

Alpha Asher Novel [by Jane Doe] Chapter 162

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“Congratulations on completing your first spell.” Cordelia’s smile was small, hiding something I couldn’t quite place. “How does it feel to call on your magic and have it respond?”

It was moonlight alone that allowed me to see her delicate features from where she sat on the patio chairs. The leather chords around her neck were dark, but the silver charms that dangled from them glittered merrily.

A frown ghosted across my face and disappointment filled my bones. “I—I didn’t do that correctly, did I?”

“Not at all, but you tried, and your magic did respond.” She replied, patting the seat beside her when my sour expression deepened.

“Come sit with me before we go inside and sort this out.”

“Everything alright out here?” Rowena’s flowery voice trickled through the small opening in the sliding glass door.

“We’re fine, just a bit of sigil magic gone awry.” Cordelia shouted back, but kept her eyes locked on my face. A slight twisting sensation in the pits of my stomach told me something was going on with the two witches. Rather than ask, I sank into the seat I once occupied and waited for her to speak. “Now, tell me. What did you do wrong?” | I skimmed the spell again and again until heat flooded my face and neck, followed by the embarrassment of missing something so blatantly obvious.

“I was supposed to paint the sigil on myself, not the porch.” I mumbled, closing the spell book, and peering down at its leather cover.

Cordelia’s hand on my shoulder was meant to reassure, but before she could speak the words Rowena’s voice floated outside a second time. “Cordelia, could I have a word with you?” This time a head of auburn hair appeared from the darkness of the living room, barely visible beneath the moonlight.

Rowena wasn’t able to see her agitated expression, but I could. The gnashed eyebrows and pursed lips were off putting on a face as kind as Cordelia’s, and for the second time tonight my stomach twisted with the feeling that something was amiss.

When the backdoor slid shut behind her and the sound of their muffled voices faded, I turned my attention to the box of supplies she’d handed me.

Within the mix of half-burnt candles, herbs, and oils was an old mirror. Other than being chipped at the corner, it was in decent enough condition. “That’s why the mirror was in there.” I snorted incredulously, pinching the bridge of my nose when a chilling sensation danced up my spine. Deep within the forest, I could feel them watching. The shadows were still keeping their distance, hiding from me after giving Breyona back her wolf. It didn’t matter how many times I asked why, there wasn’t a single whisper tossed in my direction. Rather than succumb to the anger that sprouted when they refused to answer my questions, I began flitting through the stack of spell books Cordelia left outside.

There was one in particular that caught my attention, mostly because of its cover. It was made from a pitch-black leather with an odd

texture I'd never felt before. Each individual page was lined in silver so that they caught the light each time I turned to a new one.

Just as I found the first spell in the book, and realized what type of magic this one depicted, Cordelia was taking it from my hands and snapping it shut.

“Oh, no you don't.” She shook her head much like Grandma did when she caught me gearing up to steal one of her sweets before dinner. “I can see the look on your face clear as day. You're not ready for something as complex as protection magic.”

Even Maya's attention was raised by the stirring of magic in our veins, coursing through our body and leaving little pinpricks in its wake. It rushed through us, flooding my head with chemicals even stronger than adrenaline. As it grew to a crescendo, I knew it wasn't coincidence I was drawn to that particular spell book.

For some unknown reason, I needed it.

Cordelia's eyes never left my face, even when my hands twitched with the urge to snatch the book from her. I bit back the intrusive thought, swallowing it along with my horror and surprise. There was a part of me ready and willing to tear it from her hands, no matter the cost. I wanted to stay far away from that side of myself, no matter how much I knew those spells could help.

The older and much more experienced witch could tell I was fighting an internal battle and captured my attention by clearing her throat.

“If you'd like to come inside, I believe Rowena is ready for you.” She said, her voice firm but not unkind.

Rowena was, in fact, not ready for me though I wasn't going to openly question Cordelia on that. Instead, I turned my attention to the dozens of pillared candles scattered around the living room. On the living room table was the great leather-bound book I started reading my first day of training. I'd learned what Sigil magic was, along with Natural and a hint of Divination. Before I could swipe it off the table and get to reading Rowena appeared around the corner, heading from the kitchen where Grandma's humming could be heard. There was a tension within her delicate notes that gave me pause.

"Is everything alright?" I questioned, craning my head to catch a glimpse of Grandma.

Rowena's auburn hair and flushed cheeks got in the way. "Of course everything's alright. There's an electrician on the way. I'm quite sure you blew the fuse box."

"I was referring to Grandma and..." I frowned, trailing off when I saw no sign of my dad's bulky frame. "Where's my dad at?"

