

Alpha Asher by Jane Doe Chapter 181

Read Alpha Asher by Jane Doe Chapter 181 – Even though I was more than interested in hearing Deacon’s reply, it wasn’t what made me stop. There was this sudden rush of familiarity that swelled in my stomach, making it plummet to the warehouse floor. I felt a harsh tug on my sleeve and whipped my head to the side to lock eyes with a stone-faced Dina. She jutted her chin towards the exit, which was a few rows of shelves behind where we stood and tugged a second time.

“Not yet.” I mouthed, shaking my head.

Typically, Tristan would be the one trying to keep me out of trouble, but it was hard to do when he too was crouched, peering through the slim gaps in the shelving in an effort to spy on the witches. I held back a snicker and joined him, stretching my hearing as far as it would go, until the voices at the center of the warehouse sharpened.

I guess after spending this much time with me, he already anticipated what I’d do. It was risky but getting information about the enemies plans rarely ever came with a safety net.

“Mm, I thought about it, but I’m curious...” Deacon mused, “This little spell you got going on, what’s the endgame? What will k****g three of each kind accomplish?”

I had to hunch over and bend my head at an odd angle, but I managed a somewhat clear view of them. The feeling churning in my gut came to a head when I spotted the witches. Now I understood why the voice I heard sounded so familiar.

It was the two witches Brandon, Clara, and I had been running from weeks ago. The ones that had come much too close to catching us. What made things worse is that they were both elementals, a rare and powerful breed of witch that could manipulate an entire element in nearly a dozen different ways. They were amongst the other types of witches coveted for their powers, ripped from their families at a young age and thrust into intensive training, molded and shaped until they were deadly weapons.

That was the first thing I’d put an end to once the Blood Witch was six feet under.

Both of the women stood proud and tall, with heavy cloaks wrapped around their shoulders. They were younger than I thought they’d be and looked to be around my own age. Neither one of the witches replied to Deacon, though one’s eyes began to smolder like hot coals. The other stood impassive, her hair the color of wheat and eyes like leaves during the peak of summer.

At first glance I thought she had some kind of bangles around her wrists, but as I strained my eyes through the shelves for another look, I realized they were actually vines. They were no thicker than a piece of yarn and crawled halfway up her arms

before stopping completely. I could make out the tiny leaves that sprouted in small clusters, curling lightly at the ends.

Deacon huffed, the sound deep with amusement. I was slowly coming to realize that was his laugh, even if it sounded like anything but.

“You can’t expect me to just blindly follow this Mistress of yours without a hint of what’s going on behind the curtain. That’s not how I survived all these years, and it sure as s**t ain’t how the rest of these Vampire’s survived either. Am I just supposed to trust that once everyone on your little list is sacrificed the battle is won? How so I know there isn’t more to all of this? Seeing as your Mistress won’t grace me with her presence, I got no choice but to take my answers from you two.”

The one with the glowing eyes lowered the hood of her cloak, freeing a tangled mess of ember-colored curls. Her smile was brittle and taunting, twisting her slender lips into a jagged line.

“Trust us, you don’t want her to grace you with her presence.” She snickered, “As for the spell, once the sacrifices are complete there is one more step, but we’ve got that covered. That’s all you need to know.”

Through the shelves I saw one of Deacon’s shoulders lift in what I assumed was a shrug.

“Mm, I’m inclined to disagree with you. You’re asking me to go all in on a game I’ve never played before and won’t tell me the rules we’re playing by. If my brother were alive, and it were him you two were paying a visit to, he’d be asking the same questions.”

The one with the fiery hair didn’t seem to like being disobeyed, because not only did she bristle at Deacon’s words, but her glowing eyes grew brighter, and her scowl deepened. Her companion leaned forward and placed a vine covered hand on her shoulder. When she spoke, her voice was soothing and her expression oddly serene despite the tension in the warehouse.

“Ember, relax. Surely we can give him the information he’s asking to gain his trust.”

‘Of course her name is Ember.’ Maya grumbled.

I had to bite back a snort at the irony, but it seemed I made some sort of sound because Tristan jabbed me in the ribs with his elbow.

Neither of the witches gave notice. They were much too far away to see or hear the three of us, a fact that didn’t give me much in the way of comfort. Ember, whose eyes actually looked like glowing embers, let out a sharp breath through her slender nose and nodded stiffly.

"It'll take a lot more than that to gain my trust, girl, but it's a d**n good start." Deacon huffed.

