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Razor thin branches slapped at our faces, stinging our ankles and any visible piece of skin. The darkness was all consuming, the shadows thick as they surrounded us like the heavy fabric of a cloak.

If only they protected us the way a cloak would, if only they offered their assistance as they had numerous times in the past.

Something changed since I got my magic, and that something was big enough to alter the way the shadows acted around me.

In the past, they'd jump at the opportunity to be of service, to exact a price they saw most fitting. Their whispers would plague my mind, their slippery voices a haunting song of desperation, excitement, and longing.

I could hear their whispers, only this time they didn't seem to be speaking to me, but to each other. Flinging them around the forest so quickly I couldn't make out what the h**l they were saying.

“Wait a d**n second.” I panted, gritting my teeth together as Cassidy stepped on something sharp and snarled angrily. The scent of fresh blood was instant and made what I was about to say even more important. “Those were Vampires.”

Cassidy sucked in a sharp breath, swatting away the stray branches as they wacked her in the face. “As far as I'm concerned, just as scary as witches.” The whites of her eyes were visible as she glanced at Tristan, who ran in between us. “...no offense.”

“None taken.” He huffed. “You said the guy you stabbed was already d**d?”

I’d given him a rundown of what Cassidy had told me, even though I didn’t exactly understand what happened myself. Lars was d**d, yet undead? I knew without asking that magic was responsible, but it was a kind of magic I hadn’t learned about yet—and one I wasn’t sure I wanted to.

“Sure was.” She replied, her voice thick and tinged with both nausea and fear. “He decomposed after I k****d him, but I swear I could smell him the second I walked through the door. I...I thought he left some meat out or something and it spoiled.”

Tristan nodded grimly, which looked odd considering we were still running like lunatics through the forest in the d**d of night. “That’s definitely the work of magic, which means the Vampire’s are working with witches. Or at least, some of them are.”

“Lola, maybe you should mind-link the warriors.” Cassidy huffed, increasing her pace even though she was barefoot and sporting a mini dress.

“Cordelia put a spell on the territory. It’s supposed to alert Asher and I if there’s a breach, but I don’t think it worked.” I replied, a bit reluctant to admit this second part. “I don’t want these Vampire’s k****d...which is exactly what the patrol teams will do.”

“You—you haven’t called them?” Cassidy gaped, stumbling over a root that protruded from the ground. If it weren’t for Tristan’s quick reflexes, she would’ve face planted.

I didn’t answer her question, but instead wracked my brain for a solution, for some strategy that would allow two werewolves and one

vampire to apprehend not only six vampires, but a d**d/undead biker named Lars. This was one of those impossible situations only magic would solve, yet I had no clue how to call on the mysterious force that sometimes filled my body and made my skin tingle like a livewire.

No one was coming to help. It was only us, surrounded by forest so dense that almost no moonlight could break through. The canopies overhead only allowed the smallest sliver, which is what lit our way as we ran.

We were alone, but not completely.

The shadows around us were frantic, throwing whispers at rapid fire that I couldn't even begin to make out.

Asher would be furious, and so would everyone else but I was given this ability for a reason, and I'd be damned if I weren't going to use it in times of dire need. I couldn't rely on my magic, not without proper training, but I could rely on the otherworldly power of the shadows.

“Help us.” I hissed, raising my voice so that it carved through the trees and into every dark corner of the forest.

Both Tristan and Cassidy gave me identical looks of confusion, though Tristan's quickly morphed to understanding. It was that understanding that darkened his eyes and hardened his jaw. I swore beneath the rustling of foliage and the crunch of earth beneath our feet, I could hear his teeth grinding together.

“What are you-” Cassidy began, her words faltering when I dug my heels into the ground and stumbled to a stop.

“I know you can hear me!” I snarled at them, turning in a circle to stare at the writhing mounds of darkness that hid behind the thick trees and large stones. “Why are you so afraid of me! Why now?!”

“Fear? Lola, the shadows can’t feel fear.” Tristan said, his eyes darting in all directions. I couldn’t tell if he were searching for the shadows, or for a sign of the Vampire’s that chased us.

“They didn’t want to save Breyona, but I made them. I made them, Tristan, and they didn’t ask for anything in return.” I told him, well aware that I was coming off as manic, but it wasn’t just our best option, it was our only option.

Tristan narrowed his eyes, scanning the forest line. “That’s not possible. They always have a price. Maybe they haven’t told you it yet.”

With a snarl, I spun around. We didn’t have time for this, for Tristan and me to argue over something I was so sure about. The way their behavior had changed since removing the bind on my magic, it was impossible to ignore.