"Out here!" I heard him shout and spun around to see the front door wide open with my dad standing just outside. Before I could ask him what he was doing, he nodded his head in Grandma's direction and grunted, "...don't look at me, look at the witch in the kitchen. She's the one that kicked me out."

For a second I thought he were referring to

Rowena, but then Grandma's voice snapped back.

"I wanted you out of my damn hair. You were hovering so close I could barely think."

Dad snorted and narrowed his eyes, sending his bushy eyebrows colliding into one another. “ Yeah, well you got what you wished for, didn’t you ?”

“No.” She tossed over her shoulder, “I can still hear you.”

A gust of wind tore through the house, promptly slamming the front door in Dad’s face.

“Well, wasn’t that convenient ?” Rowena said cheerfully, a glimmer of pride in her eyes as she glanced at Grandma. I had no choice but to follow as she shooed me back into the living room. “ Now, now. Don’t worry about your father, he’s perfectly fine. Your grandmother’s barred him from entering the house, it seems.”

“It’ll wear off in time.” Cordelia added, gathering the small stack of spell books in her arms before pausing at the stairs. There was a glimmer of light in her eyes that felt familiar yet foreign at the same time. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Lola.” Without so much as a nod in Rowena’s direction, she went upstairs and slipped into her bedroom. Rowena gave no notice, or at least she pretended not to. She didn’t need to glance in the direction of the stairs to tell me she too felt the tense air between them. Left with more questions than answers, I had no choice but to turn my focus to the large textbook propped on the table.

The next magical types in Rowena’s book were Divination and Elemental.

As I dove into the first paragraph, I found myself instantly missing my best-friend. Breyona had said if given the choice, she’d pick Divination as a magical skill. The further I read, the more I respected the subtle yet incredibly powerful magic form.

Fragments of the past and future were just within reach for the witches able to practice Divination. Most needed a reflective surface like a pool of water or even a crystal ball, but others more powerful need only sheer will and determination. Divination itself was incredibly accurate, but it was the future that could change on a whim. Where Divination itself was considered a passive form of magic, Elemental was its complete opposite.

The two women that had chased Brandon, Clara, and me through the streets came to mind, stirring up a feeling of dread that left me with a dry mouth. I could still feel the heat of her flames and hear the rage in her voice when she realized we managed to thwart them.

Clara had mentioned that Elementals were rare, coveted amongst witches to the point that they would send them off to be specially trained and raised by other Elementals. The entire thing felt wrong even back then.

The number of elements and the ways that they could be manipulated were near endless, varying in power from monstrous waves to small sprinklings of hail.

I'd been neck deep within the thick cut pages when I noticed grandma's small form flit from the kitchen and out the front door. In her hurry to take the plate of cookies in her hand outside, she'd left the front door cracked. Try as I might, I couldn't help but listen in on their hushed conversation.

“Anything? Anything at all?” Grandma asked, growing more urgent the longer Dad was silent.

“I'm not feeling much of anything...well, except for the usual pain.” He replied with a gravelly voice, noticeably rougher than usual.

Grandma slipped inside and closed the front door, her expression solemn as she shook her head at Rowena and darted back inside the kitchen. The clank of pots and pans rattling against one another drowned out her quiet muttering. Rowena's lips fell in a sympathetic frown, and with her high cheekbones and elfish features, she appeared much younger than her mid-twenties.

“Rarely do spells work the way you intend the first few times.” I caught her telling grandma in a hushed voice. “You’ll get the hang of it; I know you will.”

When she emerged from the kitchen I pretended to be hard at work, craning my head back over the book even though my mind no longer cared for the handwritten words. Only for a couple of seconds could I pretend to be oblivious to the failed spell my grandma had tried. Eventually my nagging curiosity won out, but before I had the chance to ask, grandma came into the living room. Her hands were full of baking supplies along with a large tote on her shoulder.

“Grandma, you heading out?” I inquired, catching her before she could flee out the front door. The promise I made to Emilia came to mind.

“Thad a favor I needed to ask you. Do you think you could get in contact with Chris? One of the trainers wanted to offer him a job. I know he most likely won’t take it, but I told her I’d try.”

Grandma paused, and from the way her slender eyebrows lifted, and lips parted, she hadn’t expected me to ask that particular question.

“I’ll give it a shot, but knowing Chris I’ll have to threaten him first, and threats are much less effective when sent through the post.” She huffed, a disgruntled look crossing her face though I knew she missed her old friend. Moving away from her cottage hadn’t been what she wanted, but she’d done it for me.

“Any particular reason you’re in a hurry to leave?” I mused, slowly closing the book in my lap. It would’ve been useful if I could figure out how I did that trick with the front door, but my magic seemed more than happy to lay dormant now that I had use of it.

Grandma had her hand on the doorknob and was in the process of opening it when she said, “ Claire’s friend is getting married tomorrow night and she asked if I’d help with the desserts. I have a lot of baking to do and very little time to do it.”

