

Alpha Asher by Jane Doe Chapter 157

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Read Alpha Asher by Jane Doe Chapter 157 – On the bright side, Asher was no longer snarling and frothing out the mouth. The only caveat was that my fickle magic hadn't taken away the rest of his anger, because without an explanation or apology, he turned around and grabbed Clint by the shirt a second time.

The battered but slowly healing Judge was thrown to his knees just a few feet in front of me. Even though his face was a mottled and swollen mass of flesh, he managed to hold onto the air of superiority that clung to him. Its strength surpassed that of the scent of blood, and was stronger than the expensive cologne he wore, that even now I could smell.

“Apologize to your Luna.”

When Asher spoke his voice resembled the endless pit I had seen in his eyes, the very one I somehow chased away using magic. His hair wasn't even disheveled from the fight—his heart rate barely elevated. His spine was made of pure steel, as rigid and unbreakable as his stance.

Clint Armstrong sucked in a deep, shaky breath and spat a wad of saliva and blood at my feet.

Before Maya could snarl in outrage, Asher moved. Without an ounce of hesitation he turned crushed his knee into Clint's nose. I remained stoic even though the sound of Clint's nose shattering made me want to cringe. Even when fresh blood splattered across the tops of my white shoes, I remembered my title and who I was to these people.

I'd always be a warrior—a protector, but the honor of being Luna came first. I couldn't openly challenge Asher, not in this way and certainly not after Clint disrespected me so badly, but I couldn't let him m****r the man either. No matter how inexcusable Clint's actions were, he had just lost his only son.

“I'm sorry.” He said through gritted teeth stained red with blood, eyes glittering with hate.

The crimson liquid ran down his nose, which was now bent at an odd angle and lightly swollen.

“Mean it.” Asher snarled, glowering down at him. He bent down to Clint's level and tilted his head when the older werewolf flinched. “...and use her title.”

I could feel Asher was nearing that dark place I had pulled him from and sent my thoughts careening into the middle-aged wolf's mind. His pain was the soul-deep kind that came with losing a child, even though Cassidy let it slip he and Devin

rarely spoke. Only when Devin needed something or had gotten himself into trouble did he call on his father-not that Clint minded since he was often busy with work.

There was nothing on my face that would give me away as I snarled at the man knelt before me, seconds away from what was becoming his e*****n.

'For f***s sake, Clint. You can't get vengeance or whatever it is you're after if you're d**d. You went to Law school, which means you're most likely a good liar. Just apologize and mean it before he kills you.'

Clint took a staggering breath and let out a nasty cough. The whites of his eyes were tinted red from his blood. They were wide with fear, absent of the hate and rage that had previously poured from their depths.

"I'm-I'm sorry, Luna...what I did was inexcusable. My son..." He stammered; his voice gritty with emotion. "I was so angry and upset...I-I should've never spread those lies about you."

Oh, he was good.

If it weren't for the persistent feeling in my gut, I would've never known he were lying.

Asher stared at him for a long moment, and finally acting on that sense of self-preservation, Clint avoided making eye contact.

"It's you he disrespected, and it's you who should decide his fate." He said, eyes swiveling to my face. They were a warm chocolate brown, which wasn't close enough to his honey shade to ease my worries over a spontaneous decision to k**l Clint.

I kept my stare pinned on Clint's slowly healing face, counting the seconds as his bruises faded from purple to yellow.

Without another word to the man who caused irreparable damage by feeding the media a false story, or my stoic mate who could taste every fiber of my anger and matched it with his own, I turned on my heel and walked in the direction of the porch steps.

A near silent but relieved sigh sounded from Clint's direction.

'We need to talk.' I forced my way into Asher's head, fueled by rage and what could've easily been a pinch of magic. There was no keeping my voice calm as I shoved the words into the deepest recesses of his thoughts. 'Now.'

I didn't break my stride as I climbed the stairs and nodded at a stone-faced Zeke.

The thump of his feet hitting the stairs could be heard before he called out to the small crowd. "Alright, everybody. You're all free to go, enjoy the next three days off."

The last thing I saw before calmly pulling open the back door to Town Hall was Zeke slinging a partially unconscious Judge over his shoulder.

If I had waited for Asher to follow instead of using his scent trail to locate his office, I would've never been able to keep myself from spewing all the things churning in my mind.

"What are you doing?" Asher's rough voice filled the space behind me, and I whirled to find him standing across the room.

Glancing one last time out the window, I watched as the larger crowd out front began to disperse. The metal curtain rings scratched against the rod as I flung them shut and grunted, "...making sure no one can hear us."

"This office is soundproof."

"Of course it is." I scoffed under my breath, and slowly turned around to face my mate.

He stood in front of the door, but as I met his eyes he crossed the room and headed for the executive desk covered in paperwork. The calm way he lowered himself into the chair sent a rush of anger straight to my head.