They were no longer eager to make deals with me but were now terrified of my presence.

“I said help us, d**n it!” I bellowed, balling my hands into fists.

There was a rustle from afar, followed by the crunch of gravel and branches beneath heavy feet. Tristan grabbed my arm, his grip almost painful. I shoved him off, using some obscure technique Chris had shown me to slip under his arm, the very arm he tried to hook around my waist.

“Lola, you can’t-” He began, genuine concern filling his eyes, turning them into a set of small oases that glimmered in the dark.

The sound of shuffling grew closer, but it was Cassidy’s whimper that told me our chance to evade had just passed.

“Watch me.”

Channeling the same horrible emotions I felt when I found Breyona d***g in that clearing was all too easy. Like it was hours ago, I could recall the fear, the utter hopelessness that had filled every corner of my soul, had filled my body with cement until I thought I’d sink into the earth, never to return. If Breyona had died that night, I knew a part of me would’ve died too.

I owed the shadows everything; the life of my mate, and my best-friend. It wasn’t hatred that kept me from working with them in the past, but fear. Fear because I knew how steep a price they could ask for. Fear because I had felt the kind of desperation that would bring a person to give anything, absolutely anything to protect the ones they loved.

As those damning emotions filled my body, it wasn’t just the electrical current of magic they brought on, but a dreadful sort of cold that was injected directly into my bloodstream.

The forest around me with its vague shapes and distorted bushes sharpened, revealing not only the writhing shadows but the six figures that had chased us all this way.

“I said, help us.” I commanded them, forcing every bit of emotion into my words until I was sure my voice would crack.

Three things happened simultaneously, each one more confusing than the next.

“Oh my goddess...” Cassidy whispered; the whites of her eyes huge as she stared at me with an open mouth.

The six figures burst free from the brush, each one a Vampire with glittering eyes and an expression of pure malice on their faces.

They didn't have time to register the inky smoke that slithered along the ground, that's how quickly the shadows moved—finally answering my call.

Each cluster of pulsating darkness shot out, wrapping around the necks of the two Vampire's standing at the lead. Like glittering spider webs coated in obsidian, they shimmered under the scarce amount of moonlight.

Where the first two Vampire's had panic-stricken faces, clawing, and snapping at the shadows that squeezed the life from their bodies, the other four were faster in their evasions. Three of them raised their arms in time to block their throats, though the sticky webs wrapped around their forearms and climbed higher as they thrashed. The sixth managed to leap out of the way, but it wasn't the nimble Vampire I scanned the forest floor, but the thing that Lars had been turned into.

If only they knew speed couldn't save them.

The shadows that avoided me for the last two weeks now seemed attuned to my emotions, my wants and needs no matter how sadistic or depraved they were. The feeling of cold, icy power was addictive, numbing my nerve endings until nothing else mattered but the threat they posed and the lives they endangered.

No longer did they feel like a chaotic, otherworldly force I had no choice but to work with. Instead they were an ancient power brought into this world through pain and suffering, a weapon, an extension of my own power and will.

I threw my arms out, raising them far above my head and felt that icy power explode in my chest. At the same time, a hundred—perhaps a thousand of those razor thin webs burst into existence, appearing from the clusters of shadows that had watched and whispered unhelpfully.

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Many hit the trees, rocks, and earth, but even more hit the Vampire's that stalked us, wrapping around their limbs, and tightening their grip much like a snake would. It was both beautiful and deadly, watching them pierce their skin, seeing the looks of apprehension and confusion as they realized I was capable of so much more than their previous ruler.

“Lola, remember you don't want to k**l them.” I heard Tristan murmur, barely registering the sound of his voice over the roar in my ears. His hand ghosted across my shoulder in a gesture meant to soothe me, but all it did was break the haze the addictive power I wielded had over me.

The tendrils of shadow that had been tightening around their throats, turning their faces various shades of black and blue, loosened just enough to allow them air.

Rather than show my emotions and express the ripple of doubt and regret that passed through me, I steeled my spine and faced them the way a true Queen would.

“You have all made a grave mistake coming here tonight.” I assured them, looking each one in the face from where they hovered several feet above the ground, wrapped almost entirely in darkness and shadow. “K*****g all of you is well within my power, and well within my rights, but I vowed long ago that I would be a different kind of ruler. Tell me, (why) have you come here and where is Lars?”

With eyes of varying shapes and colors, each Vampire stared at me. Two of the males, both Hispanic with heads of curly hair spat at my feet, while the other three remained silent. The only female of the bunch, the one nimble enough to evade my first a****k, snarled freely.