Momentarily forgetting the odd exchange between her and Dad, I felt surprise morph my face.

“Someone’s having a wedding in the middle of all this?” I gestured to the room around us, even though my true meaning rang clear. There wasn’t a single one of us here that could forget the events that transpired just the other day. Grandma tilted her head ever so slightly, her eyes relaxed and understanding. “If you can’t count on love in the midst of tragedy, then what good is it”

Those were the words she left me with, because half a second later she slipped through the front door and instantly began bickering with Dad. The two of them were quick to leave, putting down the road in Dad’s beat up Nissan.

“Don’t you dare...” I called out to Rowena, who was in the process of fleeing as well. “What kind of spell was she trying to do?”

“I’d tell you not to repeat this, but your grandmother will find out either way. She’s a very intuitive witch, I’ll give her that.” The red-headed witch sighed, shrugging a shoulder as she settled onto the couch. “She was trying to heal your father’s leg. It’s tricky magic, but he was more than willing to act as her test subject.” A softness filled the depths of her mossy eyes, “... from what I’ve heard, Flora has a

fondness for dancing. I can only assume your father has access to the same information, and what better place to dance than at a wedding?”

Any chance I had at studying was tossed out the window since all I could think about was my dad and a woman who had just woken up from a decade long coma dancing the night away at a strangers wedding. For a moment, I was dumbfounded. Things had changed so much— become so complicated in such a short amount of time that I was just now realizing I hadn't even begun to process it all.

As I stood from the couch and gathered my things, my mind was a haze of denial and acceptance. It was Holly's name on Rowena's tongue that freed my thoughts and brought my attention back to the present.

“I thought I'd tell you before you left, Holly is progressing quite nicely since you found her that therapist. I know it's only been a few days, but she's actively trying now in a way she hadn't been before. From what she's told me, even her nightmares are beginning to ease up.”

It was a bright spot in an otherwise terrible week, one that was made worse on the drive home when Asher mind-linked me to let me know he and his team of warriors would be moving out tonight. There had been an altercation between some Vampire's and Alpha Bran's warriors, both of which were much too close to our borders.

I had only a few short hours with Asher before he had to leave. It was a naive hope that our time would be relaxing, free of stress or worries about what might come next. Not only was I terrified at what Alpha Bran had in store, and worried for the Vampire's I swore to protect and defend the pack against, but I quickly realized I had another problem the second I opened my bag and looked inside.

Some small part of me noticed it had felt heavier when I slid the strap over my shoulder and left the house Rowena and Cordelia occupied, but I hadn't given it any thought.

Staring down at the pitch-black cover and odd textured leather, I tried to recall when I'd slipped the book of Protection magic into my bag. I was more than positive I hadn't, especially considering the look Cordelia had given me—the one that told me she knew how badly I wanted the book.

Yet here it was, perched on the countertop of Asher and I's house, practically begging me to flit through the silver lined pages.

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I hadn't so much as skimmed my fingers over the cover page when Asher came through the front door. A jolt of surprise swallowed my voice and made my heartrate jump, forcing me to snap the book shut and slip it back into my bag.

Asher rounded the corner and appeared in the kitchen before I could question my sneaky behavior and why the feeling churning in my gut told me to keep the book a secret—even from him.

The next few hours I spent with Asher were anything but relaxing. Even after taking out the rest of my frustration in the cushy master suite he had designed for us, there was still plenty weighing on my mind. I'd always envied Chelsea for her lack of conscience, especially lately.

Both Maya and I knew that keeping Cordelia's book was wrong and that thievery, no matter how it happened, had consequences. The

urge to return it with a heartfelt apology was strong, but there was something even more powerful brewing in the back of my mind.

It had found its way into my bag for a reason, I assumed. One could only wonder if the reason was to look inside, to use its magic to protect my mate, pack, and kingdom. Even though the feeling lasted but a few seconds, it was the excitement that gripped my heart in its hand that ultimately influenced my decision.

“Are you alright?” Asher’s voice was soft, which was warning enough that I’d been quiet for far too long.

Unable to forget what had transpired not that long ago between him and a certain Judge, I lifted an eyebrow in his direction. With a drink in each hand, he abandoned the bar cart in the lowered alcove that served as our lounge and made his way to the canopied bed I was currently sprawled across.

I took the glass from his hand and took a drink, feeling the strong-scented liquor sting my lips before racing across my tongue. Forcing away a grimace from the taste was easy enough. “Shouldn’t I be the one asking you that?”

