the witches working against us would find out and try to stop us, so the faster we moved the better. Since Asher refused to let me out of his sight for the day, he tagged along.

Even in broad daylight I couldn't help but keep my eyes peeled on these twisting and turning roads, waiting for another pair of dark boots. 'You alright?' Asher asked, his voice flowing through my head. He glanced over at me from the driver's seat and took a hand off the wheel to place it on my t***h. 'Yeah...' I nodded and sank further into the seat. My pulse raced from the small touch, but it did nothing to steer my thoughts away from the stranger and how abrupt the c***h had been.

My voice was strained when I asked, 'would you believe I'm not in any hurry to get into another c***h?' I hadn't expected to find Rowena at the house so early. She was coming down the stairs as we walked inside and smiled once she noticed us. The sundress she wore reached her ankles and had little maroon flowers that matched the shade of her hair. The long layers were curled and framed her heart-shaped face. "You like it? I got it at a little shop in town." Her smile widened when she noticed me take in her outfit. "I'm wearing it to the bake sale today. Apparently a bake sale is much more exciting than what I was led to believe." "We'll probably stop by sometime after the séance."

I replied, silently praying grandma would have leftover cookies in case we couldn't make it. Since this bake sale was in honor of Carson, I was positive there would be plenty of college kids ready to binge on a bunch of sweets. Grandma would be right in the line of fire and would love every chaotic second. She

probably considered it a reward from all the stress baking she'd done last night. "Cordelia called me this morning too! I'll be there for the séance and from what I've heard your friend Breyona is coming as well." Rowena smiled warmly, "are you coming as well, Alpha Asher?" "Of course. I

wouldn't miss it." A smile tugged at the corners of my lips, because there was no way my stubborn mate would let me call on the ghost of my d**d mother alone. We hadn't at all discussed whether he'd come, but I knew he had made up his mind when I first told him Cordelia's idea.

"Wonderful! I hope this afternoon gives you the answers you've been looking for." The sincerity in her voice rang like a bell throughout the quiet house, along with the concern that slowly closed in. She paused by the front door, "actually, I wanted to speak with you about Holly..." "Has everything been going alright with her training?" I asked, glancing upstairs to where her bedroom door was. Rowena nodded and brushed back a thick curl of hair, "she's starting out strong considering she's never practiced magic a day in her life, but my concern for her isn't of the magical variety."

My eyebrows inched together, "then what kind is it?" "Has Holly ever spoken to a therapist? You've briefly mentioned her life with your father, so I can't presume to know everything, but enduring a situation like that is traumatizing. Trauma can stunt a witches progress and affect their magic." If I hadn't already known about Rowena's background as a preschool teacher, I would've thought she sounded like a concerned mother. I wasn't nearly as suspicious as Asher.

From bone structure to even the smallest of details, she and Holly looked nothing alike. "She did for a little while before we came to town, but it didn't seem to be helping. I'll have Tristan see if she'll agree to it, and if she says yes I'll find one that's a good fit." I added it to my mental to-do list. It was my turn to stop her before she left. I planned to ask Cordelia about the tracking spell when we met for our training session, but I didn't see why I couldn't ask Rowena as well. "Do you know anything about tracking spells?" I asked.

If she thought my question was odd, she gave nothing away. Instead, Rowena's eyes lit up curiously and she answered in the clear soprano of a preschool teacher. "I know a little on the subject. Were there any specific questions you had?" She asked.

"How are they created, and is there any way to destroy one?" "With most tracking spells you need something personal from the target, or some of their DNA. Also, they can only be tracked for so long. It all depends on the strength of the witch and how well she can concentrate. The only other kind of tracking spell would involve sigils, which we would've discovered the same time we revealed your binding mark."

Rowena replied, a self-satisfied smile on her face. "I'm a bit proud I remembered that. I would play hide and seek with the witch I grew up with using a tracking spell. I was horrible at it, but that never stopped me from trying." Rowena lingered a few minutes longer, but eagerly left to venture through the city market twenty minutes away. We had passed the cluster of small boutiques and restaurants on our way to the house.

From the main road you could see some of the outdoor seating areas and the small courtyard where live music sometimes played. 'You know how easy it would've been for her to grab some of your hair when she was first in our house?' Asher's voice flooded my head, along with a heavy dose of wariness. 'She was following that feeling of hers when it led her there.' I was happy to see Rowena and Cordelia adjusting, but Asher still wasn't convinced. 'You're right, it could've been her. She was in our house...' I nodded, because other than the lack of alarm bells going off in my head, I had nothing to prove her innocence.

I continued before Asher had the chance to respond, '...but so was Cordelia and Cassidy-oh Breyona stopped by a couple days ago too, and there was that pizza man... 'Are you teasing me, Lola?' He lifted one of his dark eyebrows and pinned me in place with his stare. I was mesmerized by the golden flakes in his eyes when his arm snapped out lightning fast. The last thing I felt before being pulled into his chest was a hand wrap around my wrist. Some of the playfulness faded from his eyes, turning the vibrant gold into a gentle caramel.

'You think I'm being paranoid, don't you?' Asher was only doing what he thought was right, what had worked to protect the pack in the past. Everything had changed in such a short amount of time, and it was far from over. With vampires joining our side and witches slipping past the boundaries, werewolves are facing our biggest threat to date. We're all trying to navigate this new world as best we can, so I didn't blame Asher for becoming a little overprotective. Still, I couldn't help but tease the man. I nibbled on my lower lip, pretending to think my answer through. The short strands of his hair tickled my hands as I wound my arms around his neck. "Mm, I think that...I love you." I grinned innocently, fully aware that I had won this battle.