Ember didn't react to what Deacon had just said, nor did she acknowledge he even spoke. "We have someone on the inside, someone close to the tri-brid that will complete the last act. After that, our Mistress will have total control over her physical form." Her eyes flared brightly as she finished speaking, glowing with a malicious sort of victory that set my teeth on edge.

I held back wave after wave of panic-induced thoughts as they filled my head, each one more daunting than the next. Now wasn't the time to lose my cool. It didn't matter if there were spies in the pack, if the people closest to me were pawns set out to steal not only my life but my magic and my body, I had to keep my head on straight. Beside me Tristan stiffened, undoubtedly going through the same stomach curdling emotions as I was.

When we made it out of here I'd have to sit down and list all of the people closest to me, going through them one-by-one until I narrowed it down to those I didn't fully trust, and those capable of such a betrayal. The thought of what names I'd see nearly made me sick.

"When that happens, and you got the biggest baddest wolf-pack in the world on your a*s, what will you do then?" Deacon asked.

There was a tone of mild interest in his voice that I desperately hoped was an act because I was more than certain if he told Dina to turn back with Tristan and I, she'd do just that.

Ember replied while the second witch smiled softly, stroking the vines on her arms like they were timid pets.

"Her Alpha mate won't dare risk her harm by attacking, but the same cannot be said for the Vampire's. With our Mistress appointing you as their new King, you can placate them and keep them in control. Your brother wouldn't have been able to turn down an offer like this. Only a fool would think to refuse. Do you have anymore asinine questions or are you ready to come to a conclusion?"

I had to narrow my eyes and focus hard on Ember, because the air around her seemed to be moving softly. It was thin curls of smoke rolling off her hair and shoulders that I'd spotted, along with the start of actual heat waves. I couldn't lie, the sight was a bit freaky. I'd seen magic at work in many different ways, but never quite like this.

'She's going to spontaneously combust. ' Maya murmured, not at all joking.

Deacon barked out a dry laugh and said, "I assume you already got your three Vampire sacrifices, right? That why you took a group of my people into the wolves' territory?"

“The quota for the Vampire’s has been reached, yes.” Ember nodded evenly.

“Then you won’t mind me asking why it is that all the Vampire’s in your little group were m*****d.” Deacon replied, humming quietly to himself when Ember’s eyes flashed a threatening shade of red. Even the second witch reacted, her serene demeanor slipping for but a second. “You don’t think it’s only the witches that have spies, do ya? Wouldn’t be the first time I’ve been underestimated.”

The second witch spoke up first. She cut Ember off, who looked like she was gearing up to breathe a column of flame in Deacon’s face.

“Our Mistress doesn’t like loose ends, which is what they became when they failed to capture the tri-brid.”

I caught a glimpse of Deacon’s expression and instantly identified it as one of understanding. At my side, Dina made the smallest of sounds. It prompted me to glance her way and as I did I heard her whisper.

“There’s no way he’s okay with what they did. That ain’t the Deacon I know...”

Dina’s uncertainty was just as troubling as what Deacon said next.

“I been around awhile, seen a thing or two, and I can’t help but notice that this plan of hers, the one that ended with six of my people d**d, was a bit rash. Correct me if I’m wrong, but a powerful witch that’s been planning this for as long as your Mistress has wouldn’t concoct a last-minute plan to storm the most powerful Alpha in the world’s pack if it weren’t important, right?”

“Right.” Ember replied after several seconds, forcing the word through gritted teeth.

“Now, why is that?” Deacon pondered, tapping his chin. “What was so important that your Mistress strayed from her master plan and did something this poorly thought out?”

I didn’t realize I was holding my breath, counting the seconds that ticked by as I waited for one of the witches to answer, until I began to see spots freckle my vision. I’d been so tuned into the three of them that I barely registered the slight tickle I felt against my ankle.

A quick wave of revulsion had me nudging the rat that grazed me away without looking down. I’d seen more than a few scurrying about and super- healing or no, I wasn’t looking to get bitten.

“She’s coming into her power faster than our Mistress has anticipated, even with the hurdles we’ve thrown in her way. If she learns to master it before the spell is completed, all will be lost.” The second witch said, hovering behind Ember who looked seconds away from burning the place down.

Deacon cocked his head, but his expression was obscured. "You mean her power with the shadows? Or are you talking about her witchy side?"

The same rodent, or perhaps it was a different one, brushed up against me a second time. Once again, without looking down, I kicked it away. I added some extra oomph, silently telling the d**n thing to scram. Breyona was the one petrified by all things creepy and crawly, but that didn't mean I was fond of the beady-eyed cretins.