“You should.” He grunted, and from the deep scowl that hardened his jawline and made those soft lips of his fall, I knew his next words would be worth my while. Only after a long drink of his own did he finally speak. “I won’t apologize for what I did to Clint Armstrong, but I’ll admit I did act rashly.” For a split second, his eyes unfocused and confusion filled their depths until all traces of gold faded from his iris’s. “I...I haven’t been feeling like myself lately. There was some part of me that wondered if magic was involved, but both the witches have checked me over and neither one felt anything.”

“Could it be stress? At training today, Cassidy mentioned we don’t know everything there is to know about Alpha’s. There’s a chance this could be what happens when an Alpha’s pack is threatened from all sides...” I stumbled for a reason, startled by the feeling of helplessness that encased my lungs.

Asher didn’t struggle, he conquered. When he lost his footing he’d come back stronger, fight harder until his opponent snapped in two. Seeing him like this, with genuine confusion in his eyes, it was jarring.

“I know what stress feels like, believe me. I’ve had a lifetime of it, even before you stumbled into training late that first day.” He said, his voice quickly morphing from dry to light and amused. My own lips perked up at the sound of his laugh, and of the memory that pitted the two of us against each other. He sat down on the edge of the bed and took another drink. “When you turned yourself into your father’s men, that was the most stressed I’d ever felt. All of this...this is nothing compared to that.”

“Asher, you can’t mean that. We’ve got witches, vampires, and now werewolves coming for our throats-“

“And none of that means s**t to me.” He rasped, running a hand down the stubble that coated his jaw. His head sunk a few inches, and only when I placed my hand beneath his chin did he dare look up at me. “I would’ve handed over your entire pack if it meant getting you back, Lola. You mean that much to me-so much that my own people can’t even compare. I’ll protect them with my last breath, but only if I know you’re safe.’ There was an urgency in his voice that made my throat tighten. I tried hard to cling to my disbelief but failed when I saw the heat in his eyes. “So believe me when I say, I know what stress feels like. Maybe you and Cassidy are right, maybe this is some

Alpha thing we haven't discovered...but if that's the case, we need to get figuring it out because I'm slipping, and this pack can't afford a slip."

The more we talked, and the more Asher opened up, the more I was able to see his hesitance and indecision. Part of me wondered if I'd still feel the same all-consuming love when Asher's guard was let down and his indestructible Alpha persona was removed. It wasn't surprising that my affection for him reached an even deeper level, and that the bond between us sparkled like freshly spun threads of gold. He was still an Alpha in my eyes, but even Alpha's had moments of weakness.

"We'll figure this out." I promised him, though I had no clue how we'd achieve such a thing. If the witches couldn't figure out what was happening with Asher, who could? An idea popped into my head, and I found myself smiling with just a shred of renewed hope.

"Breyona's parents might be able to help. I'll mind-link her tonight and see if she can get in contact with them."

"Alright, just keep me posted. I'll be bringing Mason and Clara with us tonight. Having a witch on our side will be helpful, and Mason can keep her in check since she seems to enjoy tormenting him." Asher grunted, combing his fingers through his hair, oblivious to the way my eyes tracked the movement.

Seconds away from suggesting a round two, I registered his last-minute decision. The one where he thought bringing Mason and Clara anywhere was a good idea. An odd sensation warmed my stomach and a fleeting thought whispered in my ear, 'Isn't this what you wanted?'

“You’re bringing them both?” I pondered, ignoring the gut-feeling I was having that told me I somehow caused this spontaneous decision.

“Not only that, but I’m also bringing Brandon too.” He replied, his tone just a tad disgruntled. Taking one last swig of his liquor, he rolled his shoulders and twisted his head to either side until it popped softly. Seeing the expression on my face, he snorted. “Believe me, it wasn’t my decision. He was lurking on mine and Zeke’s conversation and overheard we were leaving on a mission. I can’t have him spilling the news to everyone in the pack and risk it falling into the hands of whoever our leaks are. Zeke’s babysitting him at the moment, but sooner or later he’ll try to escape him.”

“How is Zeke’s pack doing?” I wondered out loud, standing from the bed and stretching my sore limbs until they groaned in pleasurable pain. With a smirk painted across my lips, I tossed one of Asher’s shirts over my n***d torso and flopped down on my stomach. “He’s rarely been there since all of this stuff started happening with the witches.”

“His Beta is a good, honorable man. He’s stepped up a lot and has helped him run the pack. I’m sure it helps that the witches aren’t particularly interested in the other nearby packs. Strategically, it makes sense that they’d want to dismantle the strongest pack first. Even Alpha’s look up to the strongest wolf. With our pack gone, the rest in the country will weaken. I suppose I should thank the witch Cordelia...” Asher rumbled, making a sound in the back of his throat that I couldn’t quite place. Whether it be gratefulness or dismay, the gesture surprised me. “She’s been helping Zeke fortify his borders with some of those sigils of hers. From what he’s told me, they’re nothing serious, more like alarm systems incase any witches or vampires slip through.”