His arms snaked around my waist and pinned me flush against him. I knew he wasn't letting go anytime soon when he captured my lips and claimed my last breath for himself. "Since Breyona clearly has come voyeuristic tendencies she needs to work through and won't speak up, I will." Tristan's voice split the air like a whip. I knew both from his words and from the severity in his voice that he was in a s****y mood. "If you make this house smell like s*x, I'll b**n it down." Asher's hold around my waist didn't budge, but I also hadn't tried to pull away. I took a few long seconds to enjoy his embrace, knowing it would p**s the cranky vampire off even more. Sure enough, he cleared his throat. Asher smirked as I rolled my eyes.

"Are you acting like an a*****e because it's past your bedtime?" I asked, meeting little resistance when I stepped out of Asher's arms. Breyona yawned and trudged down the stairs, paying no mind to Tristan who lingered close behind, waiting for her to speed up. "Hey, Lola." She half said, half yawned. Her shoulder length hair looked even shorter with how messy it was from sleep. Catching me eyeing her disheveled appearance, she nodded. "...my life is forever going to be erratic sleep schedules and emergency naps...a werewolf on a vampire's schedule, lovely." "See, she's in a good mood." I nodded in her direction, which was currently hovering around the coffee pot in the kitchen. "She's in a good mood because she just woke up.

I have yet to be asleep and the sun-dweller that lives in this house think's it's funny to leave curtain's open in the middle of the day." His voice lowered and his jaw clenched so hard I was certain he'd crack a tooth. Breyona's voice could be

heard from the kitchen, “did you just call me a d**n sun-dweller?” She poked her head out of the kitchen and glared daggers at Tristan before turning to Asher and me, “...I only did it on purpose the first time. Second time was an accident, but he had to wait four hours to use the bathroom since Gio was also asleep.” “Doesn’t matter, keep them closed.” Tristan scowled and stormed towards the two of us.

I heard Breyona mutter something about ‘enjoying natural light’ before slipping back into the kitchen. The rest of what she said fell on deaf ears since I was currently focused on the sketch book in Tristan’s hand. He tossed it on the kitchen table with a thud and opened it a few pages in. “Holly had a dream about this place last night. Woke up around 10pm and drew this. The only reason she spoke up about it is because she saw your brother’s car out front of the place.” “How does Holly know what my brother’s car looks like?” Asher asked, darkness tainting his voice as it always did when Brandon was involved.

Again I had that nagging feeling—that budding curiosity that made me want to know the cause for all that tension between two brothers. “Your brother stopped by a few days ago, in the middle of the night.” Tristan and Asher’s unamused looks were nearly identical, even with their different facial structures. “Here I thought you were the most insufferable creature I’ve ever met, and this drunken idiot comes along wanting to see a real-life vampire. I would’ve drained him dry if I wasn’t worried about alcohol p*****g.” “Tristan, you remember what we talked about? You can’t threaten people after you try to compliment them.”

Breyona shouted from the kitchen. Her voice carried the mouth-watering scent of freshly brewed coffee. “It was one time, and I’m not complimenting him.” He grunted, his sky-blue eyes darkening with storm clouds. Tristan pinched the bridge of his nose and whipped his head towards the kitchen where Breyona’s soft humming emerged. “I apologized.”

Was all he said, his eyes daring her to reply even though she was too far in the kitchen to see. Regardless, I knew she wouldn’t disappoint. She shouted back, “...that’s debatable, you brought me a coffee.” “You looked tired.” He deadpanned. She snorted, “tired was not the word you used.” “Semantics.” He waved his hand angrily and spun the sketch book around, clearly running on fumes in terms of patience. He turned the book our way, and instantly the rough splotches and slashes of charcoal were familiar.

Fine lines made up the smaller details, like the lamp posts, sidewalks, and barren street. While Brandon’s car wasn’t in the drawing, there was something a bit more concerning I noticed. The little brick building that sat on the corner was identical to the one he dragged me to just hours ago, the one we had chased Clara through—only there were a few differences. Not only were the windows shattered and the ceiling caved in, but a jagged crack ran down the wall giving a glimpse at the inside of the building, which was nothing more than an empty shell.

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Tristan stalked off once Giovanni came downstairs, not giving the vampire so much as a glance. Clearly things were still tense between the two, but that was something they'd have to figure out on their own. Ads by 'We need to talk to Brandon and Clara about this.' I told Asher through mind-link, 'it's no coincidence the place is destroyed hours after we left.'

"This..." Giovanni's gravelly voice filled the air. In his arms was a thick leatherbound book. The pages were stained, but it was in surprisingly good condition. "...took a lot of convincing to get my hands on." My best-friend hovered nearby, always glowing whenever he was in the room. I looked up at him, taking in his mountainous physique and curly hair. Thick brows hung low over eyes so dark they looked black. The connection between myself and the vampires under my rule wasn't as strong as an Alpha and his pack, but I could tell there was something Giovanni wanted to say.

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"The vampire's you got this from, have they made up their minds?" I asked, thinking back to when I made the choice that allowed these vampires the chance to think without the influence of my father clouding their judgements. What solidified my choice even more was that Asher never once objected to my ideas or my vision for the future. His only connection to the vampire's is through me, but he was still looking out for them in what ways he could. It had taken a couple months, but after the d***h of my father Asher purchased a large sum of land just south of the pack borders. Our plan was to build houses, provide jobs and clinics that could replace the need to hunt humans. Vampires would be welcome there, but only with the understanding that my father and his arcane ideals were of the past. With time and the cooperation of the entire pack, we would accept vampires onto our lands and finally redeem ourselves from the bloodshed and mistakes of the past.