Something about Deacon's question made Ember sneer. Her expression was entirely visible through the slats in the shelving, and full of so much mirth I wondered if she'd actually burst into flame.

"That witchy side of hers possesses power our kind hasn't seen in centuries." She snarled and took a step towards Deacon, stopping only when her companion placed a hand on her shoulder. "It could unravel us all should she ever learn the true extent of it. We've done our part to keep the truth from her hands. We've snuffed out two wolves she sent searching for information. Unfortunately, they couldn't be used as sacrifices, but their deaths still have purpose. From what our spies tell us, she's unaware they're no longer on mission. Now, you do your part. Gather the Vampire's, name yourself their leader and when the spell is complete and the tri-brid is ours, our Mistress will reward you with the title of Vampire King. What do you say, Deacon?"

I couldn't focus on the part about my power and its potential. It didn't matter if it was the answer we'd all been waiting for, the solution to stopping the witches that were on the pathway to taking over the world. Those words were stored away, waiting to be analyzed while I dissected the rest of Ember's statement.

The witches had k****d two werewolves sent out to find information on my lineage -on my magic. Not only did I have to make it out of this place alive, but now I had to find a way to tell my best-friend that her parents were m*****d, that she was now an orphan. I had to physically hold back the tears and push away the memories of afternoons on Breyona's front porch, chatting with her mom while her dad backed into the driveway.

Now wasn't the time to mourn or to blame. There would be plenty of opportunities for that later once we made it out of this place.

If I hadn't tuned in upon hearing Deacon's low, calculated laugh, I would've completely missed his response to Ember's question.

The sound was both warm and rich, full of amusement, yet it carried a note of trouble I couldn't help but notice. When he stopped laughing, the warehouse fell uncomfortably silent.

"I know how this ends." He rumbled, "I won't be King to a bunch of corpses."

I swore I watched the mask of civility Ember wore shatter, cracking halfway up her face to reveal eyes flaming with malice and cruelty.

She didn't sound the least bit sorry when she said, "What a pity, truly. Our mistress will be disappointed. I, on the other hand, will enjoy adding you to the corpses you refuse to rule over."

Deacon took a step forward, his fists clenched. "I'd like to see you try, girl."

Ember was moments away from charging when the second witch placed a hand on her shoulder and whispered in her ear. Straining my ears, I began to hear what she was saying, but then another d**n rodent brushed against my ankle, all but shattering my concentration. Biting back a snarl, I looked away from the witches, and craned my head downwards.

I was about to lash out and grab the thing when I realized it wasn't rodents like I'd thought it had been.

It was vines.

There were dozens of them creeping and crawling throughout the stacks, inching their way throughout the warehouse. One had been trying to wrap itself around my ankle, but now began to slither towards Tristan instead.

"Tristan..." I whispered, digging my nails into his forearm until he turned to look.

He and Dina noticed at the same time. The Vampire we were hiding with cursed under her breath and crushed one under the heel of her boot. As we inched closer to the end of the row to put some distance between us and them, I had another semi-clear view of the witches.

Ember was smiling now, widely and with complete joy. She glanced at Deacon and waved her hand dismissively.

"Don't worry, we'll get to that shortly, after you've introduced us to your guests." She said, then raised her voice so that every word was crystal clear as it filled the ground floor of the warehouse. "Hello there, Lola. Why don't you and your friends come out of your little hiding spot and talk to us? Our Mistress is just d***g to meet you."

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“Oh, Lola.” Ember sang, “Why don’t you come out before I start losing my patience? Wouldn’t you rather walk out with dignity than have Tessa here use her vines to drag you out by your ankles? We’ll even let your little friends go...so long as you don’t put up a fight.”

“Lola, did I not tell you to get the hell out of here?” Deacon rumbled, cursing under his breath.

Ember turned her attention to the hulking Vampire that had spoken and smiled dryly.

“Deacon, you never planned on accepting our offer, did you?” She tutted, eyes flaming with vicious excitement. “I’ll admit, as much as your loyalty would’ve made things easier, I’d much rather watch you all burn.”

As the air around her began to shimmer with heatwaves, I had one thought.

We needed to get the hell out of here, right now.

No sooner than the statement had crossed my mind, the exit doors just a few rows behind us were torn open. Blasted so hard by a gust of wind, they slammed into the walls on either side. The deafening clatter echoed throughout the entire warehouse, while the scent of crisp air filled my nostrils.