“Oh, I hadn’t known. Wouldn’t the same thing help us? At the very least it could give us a heads up on the next m****r.”

“She’s already placed a few around the pack borders. She would’ve done it sooner, but the magic required apparently takes time to build up.” He half shrugged, still seemingly unconvinced. “I’m trying to trust them, but only because you asked it of me.”

As Asher slid into the driver’s seat of his Audi and revved the engine, a sliver of worry crept into my throat. It twisted around my neck, scratching at my skin like the scales of a serpent before sliding down my esophagus and into the pits of my stomach. It was this feeling that told me what Asher, Zeke, and the rest of the group they assembled were going to do was a bad idea.

I was going to tell him, even though I knew it wouldn’t change his mind, but another voice more powerful than that of my otherworldly feeling slid into my head. It wasn’t her words, but the tone of fear within them that made me pause.

‘St...Lola, you there? Ugh, stupid a****e men. Kendrick bailed on me for some curvy redheaded sl-whatever, the details don’t matter. I’m here with Lars at his camper thing and he’s acting all sketchy and tweakish. I know you said to stay away from him, but I’m freaked out and I need some help...and you’re the only person I know who won’t hold this over my head.

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‘You’re telling me that not even twenty-four hours after I left, you’re driving to some creepy guy’s camper in the middle of the forest because Cassidy made the mistake of hanging out with him after you

warned her not to?’ Breyona deadpanned. The dry tone of her voice through the mind-link made me clench my hands tighter around the steering wheel.

‘Yep.’ I replied, popping the ‘p’ for emphasis. ‘Even though that’s not why I mind-linked you.’

‘I know, you mind-linked me to ask if my parents could find anything on Alpha’s that the world doesn’t already know, which is unlikely but yeah I’ll ask them.’ She replied with a small huff. ‘Now back to what you’re currently doing, which is driving into certain doom without telling your Alpha of a mate what’s going on.’

‘I’m not driving into certain doom.’ I rolled my eyes, ‘...but yes, that’s what I’m doing and no, Asher does not know about it. If he did, he’d turn right around and demand he come with me.’

‘Well, since there’s no talking you out of it and Cassidy needs help, you need to take someone with you.’ She insisted, right as always even though I was currently low on available werewolves.

‘Who said they have to be a werewolf?’ Maya mused.

Without needing further clarification, I let out a long sigh and adjusted my route to a certain vampire’s house.

When I strolled through the front door, taking a mental note that it was unlocked, and popped my head into the dimly lit kitchen, it wasn’t Tristan’s lean form I saw standing at the stove, but Holly. It had been so long since I’d seen her that I didn’t even notice the charred grilled cheese sitting on the plate she cradled in her hands. Her pin straight hair was the same silken ebony as mine, though she often wore hers in a long braid that fell over her shoulder.

“Oh. Hello, Lola.” She said softly, in a voice much higher than my own. Her eyes rested on my face and were unblinking in a way most people found unsettling, but I knew she was simply giving me her undivided attention. There was a wispy quality to her voice that reminded me of wind chimes swaying in a gentle summer breeze. She blinked once and tilted her head. “Something’s wrong, isn’t it? Tristan will be back shortly. He left to get me more cheese. I’ve been trying to cook, but I’m afraid this stove works too well.”

She gestured to the stovetop, which was set on high heat until the burner glowed a bright shade of red. I glanced down at the square shaped charcoal on her plate and reached over the stovetop to turn the dial down to medium heat.

“Try it again, that should help. Tristan didn’t teach you how to control the heat?” I questioned, watching as she tossed the charred sandwich in the trash and grabbed two more slices of white bread. “As for what’s wrong, a friend is in trouble, but Tristan should be able to help.”

“He breezed through it, but I’m afraid I wasn’t paying much attention. He was in one of his moods, you know. Didn’t quite understand why I wanted to learn to cook to begin with, especially since he can make me anything I want.” She half shrugged, the serene expression on her face unfaltering. “I’m sure he’ll help, but only if it’s you or I who asks.”

“Is he ever not in one of his moods?” I joked but found myself wondering what she meant with that comment. Holly let out a quiet chuckle and began smearing butter along the slices of bread. “I didn’t know you didn’t know how to cook, but I suppose that makes sense.”

“Father primarily fed me blood, but truthfully I prefer human food.” She hummed under her breath, and as she finished the beginning stages of her grilled cheese, she set the butter coated bread down and turned to meet my stare. Her nails drummed across the countertop softly. “There’s something you want to do, but you’re feeling guilty about it. I can’t tell anything else, other than it has to do with magic.”