“You are not their Queen, Luna Lola.” A voice both masculine and feminine said, pulsating from deeper within the forest, like an echo that rippled and spread across the earth. “Their true ruler resides within the Land of the D**d. For now, anyway.”

Tristan sank into a crouch beside me, all too easily snapping out of his surprise.

I saw his face first, pale and covered in dark veins as his blank eyes stared at me through the night. The way he moved, hobbling

as he pushed past the bushes and hanging foliage, unflinching even with the knife protruding just below his left eye, struck a chord deep within me.

His arms and legs moved as though they were heavier than the rest of him and dredged up a seemingly unimportant memory from my childhood.

Back when Mom and I had gotten along, she'd taken me to one of those puppets shows kids seem to love. I remembered all of the other children enraptured with the little dolls, ignoring the wires that controlled their limbs and jaws, ignoring the puppet master behind the curtain, directing their every move.

“You’re not Lars.” I stated, taking a step to the left as I began circling him, keeping my movements slow and steady.

Tristan’s apprehension was practically tangible in the air between us, which I promptly ignored. The pull in my gut told me keeping my cool and feigning this indestructible confidence was the right move. Both my Vampire protector and Cassidy stuck by my side, watching the corpse I spoke to and my back incase any new intruders wanted to make an appearance.

I lifted my chin ever so slightly and spoke in a voice free of fear or doubt. It was one I only partially recognized. “Who’s pulling your strings, puppet?”

Lars’s lips split as they widened, dragged across his face in a grin that made the dark veins along his cheeks bulge sickeningly. His laughter was wet from the substance that coated his teeth, much thicker than blood even though it carried a similar scent. His

laugh sounded both male and female, like two voices layered over one another. One belonged to a cocky biker, the other a woman.

“Where’s the fun in asking a question you already know the answer to?” He mused, his body uncomfortably still and his eyes unblinking. “Such incredible power, yet you lack the wits to put it to proper use.”

Anger swirled in my chest, threatening to melt the ice that held the six Vampire’s in place. Another gut feeling told me that if I lost my cool, I’d also lose control of whatever magic it was that gave me power over the shadows.

His words chased themselves in my mind, only it was the voice of the woman I heard. Round and round they went, staining my thoughts a bright shade of crimson and bringing the scent of fresh blood to my nose.

“You’re the blood-witch.”

Lars’s grin remained rooted in place, a b****y g**h across the lower half of his face. “Well would you look at that, you’re not entirely hopeless.”

“Why have you come here?” It was Tristan that sent the question hurling in her direction. “Why orchestrate this a****k?”

“Why? To speak with Lola here, of course. I had to wait until that mate of hers left, but he’s a bit busy handling a mess I made. Not to worry, he’ll make it unscathed... for the most part.”

I shifted from foot to foot, feeling the icy magic I was somehow using sapping my strength. Slowly, the shadows were becoming

restless, frustrated that I'd confined and enslaved them. Lars's grin widened ever so slightly, as though the witch controlling him could feel my hold slipping.

“You went through all this trouble to speak with me?” I scoffed, my expression giving nothing away.

“I went through all of this trouble to warn you.” She corrected. “Your failure is inevitable. It's been written into our history for longer than even I can remember. For centuries young witches have read the prophecies foretelling the unification of Witches and Vampire's, and it all begins with you. Your d***h will be the beginning of a new world order and will ultimately mark the end of the Werewolf species.”

It didn't matter if what she was saying was true, or that it frightened me to my very core. What was important was this pack and the Vampire's I swore I'd protect. Even the ones suspended in mid air, watching our conversation with conflicted eyes, were important. As I always had in the past, I let my stubbornness win out and spoke without a l**k of common sense.

“You expect me to believe that?” I raised an eyebrow, nodding up at the six Vampire's I currently had trapped. “If I'm capable of this, I wonder what else I can do. You won't win, I promise you that much, and we will not go peacefully. Try and k**l us all, I dare you. I'll personally make sure that every single witch dies along with us, including you.”

“You would've made a decent Queen, and an even better High Priestess. Perhaps if there is anything left of your soul, you'll choose to be reincarnated.” She mused, the grittiness of Lars's

voice meshing with the silkiness of hers. “I suppose it’s time I take my leave, those dimwitted warriors of yours have finally snuffed out the presence of these here Vampire’s. Speaking of which, they cannot be allowed to live, unfortunately. I do hope you put their blood to good use though, considering I can’t while in this body. Oh, before I leave ...do give my daughter my highest regards.”