"What...was...that?" I asked him slowly, using what little restraint I had to keep myself from storming over to his desk and throwing the single guest chair at his head.

Did he expect me to sit on the other side and speak to him like I were nothing more than a disgruntled pack member? There wasn't a chance in h**l that was going to happen.

I abandoned my spot by the window and walked over to his desk slowly, stalking him like a wolf would her prey. His eyes narrowed as he read the challenge in my movements, but he remained seated, even as I came to a stop on the other side.

Rather than lower myself into the chair like a good Luna and mate would do, I placed my palms flat on the desk and towered over him.

"His son's d***h-" Asher began, but my anger quickly won out and put an end to his empty explanation.

"His son didn't just d*e, Asher. He was brutally m*****d, and Clint thinks I'm the one who did it. How else do you expect him to respond?" I snapped, and the feeling of splintered wood beneath my fingers let me know my nails had been elongating.

Asher didn't fumble for an answer and replied without paused, "With respect. Above anything else, you are his Luna first."

"You can't expect him to follow me if he thinks I m*****d his son. If I were to d*e and my dad did something like this because he blamed you, would you k**l him too?" I asked sharply.

"That's different." His expression darkened, morphing his irises from the color of fresh soil to pitch-black waters.

"Is it?"

"Is it?" He repeated, eyebrows inching closer together. "Do you understand the problems this could cause? The problems it's already caused?"

Without waiting for a response, he pulled a copy of today's newspaper out and set it on the desk. Only when silence enveloped us did I break eye contact and look down. The front page looked the same with its four columns and two blown up photographs both starring yours truly. When I looked back up, my face was blank.

Asher narrowed his eyes into slits and asked, "Have you even read it?"

It was the weird sense of awareness that often appeared within the pits of my stomach that alerted me to the change within Asher. His eyes unfocussed, making his pupils widen and shrink. Rather than seeing only my face, his vision expanded to take in what I was wearing -or rather, what I wasn't.

Dashing upstairs to change when Asher was in the process of shortening Clint Armstrong's life hadn't been a priority at the time, so I had no choice but to try and assert myself wearing nothing more than a lace camisole and pair of cotton shorts that could easily double as underwear.

On my feet were a pair of sandals I snatched from Cassidy's car, but I'd trade them in a heartbeat for a bra. The imprint my n*****s made against the thin fabric of my top no longer went unnoticed, and I watched as his aggression gave way to another hunger of sorts.

'The shift wasn't on a physical level, but I couldn't help but feel as though Asher wasn't entirely in control of the reins anymore.

I pursed my lips and tried to bide time, but each passing second alluded to the truth. Deep within my head, I could feel the roar of my instincts as they instructed me to lie.

Maya's ears twitched and she muttered, "...are you getting the overwhelming urge to run right now?"

Choosing to ignore her and the ever-increasing sound of alarm bells in my head, I replied with a resounding, "sure have."

Asher didn't so much as blink as he stared me down, eyes dark enough to s*****w his pupil whole. The silence he began to d***n me in was thick with sense of foreboding, so strong that I was helpless to stop myself as I made a wild dash for the door.

The sound of scattering papers filled the air only half a second after he leapt over the desk. A single fleeting moment was all I had before the heat and roughness of his body descended upon mine.

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Asher didn't smirk, nor was he gentle when he pulled my head back by the long strands of my hair. The pain that crackled across my scalp was mixed with something almost pleasurable, and I fought as it stoked the glowing embers that warmed in my core.

“If you want me off, then remove me. Even back then you were able to do it, weren't you?” His laugh was deep and the sound of it strengthened the sparks that caressed my skin, but rather than humor it held hunger.

My face heated and refusing to take his bait, I bit back my snarl.

“Were you even trying to get away, Lola?” He tilted his head as he asked and leaned in to run his nose along the underside of my jaw. As I heard his soft inhale, a shudder rolled down my body. “...because from the scent I'm picking up, you're exactly where you want to be.”

An almost painful throb began between my legs, and Asher's eyes darted down as though he could feel it himself.

“Asher, we need to talk about this.” I said through clenched teeth.

“Where are your clothes?” He asked, and from the soft tone his voice had taken on, I knew nothing I said would deter him.

“You were about to k**l someone; I didn't exactly care about my outfit at the time. Would you rather me have put on a sundress? Or maybe a pair of boots to protect me from the blood splatter.”

It might've not been the best idea to catch an attitude with an Alpha halfway off the rails, but I'd always been impulsive.

Looking back, I expected him to force me onto my knees or tear my clothes off—both of which I would've given into, but Asher had something different in mind. I bit back a yelp when he pulled me away from the wall and into his chest. From the heat in his eyes, I could tell a reaction was what he wanted and as much as it pained me to do the opposite, I was nothing if not horribly stubborn.