I opened my mouth, expecting my brain to catch up and formulate a reply, but nothing came out. Surprise unfurled across my face, lifting my eyebrows, and reddening my cheeks.

“Did you see this in a dream?”

“No, I picked it up just now.” She explained, swiping away the strands of ebony hair that spilled over her slender shoulders. “Ever since beginning therapy, which I should thank you for considering the therapist you chose is quite lovely, it’s been easier to use my magic. The less nightmares I have, the more I seem to pick up while I’m awake.” Unblinking, she hit me with a look that made me wonder what exactly went on in that head of hers. “You can ask me for help, you know. You tried to be close to me once, and I pushed you away. I wasn’t ready for a sister then, but I am now. If it helps, I’m quite good at secrets...”

“You’d be willing to help me?” “I couldn’t help the surprise and skepticism that bled into my voice, along with the kernel of hope that she was being truthful. “Even if it meant lying to everyone?”

Asher’s face flashed in my mind; eyes pitch-black with fury. He’d be more than pissed at me, but I’d risk everything—right down to our bond if it meant keeping him and this pack safe from harm. He needed me, he needed this.

“Your mate is no threat to me, Lola.” She reassured me with a small half-smile, but it was her knowing tone that struck me as odd. “Now, what kind of magic do you need help with?”

Swallowing back a wave of indecision I said, “...I want to put a protection spell on Asher.”

It wasn't surprise that morphed her heart-shaped face and lifted her soft eyebrows but interest.

“I'm in.” She nodded, and while the gesture would've seemed normal to some people, I could tell there was an eagerness within it that hadn't been there before.

“Does tomorrow night work for you? I need the day to gather the supplies and study the spell book I have.” I told her, leaving out the part about Asher and his whereabouts.

My mate and the group he'd assembled would make it to the borders of the deserted pack by tomorrow night, but only if Alpha Bran and the Vampire's lurking about didn't slow them down.

“Just don't tell Tristan-” I began but was cut off by the front door swinging open, followed by the scent of saltwater and male musk.

“Tell Tristan what?” The blonde-haired Vampire asked, his pale eyes washing over my face before flitting to Holly's. They had lingered on the marks on my neck for a fraction of a second, and I ignored the slight pull I felt in his direction.

“Lola and I are going to have a girl's night tomorrow, isn't that wonderful Tristan?” Holly said in her sing-song voice, closing her eyes as she smiled at the Vampire that towered over her by a good two feet.

“You’re having a girl’s night...” He grunted, his sandy eyebrows gnashing together as dread filled the depths of his angular face.

“Don’t be so sour, it’s not that bad.” I snorted on impulse, rolling my eyes at the grim expression on his face. The Vamp had brooding down to an artform and was even better than Asher if that were possible.

“It’s going to be at her house, Tristan. What better way to finally leave the house than to visit my sister’s?” Holly scolded him, but it was almost playful how she laughed and tugged the package of cheese out of his hands. “We’ll be fine, I promise. You’re more than welcome to tag along if you think we need the protection. Lola’s going to teach me all about sleepovers and what normal girls do at them.”

Instantly I picked up on where she was going with this, but before I could play along I had to s*w the nervousness I felt when realizing how well my half-sister could spin a lie.

“Oh, I’ll be pulling out all the stops. Nail painting, make-up, boy talk, popcorn, and the best romantic comedies of our time. Oh, and don’t forget the pillow fights.” I grinned cheekily, directing it at Tristan who let out a sharp breath through his nose.

Truthfully, the grumpy Vampire wasn’t half bad when he wasn’t trying to seduce me into his den of iniquity. He might be quick to anger and even quicker to frustrate, but he was surprisingly loyal and would go to any lengths to help me. I wasn’t sure if it were because I happened to be his Queen, or if he was still trying to snare a place on the throne, but I was in no position to decline the help.

“Fine. Have your girl’s night, just leave me out of it.” He grumbled, and as though he felt the need to prove my point, he waltzed to the

fridge and pulled out a small water bottle of blood. Without changing his expression, he shoved the bottle in my hands and muttered.

“Just... just call me if anything happens, all right? Does your mate forget you need blood to stay strong?”

“He’s been a bit busy, thank you.” I snipped back but took the bottle without hesitation and brought it to my lips. “I’ve been busy myself, which is partially why I’m here right now. I need your help.” A sigh bubbled past my lips, though not from the rush of strength I felt as the chilled blood ran down my throat. “A friend of mine is in trouble, and I’m the only one she has that can help, but I need back-up.”

“Let me guess, no one else is available.” He deadpanned, and the tone of his voice offended me a little.

“We don’t have the best...relationship, but I trust you. Even though you’ve given me more reasons than I can count not to, I do.”