“NO!”“ Tristan bellowed and lunged at Lars, both of us coming to the same realization at the same time.

Lars slashed a hand horizontally across his throat, and the throats of the six Vampire’s suspended in mid-air were slit, raining crimson blood on the four of us.

The rotted, decomposed corpse that had once been Lars fell to the ground, lifeless once more.

Instantly, my hold over the shadows snapped. They scattered into mist, vanishing within the darkest parts of the forest as they fled. All six of the Vampire’s fell to the ground, and I was nearly crushed by one as I rushed to their sides.

It was Tristan that pulled me out of the way.

I fell to my knee’s, barely registering the moisture within the soil seeping into my jeans. The heavy drumbeat of my heart rattled against my ribcage, ratcheting my adrenaline higher and higher with every pair of glossy, lifeless eyes I stared into.

They were helping her, and she k****d them, sacrificed like their lives were nothing-like their families were nothing.

A garbled, wet breath pulled me out of my stupor and towards the trembling form of one of the Vampire's. The lithe female that had darted out of the way during my first a****k, she was curled up in the grass, her hands clawing at her slashed throat.

“Tristan!” I called out, scrambling to her side. The blonde-haired Vampire knelt beside me, wrenching her hands away and forcing her down when she tried to tear my face off with her stiletto nails. I stared down at her, at eyes the same shade of brown as Sean's. “Stop trying to k**l me. Only one of us is d***g, and it isn't me. You'll have another chance (after) we save your life.”

Her mouth opened, revealing blood-stained teeth and a sparkly tongue ring.

‘Luna Lola, we're nearby! We caught the scent of six Vampire's and followed once we realized they were tailing you. We have the witches with us, they're going to help!’ One of the many warriors on patrol tonight said through the mind-link, followed by countless others, all jumbling into one mess I couldn't even begin to sort through.

‘Hurry.’ I told him, increasing my pressure on the Vampire girl's throat whilst sending every bit of my urgency through the mind-link.

I counted the seconds it took until they burst through the forest in a sea of fur and teeth, repeating the same plan over and over in my head.

We would save her life, and after she was stable and thoroughly questioned, I planned on asking Cordelia exactly why that security spell of hers hadn't worked.

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By the time backup arrived, and Rowena stabilized the Vampire whose heart were still beating after having her throat slit, I was utterly exhausted.

The trick I did, somehow managing to control the otherworldly power that was known for being uncontrollable, left me with little to no energy and a raging case of cotton mouth.

Even worrying about Asher, which I'd been doing since the blood witch said he had problems of his own to deal with, sapped what little strength I had left.

As I swayed where I stood, staring down at the five lifeless bodies, the shadows watched from their hidden alcoves within the forest. Tristan stood nearby, his eyes flitting to my face every few seconds as though he were worried I'd topple over at any moment.

I sure felt like I was, but I'd never admit that.

Instead I frowned at the blood that watered the earth and thought about the words that the blood witch uttered.

“Make use of their blood...” I said quietly, lifting my gaze to peer at the darkness that surrounded us.

Cassidy continued to gnaw on her lower lip, which she'd been doing for the last half hour. “What do you mean by that?”

Tristan grunted, which was indication enough that he knew exactly what I meant.

“As reward for your service, you may feed on the blood that was spilled, only that of the five Vampire’s who needlessly lost their lives this night.” I said to the shadows, my voice strong despite the lead that weighed down my bones and claimed my energy. At the last moment, staring down at the men who had harbored such hatred for someone they knew very little about, I added: “...all I ask is that you return their bodies to the earth.

I wasn’t sure if the tendrils of darkness could feel my lack of strength, or if they were simply that hungry, but they swarmed the ground like the fog that often cloaked the entire town in the early morning hours, when the air was thick with humidity.

Cassidy let out a sound that was halfway between a croak and a wail, taking several steps back though the shadows still slithered around her feet.

“What in the h**l...” She muttered.

Within seconds the ground was clean, free from the blood and the bodies of the d**d Vampire’s.

“Lola, are you alright?” Tristan said quietly, his voice so low that I had to strain to hear him. “You look like you need some sleep...”

“I do, and I will, but only after I figure out how the h**l this happened.” I told him; thankful the others weren’t within hearing range. “Have the Vampire taken to a cell ...one of the nicer ones. I don’t want her harmed, I can’t begin to stress that enough.”