The witches currently gunning for my head, that put a kink in things. "They're close..." Giovanni nodded slowly; his blank expression unwavering. I was going to throw a 'but' in there, but thankfully Breyona beat me to it. "...they want to meet you." Asher's response was instant, as was my reaction to his response "Absolutely not." The golden tones in his eyes fell flat and his jaw clenched hard enough to make Breyona wince. "Excuse me?" I lifted an eyebrow at my mate, digging my fingers into my hips as I waited patiently for his response. Out the corner of my eye I could see Breyona backing away, tugging Giovanni to get him to follow. I narrowed my eyes at her, "Don't even think about running."

"It's dangerous, Lola. There's been two attempts on your life so far, and those are only the ones we know of. Are you going to meet with every vampire family that contemplates switching sides?" I watched as his nostrils flared and the beast that hid beneath his skin stirred. Arguing was something Asher and I had done from the beginning. His rage didn't faze me, and neither did his hot[1]headed wolf.

He had a point; I know he did, but things were more complicated than that. "This thing between us and the witches cannot get in the way of the progress Tristan and Giovanni are making with the vampires. How can I expect them to trust us

and come to our side when they haven't even seen my face? How can I expect them to call me their Queen when I haven't made the effort to act like one?" I replied, hoping he could see that for once, I wasn't trying to be argumentative. When he snarled and ran his fingers through his hair in frustration, I knew he understood. Asher would risk his own life ten times over for his pack, and I needed to prove I'd do the same for the vampires. If we were ever going to end the feuding between our kinds, we needed to stop treating the vampires like pariah and give the same support to them as we would our own packs. "Think you can set up a meeting with them after I get this binding spell removed?" I asked Giovanni, who nodded popped into my head. It had a slim chance of working out, but it was worth a try. "On second thought, if there are other vampires who are thinking about switching sides, invite them too. I know this isn't fair to ask of you but try to keep this meet-up as quiet as possible.

The last thing we want is supporters of the late King showing up." I said with just a hint of sarcasm, and a heavy dose of contempt for the vampires that had rallied against me. The patrol teams scented them far beyond the pack's borders, so it was common knowledge to be wary venturing too far out the way. Since the grand announcement that landed me with a bullet in my chest, they had yet to launch a second a****k...which was relieving as it was concerning. It was Zeke who last week posed the question we had all been thinking. Were the vampire's still clinging to my father's rule in league with the witches? "Last, I want to pick the time and place. We'll meet in the new territory Asher acquired.

It's not officially part of the pack, so it's neutral ground. It'll give me the chance to show them our plans, so we can prove vampire's do have a place in our future." I sucked in a breath and let it out slowly. It was a plan, one that might sway a few of them. "Let them know they're free to bring what protection they deem necessary, and that we'll do exactly the same." Asher tacked on, his voice low and shoulders tense. "I can't promise this will stay quiet, but I'll do all that I can. Any updates and I'll find you or have Breyona relay them." Giovanni responded, but I still had the feeling there was something he wanted to say.

My eyes darted between my best friend and her mate, "...is there something you wanted to tell me?" "My family, they've been...more understanding than Tristan's, but they still have questions. My father is stubborn, but my mother and sister are leaning towards your side. If they choose to follow you as their Queen, my father will too." Giovanni replied, but there was a hesitance I'd never heard in his voice before. Always calm and reserved, stone-faced unless Breyona was around, this was the most emotion I've heard in his voice without him mentioning his long-legged mate. "It's not you they want to meet...it's Breyona and I." "They don't believe a werewolf and a vampire can be mates." Breyona said with a huff, rolling her eyes and crossing her arms over her chest. Anger was the one emotion that made Breyona's voice raise a good octave or two, so I knew she was fuming when she squeaked, "...that father of his called me a mutt, and said I was seducing him since none of our males are up to 'breeding standard'."

"I-I think I do, yeah." She nodded, her hazel eyes hopeful and sincere. I could practically feel her excitement. Her smile wavered, but she pieced it together before it fell apart. "There's a chance proving the bond between Gio, and I could get his family on your side. I can't shift...so, there's not much else I can do to help you...and I want to help, Lola. He'll make sure I'm safe the entire time, I promise.

We're best-friends, but you're also my Luna, and I can't leave without your permission."

There was so much I wanted to say to Breyona, but words wouldn't give back what the shadows had taken. Instead, I placed all my trust in her and in the vampire that hovered protectively at her side. "When do you plan on leaving?" I asked. Excitement filled her face, which she held back since I hadn't yet given her permission. "Not until after your powers are unbound, that's for sure." She replied, and just a hint of relief washed over me. "You have my permission to leave the pack." I told her, feeling my heart both ache and soar at the ear-splitting grin that formed on her face.

My eyes settled on Giovanni, who gave me his attention unflinchingly. There was no doubt in my mind that he would protect her till his last breath, but the words left my lips regardless. "Don't come back here without her." I said in a voice that belonged to both his Queen and Luna of this pack.

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While Breyona finished getting ready, Giovanni pulled me aside. The leatherbound book sat on the table between us. On its cover was a triangle with a circle inside. Inside the circle were different symbols, none of which I knew the names to. I couldn't detect a trace of suspicion in his voice, only his usual amount of severity. "Your father deemed this important enough to have it locked in a vault. He wasn't the kind person who passed up power, so if he kept it from the witches then it might be a good idea if you did the same."

Before heading to Cordelia's for the séance, the three of us stopped by the hotel we had dropped Clara off at. Since it was on the way, it gave us the perfect opportunity to ask about the nightclub, which was now nothing more than a pile of rubble. I wasn't surprised to find that Brandon had vanished early in the morning, never to return.