That seemed to appease him, or perhaps it was the sincerity in my voice, but I was genuinely happy to see his disgruntled expression fade a bit.

“Go, on and help Lola.” Holly urged, nudging him in the direction of the door before turning her attention back to her slices of buttered bread. “I have a feeling this one will turn out (perfect).”

“Where are we headed?” Tristan asked.

I replayed Cassidy’s hastily given instructions in my head and said, “...the woods, to some guy’s camper.”

“Oh, you are?” Holly’s eyes instantly perked up and for the second time her grilled cheese sat forgotten. “I had a dream about a camper just last night! It has to be for you, I can feel it.”

“You didn’t tell me about that dream.” Tristan pointed out, his lips tilting downward.

Holly shrugged. “It wasn’t a particularly long dream, but there is something you should know...” She trailed off, and as the tone of her voice switched from soft to ominous, I wondered if this dream of hers was actually a nightmare. “When you see the purple eyes in the forest... run.”

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“Don’t bother asking me what she was talking about back there, because I have no clue...and yes, I’m just as worried as you are.” Tristan huffed from the passenger seat, his scowl directed out the window and towards the impenetrable wall of darkness that filled the forest and the night sky.

Most of his attitude was from the fact that I wouldn’t let him drive, but I needed the distraction since the fear in Cassidy’s voice continued to increase with each update she gave.

“Purple eyes. What the h**l could that-“

‘Lola, please tell me your close...’ Cassidy’s voice came through the mind-link as a whisper.

I slowed down to take the sharp curve up ahead, narrowing my eyes to peer through the darkness. Acting quickly, I showed Cassidy a quick mental image of the stretch of road we were on, and visibly jumped when her hushed whisper tore through my head faster than the shadows that dashed across the road to flee the cars bright headlights.

‘Turn onto the gravel road and take it to the (very) end. You won’t see me there...but you’ll see him.’

“What? Cassidy, why won’t you be there?” I hadn’t realized I’d asked out loud until Tristan turned to stare at me, his face strained and skin even paler than usual.

‘I’m hiding.’ Was all Cassidy said, followed by a shaky, “I swear I didn’t want to do it, Lola. You have to believe that.’

“She did something, she won’t say what.” I told Tristan, grinding my teeth as the gritty crunch of gravel sounded beneath the tires.

“Goddess, I have a bad feeling about this.”

The dirt road Cassidy told us to drive down was narrow and curved in patterns that seemed to have no purpose other than to send us plunging further into darkness. The deeper we went the more the sickening feeling in my stomach grew.

The cars headlights only illuminated five or so feet in front of us and were our only source of light. I stopped just in time to avoid plowing through a chain draped across two poles hammered into the ground.

“Your Goddess isn’t here, Lola...but something is.” Tristan said darkly, narrowing his eyes at the obstacle blocking our way.

‘Cassidy, there’s a chain and a no trespassing sign here. We can’t go any further.’ I warned her, twisting, and turning my head for any signs of life or movement. Rolling down the windows increased the feeling of danger in my gut but gave us the chance to listen for anything within the forest.

‘Get out of the car and follow the trail on foot.’

“You didn’t say anything about a trail.” I replied both out loud and via mind-link, giving Tristan an uneasy look as I gripped the handle of the car door and slowly pushed it open.

“I don’t like this.” He muttered, getting out of the car, and walking around until he hovered close by. His eyes scanned the darkness, but I knew he saw nothing when his scowl deepened. “It’s not often I get creeped out, but this is...concerning.”

“The big bad vampire is afraid...” I chuckled weakly, wincing as the thud of the driver’s side door echoed loudly.

A trail of icy fear trickled down my spine, because for once the shadows weren’t fleeing. They stayed where they were, curious and patient as Tristan and I slid past the rusted chain and willingly ventured deeper into the forest.

“What are we even looking for?” He asked several moments later, his voice muffled from the intense ringing in my ears.

The earth crunched beneath our feet, and the air was surprisingly warm as it coated our skin in a thin layer of sweat. We followed the winding trail until the tree’s began to disperse and a small clearing came into view. The canopy of tree’s overhead was thick, blocking most of the moonlight from streaming through. The only light available was that of the tiny window in Lars’s camper and the two tiki torches protruding from the ground on either side of the front door.

There was a foul stench radiating from the camper, seeping from its slatted walls of sky-blue paint until the air was dank with the stench of d***h and rot.

“Do you smell that?” Tristan whispered, his entire body going tense.

I nodded ever so slightly. “That smell...it’s a d**d body.”

“One that’s been here for a while.” He murmured, eyes trained on the front door and the light flickering through the window.

Tristan went to move forward, motioning for me to stay close. Together we approached the front door, both of us holding our breaths as the k**b squeaked and hinges squealed upon opening.