“I’ll stay with her to make sure, but only after you’re safe in bed.” He replied, and as he held my gaze it wasn’t desire I felt, but the genuine need to protect and serve his Queen.

The handful of wolves on patrol who knew the location of Asher’s personal holding cells escorted the Vampire, each one under strict orders to only use force should she try and escape—and judging from how much blood she lost, that wouldn’t be happening anytime soon.

Cassidy was promptly escorted home by a few of the remaining warriors in the patrol team. She must’ve not been too shaken up because the reluctant glances she tossed our way told me she didn’t exactly want to leave.

Rowena, Cordelia, Tristan, and myself all ventured back to the estate, where tensions continued to rise until I wasn’t sure who was angry with who.

The way Cordelia stared at me as the four of us stood in the kitchen struck me as odd, especially considering it was her spell that had failed to work properly. For the first time, I was wondering if my gut feeling about her were incorrect.

Was there a chance she was one of the leaks spilling information to the blood witch?

“Could I speak with you alone, Cordelia?” I asked, shattering the haze of silence that had befallen the three of us.

Tristan’s reluctance weighed on my shoulders, reinforcing the nagging thought that I might’ve been wrong.

As soon as we were alone, her stoic expression fell, deepening the lines that circled her eyes and mouth. “You’re wondering why my spell didn’t work, and I wish I could tell you, Lola, but I just don’t know.” She placed her hands flat on the marble countertop and stared down at the flat colors. “There’s a chance it could’ve been overridden by the blood witch’s magic, but she would’ve needed a significant amount of blood to fuel such a thing. The only other option is that those Vampire’s were already within the territory lines when I casted the spell.”

“We’ll have to assume that they were, which means I’ll have to talk to Asher as soon as possible.” I forced the words through clenched teeth, fighting the urge to start shouting down the mate-bond, linking his mind with my own and potentially distracting him from what could easily be battle.

Even if I did manage to get through, I’d most likely have seconds before I passed out.

“There’s something I needed to talk to you about, Lola ...”

Cordelia’s lowered voice and unwavering gaze put a stop to my disorganized thoughts, bringing my attention back to the present.

She leaned forwards, skewering me with her eyes. “What exactly did you do back there?”

I blinked at her, flashes of memory dancing behind my eyes. Tendrils of darkness wrapping around limbs, piercing the skin like razor thin needles that held the Vampire’s in place. “I’m not following.”

“The blood witch sent six Vampire’s after you and reanimated a d**d body, yet you and your friends are alive. Not only that, but the amount of residual power I felt was intense...to say the least.” Cordelia replied, pursing her lips. “The shadows were watching you, child, and don’t think I didn’t see them clean every blade of grass free of blood.”

“I’m not sure what you want me to say, Cordelia.” I murmured, following the feeling in my gut that told me to keep quiet, to give as little information as possible. “I don’t know exactly what I did, but it worked, and the threat is gone for the time being. Isn’t that what’s important here?”

“It is important, but it’s not the only important thing.” She said ominously, her eyes flickering to the same doorway both Tristan and Rowena vanished through. It led deeper into the house, past the living room and curved staircase to the lounge and back door.

“Did something happen between you and Rowena?” I blurted, unable to keep the question at bay for any longer. It had been over a week now that the two of them had been walking on eggshells around one another, Cordelia more than Rowena.

The middle-aged witch that reminded me so much of my grandma that it hurt to suspect her as the enemy frowned.

“Nothing you need to concern yourself with. You’ve got enough on your plate and we’re both grown witches, we can handle a spat.”

For some reason, I had the strong feeling this was more than just a spat, but I stayed quiet anyway.

Late that night, after spending the last three hours curled up on the couch in a deep sleep, Asher’s voice began to trickle into my thoughts.

‘Lola, are you awake? I got word from a couple warriors on patrol that there’s a new face in the dungeons. What happened? Was anyone harmed?’

I sat up from my spot on the couch, stretching my arms far above my head. Delirious with the remnants of sleep, I groaned as my back popped in three separate places, each one cutting Asher’s voice off for half a second.

‘Good morning to you too.’ I grumbled, taking a long drink of water from the glass Tristan left on the table before I slumped over. ‘No one’s hurt. Well, not anyone in the pack.’

Asher didn’t miss the way my voice soured, just like I didn’t miss the frustration that oozed from his.

‘S**t. It’s getting worse, much worse.’ He cursed, his anger vibrating the mate-bond between us. Highly saturated images of

last night flashed in my head, replaying the battle between myself and the Vampires for Asher to see.