Mason looked a bit disgruntled, his hair a mess and his face twisted into a scowl. Clara on the other hand was draped over a chaise lounge, an arm behind her head as she smirked and looked at her manicured nails. Her bouncy curls were twisted into a quick updo, but some strands were already falling from the clip. She looked smug and cat-like, which ended the moment I pulled out Holly's drawing and told her what it meant.

I locked eyes with Mason and nodded towards the door, letting him know he was free to go. Without glancing at Asher's voice was flat and unimpressed, "we're assigning you a new guard." "You weren't surprised when I showed you the picture." I stated the obvious, holding her stare long enough to make her squirm. "If anything you look like you want to throw up." "It's obvious what it means...the witches are covering their tracks.

The fact that they don't want you to find out what they're doing more than they want to get their hands on you is terrifying..." Her smug exterior dropped, revealing the girl I had met just last night. The confident and sensual dancer turned magical fugitive, afraid of what lurked in the night. "A lot of witches worked at that club, and I'll bet anything that none of them made it home last night..." Once a replacement showed up, we were able to leave.

We gave Mason a ride back to the house, but the entire drive I couldn't get his grimace out of my head. He sat in the back seat, his cheek against the window and his warm eyes halfway closed. His light brown hair was sun bleached from how much time he spent training or on patrol and was beginning to grow past his jawline. "Mason?" I called out and heard him grunt in response. Breyona snickered, "he's been hanging around Tristan too much." "Funny." Mason said sarcastically, cracking an eye open just to narrow it at her. "Are you alright?" I asked Mason, turning to look at the two of them.

"You look a little worse for wear." "You can thank Asher's brother for that." Mason grumbled, "...real stand-up guy." "This is the second complaint about your brother." I said to Asher, pressing my lips together to keep from laughing sure why Brandon felt the need to constantly raise h**l. Against my better judgement, I asked Mason what happened. "Mm, did you know there was a bar in that hotel?" Mason asked, and when I shook my head he let out a dry laugh. "Well, you will when she checks out. I'd have to sell my tail on the black-market to pay that tab. The little witch isn't any better..." His voice dropped into a low grumble, "...went to the bar with him, made me play babysitter. Your brother doesn't know how to keep his mouth shut.

I had to drag him from the bar before he got us all thrown out, which pissed him off enough to start throwing punches. I managed to get him into the parking lot before he tore down the hotel. Luckily, he's got p**s-poor fighting skills when he's drunk." "That doesn't explain why you look like you've been hit by a car." Breyona added helpfully. At times I didn't understand the strange relationship between my two best-friends, but I was slowly learning that insults were their love language. "No, it doesn't." Mason smirked, his mood already lightening even though his eyes held traces of exhaustion. "Brandon got me to the ground, and we were going back and forth. Clara was shouting and waving her hands, but I couldn't make out what she was saying in between taking your brother's punches. Turns out she was warning us to stop before she used her magic on us."

"She didn't." Breyona gasped, a hand over her mouth. "...wait, what did she do to you?" "She's like a witchy stun-gun...for the most part, anyway." I told her, "I'm sure there's more she can do that she hasn't mentioned." "Yeah, she also sucks at descriptions." Mason's voice was dry and a little bit pained. "It's not like any stun-gun I've ever felt, that's for d**n sure. Felt like I got struck by lightning, then I was out cold...Brandon too." "She knocked you both out in the middle of the parking lot?" It was my turn to stare open mouthed. "She dragged us back inside and spent the better half of the morning complaining about how long it took her, and how she broke a nail. Of course your brother woke up early and ran." His grimace returned the more we talked about Clara. "All I know is I won't complain if I never have to see her again. I'd say the same for your brother, but I know that's too much to ask for."

"I'm surprised the town hasn't rallied against him." Breyona's good mood was infectious and had Mason lifting t I know you're doing that séance thing for your mom today...I just want you to know that I hope you get answers." The wistful edge to his smile made the air in my lungs thin until I was desperate for a deep breath. "I hope you understand why I can't be there...to see an actual spirit, to know talking to someone after their gone is real...it would just make things harder." "Of course I understand." The knot in my throat was painful to s*****w and sat in my stomach like a chunk of lead. My face burned as I let out a weak laugh and said, "...come to the bake sale afterwards, I'm sure I can convince grandma to give you the family discount." "Family discount?" His smile widened. It was a shadow of that goofy lop-sided grin I had memorized inside and out, but it was the brightest I'd seen him look in weeks. "Alright, you convinced me. I'll be there." Rowena had beaten us to the house for the séance and was inside helping Cordelia finish setting up. We walked to the very back of the house. Past the living room and kitchen, was a long hallway that led to the den. The furniture was shoved back towards the walls, leaving a wide-open floor space for us to work with. On the wooden floor in thick, bold lines was a sigil. A small bowl of white paint sat off to the side, it's paint brush currently in Cordelia's hand. With long, steady strokes she hovered around the outside of her painted circle and put down the last slashes and dots of her masterpiece. The magical trunk she used that held all of her spell books and trinkets was propped open against the far wall.

"Welcome, welcome." Cordelia smiled warmly at the three of us, but it was me she approached. Her eyes crinkled around the corners as she looked down at me, "I hear you had an eventful night yourself." "That's a nice way of putting it." I chuckled lightly, "...what better way to turn things around than a good old séance?" "I couldn't have said it better myself." Her smile widened. She turned towards Breyona and said, "...would you mind closing the c*****s for me, dear?" "I'm on it!" She chirped, racing away before Cordelia had the chance to say anything more. "Consider me your witchy assistant."