At the last second I heard Cassidy’s gasp through the mind-link.

‘Lola, don’t open that!’

I gagged as a gust of the putrid scent blasted me in the face and had to s*w back chunks of my dinner when the bloated and misshapen face of Lars appeared from the cushion of an antique looking sofa.

He was lying on his back, his head twisted at an awkward angle so that his eyes were looking in the direction of the front door, the same one Tristan and I had just come through.

There were two blades protruding from his body, both coated in blood so dark it looked fake. One was a thin pocketknife, lodged just below his eye still within his orbital socket, while the second was where I assumed his heart rested.

“Where is your friend?” Tristan hissed under his breath and turned to look me in the face. His eyes were wider than I’d ever seen them, flecked with worry so strong panic seized in my chest.

I stammered. “She’s here, she can see us. She’s saying...”

Cassidy’s whimper filled my head. ‘Lola? Lola...you need to get out of the camper...now.’

“She said we need to get out of the camper” “I repeated, my voice grave and eyes sliding from Tristan’s face to that of Lars. Bile churned in my stomach as I added, “...now.”

“Why?” Tristan demanded, pivoting to survey the entirety of the camper. Apart from the rotted body lying on the couch, much more decomposed than he should’ve been, we were utterly alone. “Ask her!” He demanded.

“Why do we need to get out of the camper, Cass? What happened here?”

‘I k**d him, but-but he was already dd.’ I swore I heard her sob.

“Why do we need to get out of here?” I repeated myself, this time hardening my tone until it bordered on a command.

‘...because he moved, Lola.’

A sickening crack filled the small camper, followed by a crunch that made both Tristan and I lock eyes. Despite the fact that the mark on my neck and the connection between a Vampire and it’s Queen weren’t quite like a mind-link or mate bond, a sort of understanding passed between the two of us.

Before I could turn that flash of understanding into words, our eyes slid to Lars’s corpse, which was now sitting upright on the sofa.

‘Cassidy, I’m going to need you to come out from where you’re hiding.’ I instructed her, swallowing a scream when Lars turned his head to stare into my face, the bones in his neck cracking and crunching from the movement while the knife below his eye remained rooted in place. ‘...when you see Tristan and I run, you (have) to follow. Do you understand me?’

‘Yes, I understand.’ Her reply was instant.

Slowly, like prey cornered by a hungry predator, I wrapped my hand around Tristan’s wrist and took a small step backwards, towards the open door.

“We can’t kl **something that’s already dd.**” I told him, the haunting tone in my voice evident no matter how quietly I spoke.

He didn’t dare break his stare from Lars to look back at me, but I could see the slight nod of his head and knew he was on board with whatever last ditch plan I concocted.

Together we took a step backwards, and then another. On the third Lars’s corpse stood, it’s spine ramrod straight despite the bulge of crushed bone and tendons in his neck.

His eyes never once left my face.

Each step we took led us closer to the front door, but quickly Lars began matching our steps, taking one each time we did until Tristan, and I stood on solid ground, and Lars within the doorway of his camper.

A split second with our feet on fresh soil and I heard a scrambling sound from beneath the camper, followed by a flash of knotted golden hair when Cassidy rolled from beneath the thing and army crawled to our sides.

She was shaking like a leaf and coated in that dark, foul-smelling blood, but still managed to look murderous in her form fitting dress and b**e feet.

“I don’t know what kind of magic this is, but it’s evil-it’s pure evil.” She stammered, lips trembling even though her stance was one we’d learned in training.

There was only one form of magic that came to mind, one that could’ve easily been capable of causing this.

“If this is blood magic...that means the witch orchestrating all of this is nearby.” I swallowed heavily, refusing to shrink under Lars’s empty stare.

Tristan tensed beside me, undoubtedly thinking the same thing I was.

Holly’s mother was within our pack’s borders, she had to be.

There was a small flicker of movement to my left, one fast enough to catch my eye. Two specks of purple appeared from deep within the trees, glowing softly within the darkness. I could hear the distant rumble of a car’s engine along with the roar of a tricked-out exhaust and knew that what I was seeing were the headlights of someone’s modified car.

It was the way they moved in tandem with one another, gliding through the trees all the way from the main road we’d turned off of, that looked eerily similar to a set of eyes.

“Tristan...” I hissed, jabbing my elbow into his ribcage hard enough to garner his attention. His eyes flickered in the direction of the lights and understanding filled their depths. “...what do those look like to you?”

“Purple eyes.” He confirmed, and not a moment later the brush surrounding us began to tremble.

As the sickly-sweet scent of Vampire's filled the clearing, Lars lunged from where he stood in the doorway.

“Run.” I issued the one worded command and turned on my heel in time to see not one, not two, but six figures break through the tree line.