‘Things are finally coming to a head.’ I murmured, shuddering as my stomach dropped and intuition spiked. Without a doubt, I knew what I was saying was the truth. ‘Whatever their plans are-whatever their goal is, they’re close. I can feel it.’

‘If the blood witch went through all that trouble to warn you herself, you must have something she wants. She wants to throw you off your game, get you doubting yourself, so you surrender before the fight even begins.’ Asher grumbled, both to me and himself.

Even though Asher had no magic of his own, his intuition was just as sharp.

I padded into the kitchen, wincing against the bright light of the refrigerator as I opened the door. A water bottle full of blood sat on the top shelf, courtesy of Tristan.

‘It’s my magic, it has to be.’ I told him, taking a long drink from the bottle before sighing deeply. ‘After what I did with the shadows, I’m sure of it.’

The blood in my mouth turned sour from the thought. I twisted the cap back on and placed it in the fridge, already rejuvenated from the small bit I’d imbibed.

‘Speaking of which, what exactly did you do to control them? You’re sure you didn’t make a deal by mistake?’

‘I didn’t make any deals. It was similar to when Breyona was hurt...’ I swallowed, hesitating on my trip back to the living room as the memory of my best friend d***g flashed in my head. ‘I wasn’t asking them to do anything. I was commanding them, and they had no choice but to listen. I don’t know why or how, but that’s what happened.’

Asher grew silent for a moment before asking, “Don’t you have that book Giovanni got for you? The one with your family name on it.’

‘I honestly forgot I had it. It’s been tucked away while everything’s been going on.’ I admitted sheepishly, thankful he couldn’t see the embarrassment on my face.

‘Perhaps you should go through it, see if it says anything about what you did tonight.’

‘Does it make me a coward that I don’t really want to open it? It was a big enough bombshell learning I’m part Vampire, and another when I found out about my witch side. I’m not sure I want anymore surprises in my life.’ Releasing a breathless chuckle, I sank back into the couch.

Asher’s response was immediate and provided support I hadn’t realized I needed. ‘It doesn’t make you a coward. If anything, you could use a bit of caution from time to time.’ I detected a hint of teasing in his voice and rolled my eyes at the sound. ‘When I get back we can go through it together, yeah?’

‘I’ll hold you to that, Alpha.’ I said softly, my chest light and fluttering from the fondness in his voice. Already my trepidation

was fading, chased away by my fearless mate. ‘...but only if you tell me about your night. I know I’m not the only one with a story to tell.’

‘You picked up on that, huh?’ He grunted. As seconds of silence ensued between us, he had no choice but to launch into the details of his own night and the distraction the blood witch claimed to have provided. ‘Alpha Bran’s men intercepted our group. They attacked on sight without any regard for their own.’ Along string of curses filled my head, each one more deadly than the next. ‘Came out of nowhere. We still can’t figure out how they picked up on our scent. Clara did some magical s**t and covered our trails.’

‘It had to be the blood witch, then.’ I nodded even though he couldn’t see it. A dry laugh escaped my lips, ” ...they’re working with her, they’re just too blinded to realize it.’

I spoke to Asher for well over an hour, relaxing only when he assured me that no one had lost their lives.

Two of the men in his group were injured, but both were taken into Zeke’s pack and given shelter until they were healthy enough to make the trip back home. Asher had to reassure them numerous times that they hadn’t failed, and that their lives were more important than completing this mission along side their Alpha.

Mason and Clara were the main entertainment for the group, it seemed. They’d been at each other’s throats since the moment they left the pack grounds, only working together when they were ambushed by Alpha Bran’s men.

I had planned on asking every single nagging question in my head when my cellphone began to ring. Upon further inspection, I realized I had a few missed calls from Tristan.

“I cannot tell you how much I wish Vampire’s had that mind-link thing you wolves have.” His voice slithered from the speakers, tight with agitation. “It’s unnatural to be this unreliable in the twenty-first century. Aren’t your kind supposed to be glued to their cellphones?”

“Good morning to you too, and if you must know, I was fast asleep.” I lied. “Also, no. Human’s are attached to their cellphones, not werewolves.”

“Nice try. You weren’t asleep, you haven’t been for the last hour.” He pointed out, ignoring my response about humans and their cellphone addictions. “You need to get to your mate’s dungeons, the faster the better. The Vampire you saved wants to talk, and whatever it is she has to say, she’ll only say to you.”

I scrambled from the couch and made it halfway to the front door before realizing I needed shoes...and pants.

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“Did you seriously stop for coffee?” Tristan deadpanned; his expression unamused as he stared down at me.