"We didn't go over this yet, but there are seven different types of magic a witch has in her arsenal. Most of the time we're only successful at one or two of those types, but that doesn't mean we can't try." Rowena glided forwards and her glossy red sandals caught the light as she moved. "The séance Cor "Can you do more than just call on ghosts?" Breyona cooed, yanking the last of the c*****s shut. Cordelia laughed at her excitement and said, "Spirit magic isn't my strong suit, but I also get feelings or hear whispers if the place I'm visiting has seen d***h. It's a powerful form of magic, I just have limited access." As Rowena placed seven thick candles on the floor all at various points inside the circle, I knew the time for questions had passed. Cordelia flicked the lights off, plunging the room into darkness.

Achill passed through me as I felt the curious eyes of the shadows lingering in the air. "The sigil that surrounds us is to keep us protected, while the smaller ones inside are to thin the veil between the living and the d**d. The ring of candles is to keep the spirit called on contained. It's crucial we all remain seated and inside the circle until the summoning is finished and the spirit is dismissed." Cordelia explained as she and Rowena lit the candles one by one. The pale blue of her eyes caught the glow of the candlelight, making them dance like threads of flame. "Did you bring what I asked?" "Sure did."

I nodded and pulled the old photograph of my mom out of my pocket. Cordelia needed a picture, but one that meant something—one that showed the heart of the person we were summoning. This had been after she had the binding spell placed on me, but years before she and I began butting heads. Mom stood with her arms wrapped around Dad's waist, wearing of her rare but dazzling smiles. It lit up her face and made you notice how the sunlight brought out the caramel tones in her hair. Sean and I stood in front of them, his hair a mess and my wide grin missing a tooth.

After a good look, it was obvious we couldn't sit still long enough for the picture to be taken. Cordelia placed the picture of Mom inside the ring of candles, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. When she opened her eyes, they were clear and serene. Her voice was strong, but there was something haunting about the way it echoed, and how that whispered voice sounded different than Cordelia's. Each word spoken charged the air with what felt like electricity, until my skin was flushed and the hairs along my arms raised. "Spirits from the other side... ..hear my words, hear my cry... ..a mother of two, whose secrets still sleep... We ask you to cross the great divide... ..to share the truth you chose to hide."

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"Spirits from the other side... ..Ads by ...hear my words, hear my cry... Only one of you we do seek... ..a mother of two, whose secrets still sleep... We ask you to cross the great divide... ..to share the truth you chose to hide." I hadn't realized I was holding my breath until I felt Asher's eyes on my face. Still, I couldn't exhale.

There was this part of me that was terrified I'd be disappointed, that the worst would happen, and she wouldn't come. Through all the fights I loved the mother I knew, but I wished she were here to tell me this herself. Cordelia repeated her chant a second time, and then a third. The air around us was thick and heavy, like a tangible substance that weighed us down. I watched as Breyona wiped the sweat from her forehead with the sleeve of her hoodie

. She pointed at it and grimaced, regret in her eyes. Asher was stoic, his face a mask that revealed nothing. Even Rowena looked a bit flustered and was using her hand to fan her face. Just when I thought she'd say it a fourth time and s**k the rest of the oxygen from the room, something happened. They were too light to be shadows. More like wisps of smoke that rolled across the floor, gathering within the ring of candles at the center of our circle. They coalesced, swirling like smoke under glass. First, the figure of a woman formed. She looked different than what I remembered, but it had been an entire year since I last saw her. We had fought tirelessly over Tyler, but she hadn't argued with me when I told her I wanted to live with grandma—she hadn't said much of anything. Her hair was longer than I remembered it and curled softly at the ends.

Sean had told me what she looked like when he went to identify the body, the wounds that she had. The button-down shirt she wore was spotless and held no evidence of the way she'd been k****d. The longer I stared at her, the more I

could've convinced myself that she was actually here-alive and safe. It was the translucence to her body that sent me hurtling through space, crashing towards earth as I remembered she wasn't here, she wasn't coming back. I would never get the closure I wanted, the answers to my thousands of questions but maybe I'd get this one chance at a goodbye.

I promised myself I'd stay strong, that my mask would be as indestructible as Asher's, but something inside of me broke when my mom got down on her knees and said, "...you make such a beautiful Luna." She smiled at me, one of her genuine smiles I seemed to witness less and less as I aged. There was no anger in her eyes, no guilt or disappointment. They shimmered with happiness, filling with tears that refused to fall. "Hi, mom." I croaked, barely able to get the words out. The knot in my throat grew, aching every time I held back a sob. Cordelia's face was serene, but the intensity of her eyes and the sheen of sweat on her face served as a reminder that we were on borrowed time. I had to pull myself together long enough to ask the important questions, then I could break down. "We called you here to ask you some questions ..."

I took a few seconds to find my voice, oblivious to the tears that trailed down my cheeks. Mom's lips fell and she reached for me, stopping at the barrier of candles that separated us. "...there isn't much time, but we need your help." "I'll help how I can, I promise. I was supposed to tell you these things myself, Lola..." Her eyes held everything we had missed together. The conversations and secrets, even the arguments and silly ways we would make up. "...you weren't supposed to go through this alone." "She's not alone, she never was." Even though I had promised myself I wouldn't take my eyes off her, that I'd memorize every detail of what she looked like, I couldn't help it when my head turned towards the sound of Ash. He looked up at my mom with the confidence of an Alpha, but there was a softness in his eyes that rivaled his fierce protectiveness, one that showed exactly what he felt for me. She could see it; I know she could. It was one of the reasons she had hated Tyler, because no matter how many cocky smiles he flashed, he never looked at me the way Asher did. "It's a pleasure to meet you in person, Alpha Asher." Mom's smile was knowing and gave me a look I had never seen before-one that said, 'I approve'. "Likewise." He nodded stiffly.