Rather than fight against his hold I gave into it and followed him as he both forced and guided me back to the massive executive desk. Asher paid no mind as we trampled the papers that littered the floor and reclaimed his seat in the leather chair.

His iron grip on my hips warned me to remain where I stood in between his legs but were also loose enough that I could break through them if I actually wanted to—which he knew all too well that I did. Both Maya and my instincts told me to kick his a*s, but I knew this would grate on his nerves more.

“Do you remember what happened last time I caught you half-naked?”

Lightning fast my mind darted back to what felt like years ago but had really only been months. I still had the imprint of his hand on my a*s, only it was in my memory rather than on skin.

The second I opened my mouth to answer he pulled me onto his lap and tore the shorts I wore off my body. One quick tear and my bottom was exposed, prickling with goosebumps from the sudden rush of chilly air.

I snarled as I felt him harden beneath my stomach, enraged from his choice of punishment but also thrumming from his reaction to me. A satisfied noise came from his mouth when he ran a hand over my soft skin, though I wasn't sure he heard it himself. I felt the absence of his hand and closed my eyes in time to feel his e*****n grind against me, followed by a swift and heavy smack.

Stars, bright and full, danced behind my eyes and a hiss curled from between my teeth. A second quickly followed, this one sharper than the first and its effect even stronger. By the fifth I had to clench my legs together to ignore the throb that pulsed between them, which Asher realized and quickly put an end to.

With each smack his e*****n seemed to grow harder, until it was almost painful against my abdomen. Anger flared alongside arousal, becoming stronger the longer I found myself drowning in pain and pleasure.

I was being punished for something I didn't do—for something that didn't even matter.

The only thing within reach was his t***h, which I promptly dug my nails into after making sure the tips were nice and sharp. What was better than the feel of his muscle beneath my hands was the way he jumped and let out a wolfish snarl from the sudden pain.

The mouth-watering scent of his blood filled my nose, making my head swim and mouth water. Both rich and tart like chocolate covered cherries, only there was

an undertone of something dark and powerful that made my entire body sing with strength. Only one time had I tasted his blood, when he sliced his hand cooking and that was well over a month ago. Four hours he fucked me, so ravenous with need that I hadn't again dared taste his blood. It had been too intense, too soul shattering.

"You couldn't be obedient even if you tried." He chuckled lightly, his hand trailing along the tender swell of my a*s. "It's what makes you perfect, Lola. Your heart is pure, and your will is indestructible."

Even now I couldn't tell if Asher remembered the way he begged for me to take more—to sink my teeth into his neck and feel the explosion of salty sweat mixed with the dark allure of his blood, but I knew it was something I'd never forget. Not once was I asked to draw his blood, to coax it from his veins with my teeth so I swallowed the urge when it popped up, but now-now I knew he'd been waiting for me to make the first move.

I whimpered from anticipation alone and turned my head far enough to latch onto one of the healing wounds.

"Don't you f*****g dare—" He began, but the moment my teeth broke skin his voice dropped, and his words were replaced with a pained groan.

A feeling not unlike the sparks that raced across my skin began to fill my body. It tinted my thoughts in a haze of pleasure so strong that every caress Asher made to my bottom brought me closer to o****m—and farther from the realization that there was something off about the taste of his blood.

No longer was he spanking me, but each swipe he made drifted closer to my center, until his fingers grazed the wetness that had long seeped past my swollen lips. When he dragged them along my c**t making my entire body convulse, I flicked my tongue against the wound I created and listened as Asher's head hit the back of the chair and a long string of curses left his mouth.

"...can't take this anymore." He murmured and palmed my a*s one last time before setting me on my feet.

Flecks of gold danced in his eyes as he stared down at me, removing his slacks without looking away. Even though blood was smeared across my mouth, Asher showed no hesitation as he lifted me into his arms and smashed his lips against my own. I barely registered it when my hands snaked up to his head, my fingers entangling themselves in his hair as I pulled him closer and deepened the kiss.

He lowered himself into the leather chair, his hands on my hips as he pulled me onto his lap. When the steel-hard length of his c**k slid between my folds and a groan rose from his mouth, I took that moment to sink my teeth into his lower lip.

Warm waves of the hypnotic substance flowed into my mouth. Asher's fingers dug into my hips as he thrustured roughly, cursing under his breath as he grinded the head of his c**k into my c**t. His hands drifted down to cup my a*s, pinning

me against him as he thrust his shaft past my swollen lips. He moved his hips in long strokes that made my core ache, until my eyes rolled, and I released my hold on his lower lip to let out a blissful scream.

The heat and pleasure of both Asher's body and blood sent a flash of light to my eyes, blinding me from its intensity just like last time.

"That's it baby...f**k, you did so good." Asher murmured softly; his voice so full of awe I fought harder to blink back the spots that danced in my eyes.