I shrugged and pushed past him. “Not all of us are used to night shift. Judging from your grumpiness, I’d say you’re not used to it either.”

“I am not grumpy.” He huffed, blinking at me a few times before regaining his composure and leading the way through Asher’s maze-like dungeon.

The network of underground tunnels wasn’t known to anyone in the pack but a select few that Asher trusted. I’d been more than reluctant to venture down there the first time Asher brought me. The entrance was in the basement of a local bar in town, part of the roadways that would allow alcohol to be smuggled in during the human’s insane prohibition.

There was a slight sting of alcohol and fermented fruit that lingered within the tunnels, which helped to dull the scent of blood, sweat, and p**s.

Thankfully, having the Vampire placed in one of the nicer cells turned in our favor. The stench was far less noticeable in this part of the dungeon.

The walls were made from smooth stone, and there was actually a toilet and small stall that served as a shower, though privacy was an impossibility.

Beneath the dim light protruding from the ceiling, swaying slightly though there was no breeze, was the Vampire whose life I had saved.

She was propped against the wall, perched on the metal bedframe that sat in the corner of the cell. With the barest hint of light, I

could see that her mane of curly hair wasn't black but a rich shade of caramel with blonde highlights dispersed throughout. Her deep-set cheekbones casted shadows along her jaw. It was that and the slant to her sculpted eyebrows that made her appear both grim and gaunt.

A pair of eyes the same shade of caramel as her hair darted up to meet my own. She had asked for me, yet her expression seemed to worsen as I walked into the small circular room.

Her cell was the only one occupied, the other four were vacant.

“You called.” I spoke, unflinching as my voice reverberated off the stone walls and floor.

There were two guards in the room with Tristan and I, each one standing rod-straight on either side of her cell. One of the guards slid a creaky metal chair in front of me, a polite smile gracing his rounded face.

The woman blinked twice before saying, “...didn't think you'd show.”

I opened my mouth to reply, instinctively generating some generic Luna response that would make me appear strong and above it all—above the chaos and h**l the witches had put us through this past month.

Exhaustion marred the confident look on my face, but I didn't bother trying to conceal it. I was every bit as human as I was witch, werewolf, and vampire.

“I take the safety of my people seriously, regardless of their species.” I kept my voice neutral, lowering myself into the fold-out chair without breaking eye contact.

She turned her body to face my own and glanced up at the two guards flanking her cell.

“I want them gone.” She said, narrowing her eyes until the swirls of caramel brightened to a warm gold. “If I decide to give anything up, it won’t be with them in the room.”

“If you decide?” Tristan snapped, his voice cracking like a whip through the silence that encased us. “I didn’t call her here on an if.”

The way she was looking at me felt familiar, her eyes hardened like two slabs of mahogany, streaked with gold that reminded me of Asher’s only a bit more watered down. It was a look of assessment, one that threatened to slice me in two, flesh and bone, to what hid deep inside.

“She wants to know what type of person I am.” I murmured, inclining my head in the same way I’d seen Asher do hundreds of times. “What kind of ruler I am.”

Without breaking our staring match, I gave the guards monitoring her cell a dismissive wave. I knew neither one would stray far, just enough to give us the barest hint of privacy. Tristan, on the other hand, remained rooted in place at my side.

“So tell me Luna, Queen of all those who walk in the night, who call its darkness our home...” She spoke only when the two guards’ footsteps silenced. The words emerged softly, but despite

the delicate tone there was no weakness, no fear within her voice.
“...what kind of leader are you?”

I had no clue who this woman was or what she had been through in her lifetime, but the feeling churning in my gut told me she'd sniff out a fake answer a mile away, and that upon the first whiff she'd shut down completely.

“I'm a flawed leader. I'm impatient, naive, and horribly under experienced. I'm so exhausted, so tired that the moment I wake up in the morning I want to go back to sleep. Even more than any of that, I want peace.” I exhaled sharply, forcing the words out in a rush that made my chest feel as though it were caving in. “I'm fighting an impossible war, trying to keep both sides alive long enough to realize who the true enemy is. It doesn't matter how far things get, how b****y or horrific. I'll never be able to stop, because stopping means picking a side, and I will not let half of my people d*e.”

The truth was rarely easy, rarely subtle in its explosion into existence. Short of breath was an understatement. It felt as though the walls were crumbling, like the stone were giving away to damp earth that piled up around me and threatened to s*****w me whole. Every slow breath I took eased the feeling of claustrophobia but did nothing to ease the weight in my chest.