"Mom...we need to know how to remove this binding spell you had put on me." I wiped away the tears that fell, blinking past them until I could see clearly again. "...I need to know why you did it. Was it because you couldn't tell Dad about me?" "No, baby...It wasn't about that. The more people I told, the more dangerous it was for you. Your magic had to be bound...I tried every other option, but I had no choice." Her voice broke at the end, and that one crack in the armor of the strongest woman I knew released all the anger I'd been holding inside me. "You were showing signs of magic when you started walking...all you wanted to do was explore, but soon things started happening.

Car keys would disappear, and eventually so would your toys. They'd always turn up in the strangest of places. On the roof, in the neighbors washing machine, even in the lobby of the police station around the corner. For awhile I could lie and shrug it off, but as you grew so did your power. They would've noticed you, Lola. He would've noticed you." "You did it to keep me safe, but now it's putting me in danger. I need to be able to defend myself, because even though my father's d**d there are still threats out there." "She told me you would need this list someday if you ever wanted the bind removed. It's ingredients for a spell, and

the last one is the blood of the witch who bound your magic. The witch is with me on the other side..."

My heart dropped, then soared fast enough to leave me lightheaded and fumbling over her words. "...but her sister is still alive. Her blood can undo the spell too." "She's alive." I exhaled; the rush of relief was so strong I had nearly mistaken it for adrenaline. "Where can we find her?" "She's close by..." Mom's eyes twinkled mischievously, "...she has a son and two grandchildren to look after." "No, that's not possible." I started to shake my head but paused. I picked it up from the store. Plants quite literally flourished under her touch. I had watched the woman revive countless rose bushes and saplings that were far beyond repair, only to grow them into vibrant showpieces. "You're telling me Grandma has a sister and that sister is a witch..." I trailed off, "...which means Grandma is a witch." "Why do you think I never liked the woman? No one's baking is that good.

No one." Mom chuckled, and I memorized the outline of her smile before it fell into something softer. "I needed to keep you away from magic, Lola... which also meant keeping you away from her. There's not enough time in the world to ask for your forgiveness, but I don't want you to walk through life holding onto anger. It's not worth it—I'm not worth it." "I don't think I can be angry at you anymore." Even though my throat tightened, my voice came out strong and confident. Perhaps it was because I believed what I was saying, or because I wanted my mom to know that she didn't have to ask for forgiveness. It was there for her to take and had been all this time. "You aren't the only one asking for forgiveness..."

To anyone else Asher probably looked like an emotionless a*****e, but through the bond I knew exactly what he was feeling. He felt the same thing I did whenever I looked at Mason or Breyona—a soul-crushing sense of guilt. Just this once, Asher dropped the indifference in his eyes and let every ounce of emotion shine through. "I want to formally apologize for my hand in your d***h. It was my decision to punish Tyler's disrespect by attacking his pack. I wasn't thinking of the d***h I would cause—of the lives I would ruin, but I should have. Yours is one I'll carry with me for the rest of my life."

"Since you're my son-in-law and I'm d**d, I think I'm going to risk calling you Asher." A mix between a laugh and a sob escaped my lips because I hadn't realized how much I missed my mom's attitude. What was even worse, it took me all this time to realize how identical we sounded. "You have one chance to make this up to me, Asher

. Protect my daughter at all costs, and make sure there's never a moment where she doesn't know how special she is, and how much she's loved." "I won't fail you, or your daughter." His promise brought a smile to her face. Mom rattled off the ingredients for the spell that would unbind my magic, and with each one I felt like we were one step closer. I knew what some were like bay leaf and anise, but others like black thistle left me drawing blanks. "How am I supposed to say goodbye to you?" I sobbed, a hand against my mouth as though that would hold back every ounce of grief I'd been shoving down for the past year. "I'll make you proud, Mom. I promise, I will." "My strong, fearless daughter... I've always been proud of you. It's never goodbye, Lola..."

Mom's voice trembled, and a watery smile formed on her face. Bits of her translucent form began to fade, curling back into the smoke that had once filled

the room. First it was the curly ends of her hair, then her slender hands and arms. "We'll see each other again, but only after I've watched you grow into the Luna and Queen you're destined to become." That crack I felt in my chest, it had been the dam that held everything back-every beautiful, painful moment that I missed desperately. One last fight, one last chance to see her eyes light up in anger, to smell the gardenia and pear perfume she'd wear every single day. I'd never get those moments back, I'd never get another chance to live through them, to appreciate them the way I should have. As I watched the spirit of my mom vanish in mist and smoke, carried from the room by a gust of wind that seemed to emerge from nowhere and everywhere all at once, my heart and head felt a million times lighter.

Cordelia closed her eyes and whispered, "I release you to the other side...may you find happiness and peace until the ones you love are called home." And one by one the candles went out. One last breeze carried the echo of her voice, an echo no one else seemed to hear. 'Lola, be warned...the kind of magic you have, it hasn't been seen for a long time. They will want it...' Seconds passed in utter silence. I barely noticed when Rowena stood and glided towards the c*****s, tugging them open enough to let a few rays of sunlight creep inside. Both Cordelia and I jumped, visibly startled when Breyona's ragged sob filled the air.