“Really, you’re going to take the cowards way out and run?” Ember scoffed, sounding truly disappointed. “I have no intentions on chasing you, but Tessa here, she’s more than ready for a rematch.”

“Tell Bridgette the truth about what happened to me, Lola. She deserves that much.” Deacon grunted.

Dina shouted before I could, her voice even more vicious than Ember’s. “Don’t you dare, Deacon!”

Deacon then barked. “Now get the fuck out of here! ”

I could hear shuffling and knew what Deacon had in mind. He was going to attack the witches to buy us time, and for some reason, that fact didn’t sit right with me. I had no warm and fuzzy feelings for the man, but if he were willing to die for a few seconds of time, the least I could do was fight for him. There was no part of me that wanted to sit down with Bridgette and explain to her how her mate had died, so I decided I wouldn’t.

“Hold onto me.” I whispered to Tristan and Dina.

Outside, in the dead of night, there were nothing but shadows. Clinging to every tree, leaf, and dark crevice in the forest, they lingered and watched. Like a million beady eyes turning my way, I could feel their attention shift to me. When I commanded them this time around, I didn't use words. Somehow, the shadows knew what I wanted, and didn't hesitate to oblige.

The sound of raging wind tore past my ears, whipping my hair into a frenzy around my face, but it wasn't air that had rushed into the warehouse. Heavy shadows, impenetrable in their absolute darkness, filled the room like a cloud of thick smoke. One minute everything was visible, the lights on the ceilings swaying back and forth slowly, and the next we were submerged in total darkness.

All I could do for Deacon was send out a silent prayer that he'd make it out safely while I hauled Tristan and Dina to the doors. It

was the scent of the forest I followed, of damp soil and dewy leaves. As we ran out the back of the warehouse and a sky speckled with stars exploded into life above our heads, I caught a strong whiff of something burning.

Dina was incredibly fast, even for a Vampire. She released her hold on my t-shirt and spun around, staring into the blackened doorway for but a fraction of a second.

Finally, she cursed and took a deep breath.

"Let's go." She said darkly, looking back one last time before the three of us pressed forward.

Half a minute later the three of us were in a dark-colored minivan, whizzing down the backroads at speeds that made my stomach clench and unclench. In the back of my mind, behind the fear, angst, and guilt for Breyona's parents, I had the urge to laugh.

Here I was, the Vampire Queen and Luna to the notorious Alpha Asher, terrified not from the powerful witches chasing us, but of riding in a damn car.

When I craned my head and stared out the rear windshield, my fear of the metal box we were riding in vanished. Even in total darkness, I could see the grey smoke that wafted into the sky.

Many times I'd seen plumes of smoke rising from bonfires. There was always so much, filling the air and tainting it with the scent of burning wood, but this—this was easily tenfold. A sickening feeling in my gut told me that there would be nothing left of the warehouse come morning.

Dina broke the silence, her eyes skewering me through the rearview mirror.

"You better hope my mate don't die or I'll hand your ass over to them witches myself."

She sounded more than serious, enough to make Tristan stiffen in the passenger seat. His eyes paled, narrowing in her direction, but she didn't give him the slightest hint of her attention.

There was something that pulled my eyes away from Dina and back towards the growing pillar of smoke. I thought of the Vampire's inside, how they had been ready to evacuate but hadn't yet left the building. Each of their faces flashed in my mind, not as friend or foe, but as innocent people with hopes and dreams of their own. Every single one of them were living on the run, never settling down, never seeking out the things they wanted most.

"He won't die. None of them will."

The sound of my own voice caught me off guard. I wasn't sure what prompted me to say this, but I sounded so sure that it made me pause. A chill worked its way down my spine, so strong that I had to bite my tongue to keep my teeth from chattering.

"What did you do just now?" Dina snapped, nearly tipping the van as she hit a sharp curve without slowing. "What kind of weird ass magic was that?"

I blinked at her but didn't respond, then matched Tristan's confused stare with one of my own.

Dina let out a huff and rolled her eyes. "The air around you just rippled, and you're tellin' me you have no clue what you did just now?"

That seemed to break me out of my stupor, along with the sudden wave of fatigue that settled on my shoulders and began to slowly weigh them down. I ran my tongue along my teeth, unsure of when my mouth had become so dry.

"I wasn't trying to do anything." I insisted, biting back a yawn, and swiping at my eyes. "How come you could see the air ripple, but neither one of us noticed?"