The ledge of the desk was at my back, keeping me propped up as I straddled Asher's lap. Something wet and warm encompassed my nipple, flicking it lightly before being replaced by the sharpness of teeth. They grazed against the sensitive nerve endings, then soothed the pain with gentle, lavishing strokes. Meanwhile I could feel the swollen head of Asher's c**k pressing at my entrance and fell forward when it began to slip inside.

There was no stopping myself from begging, not when he controlled this agonizingly slow pace.

"I need more. Please, Asher...it's so slow it hurts." I whimpered, finally able to see Asher's face and the need that kept his eyes continuously roaming, soaking in every sight and sound as my p***y clenched around his shaft.

This time it was his eyes that rolled, and when they opened a flash of gold surfaced from their depths. Before I had the chance to admire them, he thrust his hips upwards and pulled me onto his lap, sinking his shaft the rest of the way in. A tiny burst of light danced behind my eyes as my c**t ground into him but was replaced with a firework show when he started f*****g me like a mad man.

"...so perfect, and all f*****g mine..." He snarled, grinding himself into me in a way he knew would make me ravenous. I was awarded with a string of praises when I snarled and dug my nails into his shoulders. "...that's it, take what you need from me...whatever you need."

I couldn't recall the reason for my hesitation earlier, nor did I notice how strong the odd taste in Asher's blood was when I sought out the shimmering mark on his neck and sunk my teeth deep into its surface.

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Hours later I could still hear his roar in my ears, trickling down my spine in wave after wave of crippling pleasure. His face was painted in my head, eyes black with need and jaw carved from stone even though the promises he whispered were soft and sweet.

It played in the background of my mind and along the swollen, tender bits of my skin as Rowena's delicate voice threaded words together in small notes of conversation.

"I'm not sensing any magic attached to him." She said with an encroaching frown, her lips painted in a new shade of lipstick-one with a nude undertone that reminded me of a caramel latte. Her dainty hands moved swiftly, weaving around one another in a graceful dance that was made mysterious by the jade glow they emitted. A scowl coated Asher's face in harsh lines and angles when she dropped them abruptly. "...just a great deal of stress, and quite a bit of anger." As I thought he would, Asher stood from the leather chair the moment a wilting note of sympathy laced itself within Rowena's voice. "With the pressure you're both under, no one can blame either one of you for acting swiftly. You're both so young, with such little time to enjoy it."

The stubble across his jawline rippled from the tensing of his muscles as he grunted, "There will be plenty of time to enjoy youth once the people murdering our pack members are brought to light."

"Yes...well, with that attitude you're bound to succeed." She replied, aiming a tight-lipped frown in his direction. It mirrored one a teacher might make when an unruly child spoke out of turn. Her eyes, the same jade green as the treetops outside, slid over the stony expression on my face and stalled. "Will I still be seeing you at training today, Lola?"

"She'll be there." Asher answered first, his voice curt and attention placed solely on me even though the witch he replied to was standing a few feet to his left.

I didn't break my stare from his, and instead listened to the ominous beat our hearts made, counting each note until Rowena cleared her throat and said, "I'll leave you both to talk, then..."

"You've gone fully insane if you think I'm letting you out of my sight." I told him only after the thud of the heavy office door swinging shut faded from our ears.

My words hung in the air between us and were much truer than either of us could've known.

As his eyes narrowed and head tilted, I shifted on my feet and nearly bumped into the bar cart and coffee maker I stood beside-both of which I knew were unused because Asher didn't drink coffee.

"I may be called insane in tomorrow's papers, but what this article is calling you is much worse." Both his baritone and the tiny ink of the newspaper clipping traveled the short distance to pelt me with the truth. He spun the page around and stopped it with a finger. "I'll spare you the specifics, so you'll still be surprised once you read it yourself, but it paints a pretty little picture of your life this past year. Tyler's birthday, returning home, meeting me, the murders. The wolf that wrote this, the web of lies that they've spun-It's more than convincing. It's already begun to turn heads, and not just ones in our pack."

"Whose, then?" I asked and instantly regretted it when his fists clenched, and irritation flashed within the pits of his eyes.

His laugh was as dry as the air I sucked into my lungs, swirling with dust particles that made my throat constrict.

“The ones surrounding ours know, and the news is spreading by the hour. Within a month every pack in the world will know someone else’s version of your story. They’ll have more reason than ever to hate you and every witch or vampire they stumble across.” His eyes softened at the sudden rush of my fear, but he didn’t move from where he stood. I wasn’t sure my stomach could plummet any further, but as always Asher lived to prove me wrong. I could practically taste the wicked promise on his tongue when he said, “I wish I could tell you that were it, but it’s not. Our old friend Alpha Bran...he’s already campaigning against you.”

~

‘You’re joking.’ Cassidy hissed, narrowing her eyes in a way that reminded me of Breyona.

I had mind linked my best-friend during the fifteen-minute drive to the training center and told her everything that happened after our peaceful morning turned tumultuous.