It was followed by a wet sniffle and a few hiccups. Cordelia handed her a powder-blue hanker chief, which Breyona took and loudly blew her nose in. Her eyes were bloodshot and swollen from crying, and her make-up she had spent half an hour applying was smeared halfway down her face. She looked at Asher and I with a trembling lip and sniffled, "that was beautiful, you guys."

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I didn't have long to accept the fact that I'd just spoken to my d**d mother's spirit because we were on our way to find my grandmother, whose uncovered heritage I was also trying to process. Bright spot, grandma was with the rest of the town at the bake sale hosted in Carson's memory. Ads by The plan was to grab Grandma and head back to the house to get the blood we needed. Cordelia had every other ingredient on the list and was surprised that the spell itself was a simple reversal spell.

What made it complex was the final ingredient, grandma's blood. Rowena was right, bake sales had a different meaning around these parts because what I had in mind involved perky PTA members with plates of store-bought chocolate chip cookies and children with fists clenched full of old ones and quarters. What I hadn't expected to see was every sorority and fraternity milling around outside, hanging out in clusters of ten or fifteen.

All of them shouting over one another, yet the conversation seemed to be flowing. I was pleasantly surprised to see fists clenched full of ones and quarters, but instead of eager children it was excited frat boys. You could tell who belonged to who because of the matching clothing and face paint. Chi Omega

made sparkly tank-tops with Carson's face on the front and their last names on the back, which also happened to match Kappa Sigma's football jerseys.

Delta Sigma had on crop tops, only Carson's face was on the back instead of the front. The larger sororities and fraternities occupied the houses around the University, forming a large U shape. The smaller ones were a couple blocks away. For nearly a mile college students could be seen walking down the street, all trickling towards the center of town. "Wow, they really do use every excuse to party." Breyona said, her voice full of wonder and disbelief. She had her face close to the window and was watching some of the students intently. One of the sororities were posing for pictures just outside of their house. They lined the porch and steps, shifting into a quirky pose as though they'd done this a thousand times before. Once the camera was put away, drinks were passed around. We passed a photo of Carson that had been placed on a little wire stand and st Asher glanced up at the rearview mirror and said, "I gave them access to the jet to fly out and see some family.

They'll be flying back for her memorial. From there I'm not sure what they'll do. I gave them permission to transfer packs if it's what they wish." The roads that circled the center of town were blocked off for today, which meant the closest parking spaces were a ten-minute walk away. Asher pulled the car up to the 'road closed' sign and got out. He sauntered up to the parked police car ten feet away and leaned down to speak through the open window. His hand rested on the roof of the car, giving me a clear view of his biceps and toned abs. The shirt he wore was tight in all the right places, including his broad shoulders. His lips curved up in a grin as he talked to the officer, flashing him a smile that was all teeth before coming back to the car. The officer stepped out of his car and moved the barrier to the side, giving us access to the road.

"Using your Alpha status to get us premium parking." Breyona grinned, sounding just a tad jealous. "I like it, let's go!" It wasn't hard maneuvering our way through the growing crowd of college students, parents, and sugar crazed children. They parted for the three of us like we were royalty – or like we carried some sort of contagion. Canopy tents of various colors sat all around campus square. Along the pathways and beside the fountains, even in between the hedges of blossoming flowers. Plastic tables sat beneath them, each one loaded with baked goods. Refrigerators had been hauled in by trucks earlier in the morning, which really drove Rowena's point home. I spotted grandma and Claire manning a lavender colored tent with the words, 'magical desserts' printed in cursive along the top.

The two of them were swamped by people, their tables so crowded that I wondered how they had anything left at all. Asher didn't budge as I tugged him towards grandma's tent. His eyes were narrowed, locked on Brandon who was leaning against the pole of mint green tent, talking to Cassidy. "I'm going to talk to grandma." I told him, giving his hand a soft squeeze before letting go. "I'll be right there." His eyes flitted down to me and some of the tension within them faded. As Breyona and I headed to grandma's tent, I glanced back to see him talking to Brandon, and caught Clara's name as it left his lips.

"Oh thank the Goddess you're here. Can you two man the booth with your grandma while I run to the hairs away from her face every couple seconds. "Sure thing, we've got this." I nodded, waving to grandma as I rounded the tables with

Breyona in tow. I was aware there were dozens of eyes on me, but that didn't stop me from grinning stupidly when Claire marched up to two jocks in football gear and said, "you and you, come help me carry these pastries before my son spots you gawking at his mate." Both gave me one last look and followed Claire, who told them to keep up and pull their weight.

I turned towards grandma and watched as she greeted a group of sorority girls, a kind smile on her face as she showed them her inventory. The truth was right there on my tongue, but when she turned and welcomed me it wasn't the truth that came out. "You stayed up all night stress baking didn't you?" I smirked, since it was a lot easier to fake than a smile. "Hush and stop bullying the elderly." She scolded me, which made Breyona snicker. I got to work, greeting people as they approached since there was no clear line forming.

Just a sea of people that inched closer as we sent others on their way. Helping collect money and pass out bundles of cookies or brownies gave me the chance to talk to the townspeople, to get to know the people Asher and I were trying to protect. From a distance, I spotted Asher. I'd never be able to miss him, not with how easily he towered over everyone, exuding an aura of intimidation. Cassidy was talking to Asher, but Brandon was no where in sight.

I glanced at Asher and then Cassidy's smiling face before scanning the crowd for his brother. Brandon was slippery enough, and I trusted Asher not to lay into him on today of all days. "You want me to go over there and break that up?" Breyona lowered her voice, but it was clear who she was talking about. I laughed and shook my head, while Maya gave an exuberant, "yes!" "I knew having a mate would be all intense, but I never knew how jealous it would make me."