"How the hell should I know?" She retorted, "I've always been sensitive with that kind of stuff, just like Spence has always been terrified of it. I've got some distant cousins living in New Orleans that practice voodoo, maybe that's where it comes from. If it ain't obvious, these aren't the questions you should be asking. You look bone tired, but you didn't five minutes ago. So clearly you were working some type of magic. I suggest you figure it out before—"

Farther up the road, a cloaked figure stepped out of the brush. I spotted the vines twisting around her arms, and felt my stomach drop as she lifted them above her head. The asphalt began to split in two, but the sound was drowned out by Tristan's shout.

"Watch out!"

He grabbed the steering wheel and jerked it to the left, sending us veering straight into the forest.

Every muscle in my body tensed, remembering how it had felt the first time around when impact smashed into my body, flexing every bone and joint until I could feel each one hiding beneath my skin. Rather than the teeth-rattling feeling of collision, I was hit with something just as terrible.

I could feel the moment the wheels of the van left the ground and knew we were soaring through the air, narrowly missing the tree's that whizzed by. My stomach dropped and bile filled my mouth when the nose of the van dipped towards the ground. Seconds seemed to race by without caution. Either that, or time itself had slowed.

When Tristan looked back, the pale blues of his eyes wide, I knew we were moments away from impact.

"Brace yourself." I heard him say.

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Rather than felt, I heard the screech of metal twisting and tearing, followed by a loud splash. Before I could swipe away the moisture that coated my face, the entire world went dark.

"Damn it, Lola..." A voice snarled, practically shouting in my ear. "...one minute before I throw your ass over my shoulder and—"

All at once the memories collided in my head, exploding in a symphony of screeching tires, torn metal, and rushing water. The soundtrack was backed by Tristan's voice, which was growing angrier by the second. When I was able to pry my eyes open, my surroundings quickly sharpened and the forest we were in came into view. While I was more than thankful there wasn't any light to blind me, there was a gnawing sort of pain covering most of my body.

'Goddess, I hate cars.' Maya groaned, 'We're running everywhere from now on.'

"You need to get the hell up before the witches catch up." Tristan hissed quietly, wedging his hands underneath my arms.

As he lifted me to my feet, the pain that wrapped itself around every bone and muscle in my body began to throb, pulsating to the same beat as my heart. I must've let out groan of some sort because Tristan muttered an apology and began looking me over. I swayed on my feet as he lifted my t-shirt, trying and failing miserably to swat his hands away.

"I'm fine!" I insisted, "I just need a damn minute."

"We don't have a minute." He retorted, jostling me hard enough to snare my attention.

It was then I looked at him, noticing the blood that trickled from a gash on his forehead. His hair was matted and disheveled, the blond strands tinted copper with blood. I trailed my eyes downwards and frowned. His clothes were wet. Soaked to the bone, actually.

I spun around fast enough to make my vision blur, the tree's doubling and tripling before my eyes. It didn't stop me from seeing the river we'd crashed into, or the minivan wedged directly in its center. The windows were blown out and the airbags deployed, blocking me from seeing into the driver's side.

"Tristan, where is Dina?" I asked quietly, not tearing my eyes away from the van. "Don't tell me you left her in there."

"Lola." He said in warning.

"Get her out of there!" I snarled, whirling on him. "Get her out, now!"

For a moment, all we did was stare at one another. Tristan's face was grim, his eyes haunted yet filled with a determined light. He was waiting for me to break, to realize that time was ticking away and that sooner or later the witches would find us. Panic swelled in my chest, but not at the thought of getting caught. Dina was moments away from becoming the next person to lose their life because of me. That fear, it overshadowed everything.

Tristan must've sensed it because his face contorted into a look of outrage. His eyes flared so brightly that for a moment, I thought he might throttle me. Instead, he ran a hand over his face, smearing some of the blood down his cheek, and raced to the minivan. I took a few uneasy steps in his direction, wobbling ever so slightly. The dryness that had encompassed my mouth now spanned down my throat, bringing on a familiar burn that I had felt a time or two before.

What I needed was blood, both to speed my healing and to chase away this exhaustion that was looming over me like a shadow.

When I was able to move without falling over, I hurried to Tristan's side. He had hoisted Dina from the driver's seat, slinging her over his shoulder. The slight limp in his left leg

was the first thing I noticed, followed by the milky white bone protruding from Dina's calf. The Vampire groaned weakly, lifting her head high enough to meet my eyes.