Part of me needed a second opinion on what happened with Asher, while the other side wanted to shove his vicious glassy-eyed stare deep within the depths of my mind, buried so deep I’d never have to hear the empty tone of his voice again.

Half an hour later I found myself sitting beside Cassidy, stretching on the padded mats that lined the classroom we met in every weekday for training. With over a dozen other students doing warm-ups around us, talking wasn’t an option.

‘I wish I were joking.’ I sighed out loud, leaning forwards to touch my toes. Cassidy followed my movements and together we stared at the floor, our ponytails grazing the sweaty, bloodstained mat. ‘I mean you saw him. He was...he was feral or something. How does that just happen to someone?’

‘...maybe it is an Alpha thing.’ Cassidy’s baby blues were reluctant as they flitted over to meet my own. When I turned my head in her direction and the b**n in my muscles faded into static, she swallowed and quickly explained. ‘What I mean is there’s still a lot we don’t know about Alpha’s. They’re stronger, faster...they have bigger wolves. We know they have rage and possessiveness down to a science, but maybe this is what happens when an Alpha gets overwhelmed...’

‘You don’t seem convinced of that, and you’re the one that’s known him his entire life.’ I pointed out the obvious, returning to a standing position in time for Emilia to begin today’s lesson.

Even though this was the second time I’d seen her sweep into the room and claim the attention of every student, the awe that followed hadn’t lessened.

There was something incredibly feminine about her delicate eyebrows and slender nose. Even her wide-set mouth and plump lips were symmetrical and

gave her a softness one wouldn't associate with a warrior. Those qualities paired with her rippling muscles and broad shoulders highlighted her unique form of beauty.

"Alright, class. I know we're all a bit amped from what happened to Devin Armstrong—and may he rest in peace, but this is when we need to settle down and focus. You're here to learn how to defend yourself, to master your weaknesses and turn them into strengths. That, my students is how you stay alive."

Emilia walked the length of the room, eyeing us like we were soldiers prepping to step onto the battlefield. Her soprano voice bounced off the brick walls, sharp like the commands of a general at war.

I was immediately grateful she hadn't taken a side, unlike some of the students in the room who felt the need to tell me they supported Clint Armstrong and the mess he had made.

As her speech came to its conclusion, she came to a stop at the center of the room. For a moment she stood there, hands clasped behind her back as she stared us all down. More than half the wolves began to shift on their feet, averting their eyes in favor of the floor, ceiling, or their athletic shoes.

Even Cassidy's jaw began to clench, but I knew from the stubbornness written across her face that she'd never submit to Emilia.

It was my position in this pack which made staring into her champagne tinted eyes all too easy.

"How many of you know the ten core fundamentals to Krav Maga?" Emilia asked, holding my stare as though she were waiting for me to raise my hand.

No one else in the room responded, except for Cassidy who let out a disgruntled huff under her breath. As my hand inched into the air and the curious and condemning eyes of the other students fell on my face, I felt a rush of Maya's stubborn strength fill my bones.

"Luna, if you'd be kind enough to tell us the first three..." Emilia said, gesturing to the room to show that everyone was waiting for me to speak.

I stepped forwards and met the eyes of the students staring me down, the word 'm*****r' written across the tense muscles in their faces.

"The first is to aim for your opponents' weak points." I said loudly, plastering my attention on a she-wolf who at the beginning of class felt the need to snarl the word traitor as I walked into the room. My words were directed at her and her alone. "Shifting weight to a particular side could mean a childhood injury that didn't heal correctly." Without waiting for the blood to rush to her face and embarrassment to claim her features I pivoted my head in the direction of another student, this one a muscular guy who promised I'd receive my comeuppance soon enough. "The second and third go hand in hand. Quick and

powerful responses are what will save you in battle. You have to be ready for the situation to go from 0 to 100...but strength will only get you so far. Speed and technique are crucial. They'll win you any fight, no matter how big the meathead you're up against is."

One by one I ran through them all, using each fundamental to pick apart the weaknesses of the students who decided to stand against me and Asher.

As I recited each one by memory, courtesy of Chris who pummeled me into the dirt until they were etched into the back of my skull, Emilia's smile seemed to widen.

"Wonderful." She exhaled, speaking only after I'd finished shaming half the class. If she noticed their embarrassment and anger she didn't let on. Her eyes darted from face to face, "...now that is a warrior. Someone who not only memorizes every single aspect of a fighting form, but also uses those moves in a way that turns them into art-into a dance where one lives and the other dies." Once she finished making the rounds, her attention returned to me. "Luna, would you mind sparring with me? I'd like to give the class a demonstration of a few of those fundamentals."

"Of course." I replied instantly and without a hint of hesitation.

'...good luck, she punches hard.' Cassidy's voice trickled into my head, and I glanced back to see her eyebrows furrowed and lips pursed in the direction of our trainer.