She teased, using a set of tongs to place a few chocolate chip cookies in a to-go bag. The crowd was dwindling enough to where we had a handful of seconds in between customers to drink and restock the tables. Breyona and grandma were helping an elderly couple with a large order when I heard a sour voice that "You wouldn't happen to know where Carson's parents are, would you?" Devin Armstrong, the a*****e who tried to pick a fight with me the night of Carson's d***h stood at the edge of the table. Perhaps in another life he would've been considered attractive, but his bad attitude contorted his face into a permanent sneer.

"Or did you k**l them too? Tying up loose ends, am I right?" It wasn't everyday a Luna was disrespected outright, so it took me longer than I'd admit to form a coherent response. It took even longer to convince Maya that tearing his throat out wouldn't win us any awards. "You know they went to see family, stop playing dumb." Asher's cousin snapped in a voice full of poison as she approached grandma's booth. The chunky green stripe in her hair looked radioactive bright in the sun. She smiled sweetly when grandma greeted her and held out a twenty in her hand. "Can I get one of them brownies for my girl, and I'll take two of your brown sugar cookies." Grandma grabbed what she needed and handed her the lavender paper bag.

Alex pocketed her change and glanced at Devin one last time, "Luna trumps the son of a judge, just saying." Devin's face contorted in anger, which wasn't all that different from his 'it's Tuesday' face. "F**k you." He spat. "Not even if you begged." Alex tossed over her shoulder, laughing silkily as she joined a curvy

she-wolf on one of the park benches. "Are you done trying to cause trouble?" I asked him, knowing well that he hadn't come here to support Carson's family like everyone else. His beady eyes narrowed, "don't get comfortable, I'm not the only one who sees your kind for what they are..."

"And what's that? By all means, share with the class." His d***h-glare paled in comparison to Breyona's, who even made Zeke stop in his tracks. "Just another p***k with rich parents." Grandma finished up with another round of customers and walked over just as Devin was gearing up for a hasty retreat. I could see the fire leave his eyes the more the crowd turned their attention on him. He was the center of attention, but not in the way he anticipated. "Watch out, old woman. That she-wolf's a k****r." He snarled, desperate to get the last word in before rushing off in a huff. "Oh, p**s off."

Grandma tossed over her shoulder, tugging Breyona and I to the next wave of customers as the sound of Devin's stomps faded in the distance. Fifteen minutes later Claire returned with Asher and Cassidy in tow. The two frat boys set their platters of desserts down where Claire directed and high-tailed it in the other direction, their faces pale, and eyes on Asher. "Grandma, we need your help with something back home...it has to do with the binding spell on my magic. Would you mind leaving early?" I asked, biting back the words before I blurted them out in front of everybody. "

Go ahead and help them, I've got some extra hands coming." Claire reassured her, a grateful smile lighting up her face. "I can't thank you enough for all the work you did today." "Nonsense, as my grandchildren like to remind me, I have a problem with stress baking." Grandma grinned and wound her arm through mine. "Now what magic binding spell would call for an old werewolf?" I was saved from answering when Cassidy's squeal filled the air. "I should've figured you were here!" Cassidy beamed when she spotted Breyona and me. Her golden locks were twisted into a messy bun that looked purposefully perfect, and her smile was perfectly white. It faltered when she noticed us packing up, "Oh, are you leaving already? I'll walk you to your car, I actually wanted to talk to you about training."

As we walked, grandma and Asher ended up taking the lead a few feet in front of us. I could hear her talking to him and caught her saying, "...you know she'll be pissed at you if you k**l the judge's son." "Have you thought about when you'll start training? All of the students are eager to see what you've got-honestly, I'm a bit curious too." Cassidy smiled sheepishly. "I've been wanting to get back into training. Even though I can't shift, it's a nice energy outlet." Breyona replied, not at all opposed to the idea. I thought about it for a few moments. My schedule was already hectic, but Breyona was right. We had enough stress in our lives to not take advantage of every healthy outlet available. "How about we start tomorrow?" I asked her.

"I can't wait!" Cassidy cheered but paused mid-celebration when a couple girls called her name. She held a finger up and turned to Breyona and me. "I'll text you both the time and location of the class. See you tomorrow!" Asher and grandma were already at the car, engrossed in a conversation. I didn't have the chance to eavesdrop "Hey, Luna Lola!" Lar's jogged up to us, his messy hair even more windblown when he finally came to a stop. He was wearing his usual leather jacket t-shirt combo and gave Breyona a look that instantly made her eyes narrow. "Saw you talking with Cassidy, but then I noticed your friend here." "Her

friend here has a mate." Breyona replied dryly, pointing to the mark on her neck that was exposed by the off[1]shoulder design of her top. "Honest mistake." He raised his hands in surrender, not at all fazed by Breyona's glare. "

Was there something you needed, Lars?" I asked him, wondering why he tracked me down when we've barely spoken more than fifteen words to each other. I had gotten to know him well enough at the coffee shop and wasn't interested in his idea of friendship. "Yeah, actually.

Some friends of mine are throwing a party this weekend for summer break. Goal is to make it the biggest of the year, bigger than Devin's twenty-first at his dad's lake house." Lar's rolled his eyes, "...if I got the Alpha and Luna to show, everyone in the pack would be fighting for an invite." I was going to answer him, but then I glanced down. The world around me spun until the sun faded and the clouds vanished. The scent of pastries faded, replaced with that of wet soil and grass.

Stars speckled the sky, and the University courtyard melted into a winding backroad surrounded by dense pine trees. A pair of scuffed black boots was the last thing I saw before pain and darkness had claimed me-the same black boots Lar's was wearing.