"Legs broken..." She murmured, wincing as Tristan lowered her to the ground. "Can't run like this."

"No, you can't..." Tristan said briskly, "...and neither can I."

I ignored the two of them, focusing only on the jagged piece of bone that had torn through Dina's flesh. "We need to set her leg so she can heal properly, then we can get out of here."

"Sun's coming up. Won't be here for a few more hours, but I can feel my healing slowing." Dina said quietly, her tone eerily peaceful and face turned towards the skyline. "I won't be healed before it rises. I'll only slow you down, which means you need to leave me behind."

"No, that's not what that means—" I snapped, grinding my teeth together to hold back a scream.

"Lola, you need to shift." Tristan said firmly. "You need to shift and get out of here."

He took a few steps in my direction, blocking my path to Dina with his broad shoulders. I could feel my adrenaline spike, matching the refusal that not only burned my tongue, but stung my eyes and constricted around my throat. The world around me was trembling. Every branch and every leaf shook, yet no one else noticed. It took me longer than it should've to realize I was shaking my head, showing my refusal in the one way I could since words were failing me.

I could see the impatience growing on Tristan's face and anticipated his explosion half a second before it occurred.

"Fuck! Why do you have to be so goddamn stubborn? Be selfish, Lola. Get out of here and live. Your life matters more than ours."

His chest was heaving, rising, and falling even faster than mine. There was something about the raw edge to his rage that sapped my own. I was still exhausted, but I could think clearly, could feel the twisting in my gut guiding me to a decision.

I took a deep breath, and when I spoke, my voice level and calm.

"That's the mind-set that made Vampire's, Werewolves, and Witches hate one another. It doesn't matter what I am, my life is not worth more than hers or anyone else's."

He clenched and unclenched his fists. "Lola—"

“I have made my decision, Tristan. Respect it and help me set her leg so we can get the hell out of here.”

The tone of my voice would've left me stunned if we the situation we were in didn't have a countdown. I'd heard myself take on the confidence and fearlessness of a Luna a time or two, but this was something more. The shadows lingering in the forest writhed at the sound, inching deeper into their hiding places.

Tristan didn't fight back or argue, but there was an emotion on his face I couldn't quite identify.

He nodded, “Yes, my Queen.”

First aid had always been included in warrior training but was a bit more extensive given werewolves had faster healing. That meant instead of learning how to patch cuts and sterilize burn wounds, we learned how to set broken bones and preserve severed body parts until pack doctors could arrive. I'd only ever put the knowledge to use once, during the fight that left my father without his head.

I could get used to battle, to the snarling and the bloodshed, but I wasn't sure I'd ever get accustomed to the aftermath. With my hands firmly on the shard of bone, I slid my eyes away from Dina's pained expression and to the blood seeping from her wound. The ragged breaths she let out were muffled by Tristan's shirt. We had no choice but to stuff the wad of cloth in her mouth, both to give her something to bite down on and to keep her from screaming.

“On the count of three...” Tristan murmured, “One, two—”

Blacking out, I pushed with all of my strength. Even blinded, I'd never forget the feeling of bone grinding against bone, or the agonizing scream Dina had let out, muffled by the wad of cloth in her mouth.

Even minutes later, or perhaps it had been hours, I could no longer tell. I replayed the events that led us to where we were now, dragging a half-conscious Dina through the woods, using what articles of clothing we had to keep her blood from hitting the ground. Tristan shouldered most of her weight, muttering something about how tired I looked. I was thankful, even if I didn't say it out loud. It was taking most of my energy not to trip over every stray root or sharp stone that stuck up out of the ground.

The sky had gotten just a tiny bit lighter and was now a deep indigo rather than a vast expanse of star-flecked nothingness. What little visibility it provided only made things worse. I could now see my hands and the dried blood that coated them. Each time I looked down, Dina's scream would ring in my ears.

At one point Dina managed to lift her head from Tristan's shoulder and let out a sardonic laugh.

“What I wouldn’t do for a pint of blood right now.” She chuckled weakly.

A seedling of hope sprouted in my chest when I heard the faint rumbling of cars speeding off in the distance. I refused to give into the feeling, and knew I’d been right in doing so when we came to the base of a steep hill. There were trees scattered along the terrain, which would surely be helpful since the ground was nothing more than mud.

I dug my fingers into the bark of a nearby tree and began to climb, gritting my teeth as my feet sunk into the wet earth, letting out a loud squelch in the process.

I turned back to Tristan. “How are we supposed to—”