I made sure to take my time approaching, using those valuable seconds to scan Emilia from head to toe. Her widening grin told me she knew what I was doing and was thrilled to see me respond accordingly. As I watched her walk a few feet to her left, I noted no imperfections in her long stride nor in the way she bounced on the b***s of her feet.

'This might actually be challenging...' Maya murmured, impressed even though we'd yet to begin.

"Can anyone here tell me what our Luna just did?" Emilia asked the class once I stood at her side. When no one raised their hands she continued, "She sized me up and took in my movements, posture, and the way I distribute my weight. This is what a warrior does. They see the fight in their head before it even begins, and that way they'll always be prepared."

"The man who trained me always said preparing is half the victory." I said both to Emilia and the class, thinking back to simple days in Grandma's cottage, where training with Chris was the most strenuous thing I had to deal with.

Emilia's eyes twinkled pleasantly when she asked, "And what is the other half, Luna?"

"The other half is earned." I told her, this time turning away from the class to stare into the eyes of the she-wolf Cassidy claimed long ago tried to win Asher

over. There was no malice I could detect whether it be with my eyes or what strange sense unlocking my magic had given me. Either way, right now she was an opponent. With that reminder swirling in my head, I squared my shoulders and sank into my fighting stance. "Through blood and sweat, it is earned."

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The moment her fist connected with my shoulder; I knew Cassidy hadn't been exaggerating.

Emilia punched hard, like MMA level hard. Not only was she strong, but she was fast too. She came at me without warning, without shifting into a stance that let me know the battle had begun. She had hoped to catch me off guard, but Chris had skinned my hide too many times for me to make that mistake again.

His method of keeping me on my toes came in the form of sneaking through my window in the d**d of night. If I weren't on my feet the second the window cracked open, I'd quickly find myself groaning on the floor with the taste of blood in my mouth.

His methods weren't humane by any means, but they worked.

Boy, did they work.

I used my small stature to weave in and out of her blows, a partner in a painful dance that would surely leave me black and blue.

If I weren't a Luna or a Vampire, I might've lost this fight. That being said, my positions gave me power and speed, both of which I used in abundance just to remain on my feet.

"You see how she's not letting me knock her off balance..." Emilia shouted to the class who watched with overflowing interest despite the thick silence that enveloped the room. "If you fall in battle, you have seconds—seconds to act before your mistake becomes f***l."

To prove her point, Emilia let me knock her to the ground. In a move that I would've done if the roles had been reversed, she kicked out with her long legs and managed to clip my ankle in the process. My legs buckled from the sharp pain that danced up my tendons and bone, but a quick roll to the side followed by a few sharp jabs kept me advancing forwards.

What ended our match was a sharp whistle that exploded from the back of the room.

I barely noticed it. The shrill sound couldn't reach me, not while this sea of adrenaline churned in my head, its frigid waters bursting with every technique, move, and tip I'd learned from Chris.

When Emilia faltered mid punch and I managed to land a crushing kick to the side of her ribcage, I knew the whistle hadn't been intended for me. The warrior, whose prowess I actually found myself admiring fell to the ground. She recovered quickly, with speed I found impressive despite the fact that I was faster.

Before she could make it to her feet, my foot was at her throat. I kept it there, hovering above her pulse point, feeling the faint thud hit the millimeter of air between us.

I could've used this moment to assert myself, to land a final blow that would prove to these wolves that I wasn't one to be messed with, but it was Emilia's eyes that halted the idea in its tracks. They stared up at me with pride, but also just a hint of fear.

It was that fear that made me lower my foot and extend a hand.

"That trainer of yours...if he wants a job here, he's got it." Emilia said through heavy breaths, smiling as she wiped the sweat from her forehead. The expression soured as she turned to glare daggers at the class. Even I had to repress the urge to flinch at the ferocity in her voice. "Who did that?"

For far too long the class stood in silence, most of them cowering under her heavy stare. I noticed quickly that Cassidy wasn't one of them, and Emilia seemed to notice as well because her eyes darkened to a muddy brown when they registered her face and tense posture.

Cassidy took a step forward and Emilia's mouth opened, but the high-pitched bleating of a cellphone rang out instead of her voice.

"Apologies, I'm afraid I have to take this." Emilia murmured to the glass, though her eyes remained on my tanned, narrow eyed friend.

She slipped from the room without another word, her shrill ringtone fading as she walked down the hall.

"Way to kick some a*s, Luna!" Cassidy cheered when I ventured back to her side. A snicker escaped her lips as she toyed with the end of her ponytail. "Goddess, what a cathartic experience. I've been waiting to see her get her a*s kicked for years now."

"You really don't like her, huh?" I kept my laugh light but couldn't help the way my head tilted with curiosity. Knowing she'd chew me out if I said this aloud, I slid into her thoughts and asked the question circling my brain. 'Were you the one that whistled at her?'