The Vampire woman remained silent for several seconds before she stood and approached the iron bars that kept her contained. Tristan stiffened but maintained his position beside me when I lifted my hand.

“My name is Bridgette, and I have one last question for you.” She said, watching as I rose from the chair. “There’s rumor of a town, a place where Vampire’s are free to live...where we’re safe. Is this true?”

“It’s true.”

My confirmation that the place Asher and I were building, a town for the Vampire’s on our side, was a relief she’d never known. Her shoulders sagged and lips parted, a million questions bubbling to the surface.

“Where is it?” She breathed, leaning forward on the b***s of her feet.

I blinked at her; my expression unchanging. “You know I can’t tell you that, but depending on what you tell me, you may live to see it one day.”

Bridgette nodded slowly, hope a potent chemical that brightened her eyes and took years off her face. “I apologize for my role in this, just as I apologize for what I am going to tell you.”

Several minutes had passed since Bridgette told me her story, of the life she had left behind when a small coven of witches descended upon the lair she and her mate had formed.

Upon my father’s d***h, many of the Vampire’s scattered across the country, slowly gathering to form families of their own. They sought out shelter and food whilst searching for a way to navigate this new world.

According to Bridgette, the allegiance of many Vampires was undecided. Far too many had been seen as disposable to my father, as heads in his army, as soldiers ready to perish for the world he had envisioned.

These witches were beautiful, wielding magic they had never seen before. It wouldn't have taken much considering the witches have kept themselves hidden for centuries, but the fact that they were crawling out of the woodwork was nerve-wracking enough.

“My mate was smart. He was suspicious, made some of the others feel that way too. I should've listened to him.” Bridgette said dryly, folding her arms over her chest. She let out half of a laugh and said, “he'd say that if he were here right now. I always had to make the mistake myself first before I'd listen to him. Look at where it's gotten me.”

“You might be in a cell, but you're about to save a lot of Vampire's...one of those being your mate.” I assured her, hoping she could see the promise in my eyes, the one I intended to uphold no matter the cost.

“I'll tell you where the lair is, but you can't waste any time going. The way we'd keep under the radar was to move locations every couple weeks. It's coming up on that time again, so you have to hurry.” The desperation in her voice told me she knew she was out of options, and that this was the biggest risk she had taken. Perhaps even bigger than trusting the blood witch.

I memorized each detail she gave me, from the twists and turns in the road, to the street signs flecked with a miniscule splotch of glow-in-the-dark paint that would take me to my destination.

As I turned to leave, with Tristan at my flank, Bridgette's voice rang out loud and clear.

“Queen Lola, I'm trusting you not to harm them. I'm trusting you to be exactly what you said you were. If you're on our side, if you care about Vampire's the way you claim, don't hurt them.”

Once the guards led us upstairs and we navigated our way through the semi-crowded bar, Tristan turned around and speared me with a knowing look.

“You're really going to listen to this random Vampire and head straight into a lair that could easily be a trap.” He deadpanned, already knowing my answer.

I lifted a shoulder in a half shrug. “It's what a Queen would do.”

“No, a Queen would send other people in her stead rather than risk the journey herself.” Tristan laughed humorlessly, his slender face haunted by the shadows that formed around his eyes and jawline. “There's no way this is going to end well. You show up with a full squad of werewolves and you might as well declare war yourself. You show up alone and you're all but slitting your own throat.”

“Well, are you coming with me or not?” I asked stubbornly.

He rolled his eyes and stopped his grumbling. “Obviously, but there's one last thing you need to take care of before we go gallivanting to some dangerous Vampire lair.”

“Really, what might that be?”

Tristan turned around and flashed me a smile that was all teeth.
“You have to tell your mate.”

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‘Absolutely not.’

There was no room for argument, no room for negotiation within the gruff plains of his voice. Not a single shred of remorse or sympathy was viable within his words, nothing I could play on or entice to change his mind.

‘Asher, come on. I have to do this—’

‘You don’t have to do shit.’ He snarled, the sound raising each and every hair on my body until I felt like I’d touched a live wire. ‘You can wait until we get back, then we can assemble an actual team to accompany us.’

‘It’ll be too late by then. I’ve already told you that they change the location of their lairs. If I don’t act now, they’ll move somewhere else and then we’ll never find them. How can you not understand that?’ I barked, frustration sharpening my voice and tinting my vision in a dull shade of red.

I was being insensitive, uncaring of the fact that he’d gone through so much while I was held captive by my father, but Asher was being so damn stubborn.

‘I might be stubborn, but I’m not reckless. I don’t l