Cassidy's eyes twinkled mischievously, and within their depths I swore I saw something that reminded me of Chelsea.

'It was a bit harsh; I know...but you have no clue how much she has coming to her.' Her thoughts had a sour undertone that alerted me to how much she

disliked Emilia. With a quiet grunt she lowered herself to the floor and placed her back against the wall.

'She seems friendly and approachable...I can't help but wonder what she did to make you hate her so much.' I said truthfully, sitting down beside her as we waited for Emilia to return.

'Look...if I show you this, you can't tell anyone, got it? I mean, obviously people already know, but they don't speak about it because they're all weaklings who fear me...and rightfully so.' Cassidy huffed, gnawing on her lower lip until the pale pink of her skin turned red.

As she tucked the golden strands of her bangs behind her ear, a fuzzy image began to form in my head, one that was pulled from the depths of someone else's memory.

"Ugh, Cass wait up!" Brandon shouted, his voice a few octaves higher and his appearance almost ten years younger. His feet seemed to land in every single puddle, sending droplets of muddy water scattering into the air. They seeped into the white t-shirt he wore, but only made the grin on his face widen. It was one of playful joy and not the callous scowl I was used to seeing him wearing.

"Not a chance in h**l! Last time I was it for two weeks. You're not catching me anytime soon!" I heard Cassidy say, her laugh exuberant as it rang in the air like a symphony of delicate bells. I saw flashes of golden curls through the tall grass feet away. It swayed in the breeze, jostled by the light rain that continued to fall. "Only Asher can catch me! He's never it!"

"Asher's in Alpha training, Cass. You know he doesn't have time to play anymore." Brandon's little frown and furrowed brows squeezed at my heart hard enough for me to memorize the forlorn look that lasted on his face for only a few precious seconds.

"Well I'm not coming out until he catches me. He promised he would this time!" She shouted from deeper within the grass, her voice facing with each word tossed into the air.

Brandon groaned loudly and threw his hands in the air, "Fine! I'll get Asher, but you have to promise you won't sneak out while I'm gone. That's cheating, and cheating means you're automatically it."

"What?!" Cassidy squealed in h****r, "You just made that rule up!"

"Can't hear you anymore-walking away now, going to get Asher." Brandon shouted, cupping his hands around his lips as he backed away.

When his small form vanished behind a hill, I saw a pale face with bright blue eyes pop out of the grass. The cheeky grin belonged to Cassidy, though it was laced with the fading innocence of a child hitting their teenage years.

As she tip-toed out of the grass and headed in the direction opposite to where Brandon went, I realized she couldn't have been older than thirteen.

The scenery changed as she walked, her blue jeans darkening with each water droplet that landed on them. Even her paisley top, which looked adorable when paired with the dainty charm bracelet around her wrist, was changing colors from the rain.

Before long we stood in a small neighborhood, similar to the one Asher's parents lived in. Even in the rain, children crowded the sidewalks.

Bikes and scooters, sticks of melting chalk clutched in the hands of kids too young to partake in many other activities. They were everywhere, laughing and playing like there tomorrow would never come.

It breathed life into Cassidy's cheerful walk, which soon fizzled out when I heard Emilia's voice.

"You should've known better than to come back around here." Emilia said, appearing from the side of a pale-yellow house whose front porch was in the beginning stages of construction.

Even as a child her champagne eyes were bright and her voice a high soprano that reminded me of a robin's song. Those eyes of hers narrowed into little slits and her hands became fists that trembled at her sides.

"You don't own the neighborhood, d***y." Cassidy sneered, wiping away some of the ash blonde curls that clung to the sides of her wet face. "This is Asher's pack, and Asher is my friend!"

I hadn't a clue what happened before this, what events formed the snowball that grew and grew until it was an avalanche cresting down the side of a great mountain, ready to crush them all.

They were children, but the way they glared at one another reminded me of adults.

Emilia stomped over to Cassidy and grabbed a handful of her hair without warning, breaking out into a run that forced a scream from Cassidy's mouth. She had no choice but to follow and stumbled onto the sidewalk after Emilia.

The other children looked at the fight happening just feet away on the sidewalk where so many of them played. Some pointed, others laughed and taunted Cassidy, who quickly found herself on the pavement.

Emilia leaned down to whisper something in Cassidy's ear when the memory came to an end.

Even though I was floating back to the present, I could still taste the rain on my tongue and could see the m****r that mixed with the embarrassment on young Cassidy's face.

I blinked a few times, pawing at my eyes when they began to water from the artificial light. Cassidy's face came into focus, slender and much more angular than it had been all those years ago, though her expression was exactly the same.

Rage and embarrassment.

'Looks like Asher wasn't kidding when he said she doesn't handle embarrassment well.' Maya murmured, flattening her ears against her skull.

'What is it she whispered in your ear?' I couldn't help but ask, feeling my curiosity expand in my chest like a bubble ready to pop.

The door opened with a slight creak and Emilia stepped back inside. In that same moment, Cassidy gave her a feverish glare and sent her answer rushing down the mind-link, so fast that the words rattled around in my head before rearranging themselves.

'She told me he wouldn't be my friend for long, not once she got her hands on him...she promised she'd make sure he knew just how ugly and disgusting I actually was.'

The way she said it struck me as odd. There was no emotion in her voice, no burst of rage turning her iris's a deep shade of blue. It wasn't the words Emilia said that stuck with her, that turned her anger into something more potent. It had been the embarrassment, the shame she felt when she was vulnerable and broken, teased by the cruel children who did nothing to help.

We didn't speak of the past for the rest of the lesson, and instead put every ounce of our focus into sparring. Once class was finished and every ounce of pent-up rage flowed from Cassidy's body and into the mats, we emerged out the set of double doors leading into the parking lot.

"Hey, I've got to get going. I'm getting all dolled up tonight to go out with Kendrick." Her lips tilted up in a silky smile that contained a double meaning I didn't miss.

After saying our goodbyes I readied myself to merge into the sea of students flooding the parking lot. It was Emilia's voice, oddly unchanged from her childhood, which gave me pause.

"Luna! Mind if I get a word?" She shouted above the chaos of the crowd, all of which were eager to get home and shower before continuing with the rest of their day.

For a moment I contemplated ignoring her, feigning ignorance as I vanished within the throng of people.

It was a tugging in my gut, a feeling of concreteness that made me turn around and wait for her to catch up.

"You were beyond impressive back there, really. If you weren't Luna I'd offer you a position, effective tomorrow." Emilia put every ounce of emotion into her laugh, which was warm and effortless despite the cruelty I saw on her child-like face. She pulled a small pin from her hair and sent the tiny ringlets spiraling down her shoulders. "I was serious about hiring that trainer of yours, though. You think he might be interested?"

"Mmm, he's a bit of a...recluse." I cringed at the word I used, knowing Chris would kick me into next week if he heard me saying such a thing. He didn't like it when I brought up his general hatred of other people, even less so when I attached words like recluse, hermit, or loner. Seeing the disappointment form on her face and the light leave her eyes made me stumble for a solution. "I can't promise anything...but I can try to get a hold of him, at least to relay the offer."

"Yes! Oh, I can't thank you enough. Tell him benefits are included along with pension and retirement. We can work out his salary if he agrees." She nodded eagerly, but her excitement was short lived.

A student with bleach-blonde hair passed by, and the cheerfulness on Emilia's face dropped. Even though the girl's roots were a deep shade of brown, I knew it was Cassidy she reminded her of.

"During class did you see who whistled?" Emilia asked quietly, her eyes scanning the parking lot as the grim expression on her face darkened. It didn't appear from out of nowhere, but instead seemed to resurface from somewhere deep within. With lips pressed into a thin line and reluctance hardening the softness of her face she asked, "...was it Cassidy who did it?"

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. There was this twisting in my gut that felt right and wrong all at once, like a storm of knives and butterflies that refused to cease. It yanked me in Emilia's direction, only to send me spiraling in Cassidy's.

Even with that torn shred of the past, I had no clue who to trust.

Unfortunately, my hesitation was answer enough.

Emilia nodded her head, and the bleak understanding in her eyes made an apology float past my lips.

"Don't apologize, Luna. I know it wasn't your fault." She shook her head gently, her lips twitching at my surprise. "You probably don't remember me, but I was one of the warriors that came to help when your father attacked your old pack. I k****d a lot of Vampire's that day, and each one haunts me the moment the sun goes down. Corey, my mate, he's a good guy. Keeps me safe from what demons he can, even though it'll never be enough to save me. On that battlefield, I realized something. The Vampire's, they're just like us. Hating, loving, fighting each day to survive and make something of themselves. Seeing them as monsters,

it makes us no better than the humans that call us beasts. You were the first to see that. It's why I support you, Luna...and why I always will." Her eyes darkened into that muddy brown as a shadow of a memory ghosted across her face, "It's also why I'm going to take the risk and warn you, knowing it could be my job or life on the line if you don't like what I'm about to say..."

"You don't have to worry about your job...or your life." I swallowed and tightened my grip on the water bottle in my hands, even though it would do nothing to soothe my dry throat.

"I appreciate the reassurance, Luna...and I do hope you listen when I say this." Emilia murmured, her voice quiet and eyes guarded as they scanned the space above my head, far into the parking lot where students still milled about. "I've done things in my past, stuff I'm not proud of but I'm no longer that kind of she-wolf. People change every day, but Cassidy-she isn't one of them. I'm not telling you to not be her friend, but just keep what I'm telling you in mind. She can be charming and nice...until she isn't anymore."