

Alpha Asher by Jane Doe Chapter 191

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The moment my eyes opened; I regretted every single decision I'd ever made that led me to this point in time.

Everything hurt.

"F*****g h**l." I tried to groan, but my tongue stuck to the inside of my cheek.

Clutching my head, I tried to turn over. Sharp, pulsating pain left my nerve endings blistered and raw. I swore I could feel my skull rattling in my head like it was full of rocks. Something was blocking me from moving, and that something immediately stoked my anger, not that there was anything I could do given my current condition.

The second time I tried to pry my eyes open, I felt tears drizzle down my cheeks. What light surrounded me b****d and made the migraine I had much worse. I was surrounded by a mass of color that moved and twitched. It carried the scents of Asher and Zeke, but they weren't the only ones I recognized.

"Let me up. Goddess, is there a boulder on top of me or something?" I snarled, my mouth bone dry.

In the background, someone chuckled. I'm pretty sure it was Zeke, or possibly even Mason. That didn't make much sense though considering Zeke said Clara and Mason wouldn't be back for another hour or two.

"Good to know she's not fatally wounded." Someone chuckled.

This time I was certain, that laugh belonged to Mason. It was full of warmth, even if it sounded strained and tainted with worry.

Zeke's voice appeared much too close to my ear. "That boulder you're talking about is your mate."

I snarled at the two of them, lifting my arms to shove Asher away, but it felt like my limbs had been injected with lead. There was something soft beneath me. A bed, I assumed. I felt it shift as the immovable presence keeping me in place drifted away. Rolling onto my side helped lessen the throb in my head but did nothing to help me open my eyes.

Slowly, something grazed my forehead. It was both soft and rough, but the immediate rush of sparks told me exactly who was touching me. His voice filled my mind, but it was hazy and muffled, lingering around the edges of my migraine without managing to break

through. The feel of my mate close by did help ease the pain, but it still took several minutes before I was able to keep my eyes open.

“What the h**l happened?” I mumbled, s*****g down another mouthful of water.

I felt like I’d run an entire marathon in human form, then shifted and bounded through the woods for another seven hours. Using my magic unintentionally never once felt like this. If this was how it would feel every time I conjured something, I wasn’t sure how I’d defeat the witches.

Asher cupped my face, cradling it in his large hand. For a moment, the world around us melted away, along with the curious eyes of Zeke, Mason, and Clara. Even my worries didn’t dare stand a chance, vanishing one by one until only the hum of the mate-bond occupied my thoughts.

I groaned softly, the pain already dimming. “Ugh, I love you.”

Even though I hadn’t yet opened my eyes, I could tell Asher was smiling. It was one of those soft smiles he reserved for my eyes alone. He must’ve been shaken up if he were looking at me like that in front of all these people.

“I love you as well, mate.” He murmured huskily.

Hovering around me was Zeke, Clara, and Mason, each one with a look of curiosity on their faces. Turning onto my side, I felt the stiffness of the cot beneath my shoulder, and realized we were all packed inside the holding cell. I blinked at the four of them, Asher included. Every muscle in my body voiced their disagreement as I tried to sit up.

“What the h**l happened?” I grunted, stretching out my arms and wincing. “It feels like I just lifted a c**p ton of weights. Everything hurts.”

Both of the Alpha’s turned to Clara for an answer, but the curvy witch merely shrugged and shook her head. The jungle of curls tumbling down her shoulders bounced and swished from the movement.

“Don’t you two go lookin’ at me for answers. Just cause I’m a witch don’t mean I know what’s going on with her. And I’ll remind you guys that we got here after she passed out.” She said, placing her hands on her hips.

Asher’s jaw tensed, but he did a good job of hiding his irritation. “Is it normal for witches to pass out after using their magic?”

“Oh!” I shot up out of the cot, nearly toppling over the second I landed on two feet. “I want to see if it worked. Is his mark gone?”

Asher's reflexes were lightning fast, and without a moments hesitation he wrapped his arms around my waist and held me flush to his side. I squirmed a bit, trying to get to the two-sided glass across the cell. He steered me to where I needed to go, his hands skimming down my torso before landing on my hips. His hands were hot against my b**e skin, a fact I had to force myself to ignore.

Luckily, it wasn't too hard, because the minute I saw the patch of b**e skin on my neck, I squealed with joy.

"I did it! I actually did it." I gasped, poking, and prodding at the spot with my finger. "How insane is that? I made it go away just by thinking about it."

"I've never heard of a type of magic capable of removing a mark, vampire or otherwise. You said you made it go away just by thinking about it?" Clara questioned, her hands still on her hips, but her expression was one of confusion rather than sass.

Surprisingly, Asher was the one that spoke first, and it wasn't to tell Clara to mind her business. He seemed much less hostile towards the witch this time around, making me wonder what exactly happened to them all during their time away.

"You can tell her." He said, his eyes softening as he looked down at me.

I could feel my eyebrows crawling up my forehead.

"You trust her?"

"Fina-f*****g-ly, and all I had to do was save his men and uncover a secret witch village." She snorted, narrowing her eyes at Asher. "Took long enough for him to believe me when I said I had no interest in killin' his mate. Guess I can't really blame him though, you do have a knack at getting yourself into s**t."

I returned her glare, "The type of magic I have is called Conjunction. It runs in my family, and its existence is kept a secret for the most part. Well, according to the book, anyway. Supposedly, I can conjure things into existence. Ideas, thoughts, dreams, nightmares...you name it."

Clara's pouty lips thinned as she forced them together, her expression one of disbelief but it wasn't long lasting. She made a sound of surprise and mumbled, "Remind me not to go pissing you off."

"I wouldn't hurt you." I grimaced, "If I went and offed everyone who said something I didn't like, I'd be the Queen and Luna of nothing."

For the longest time I'd felt like a monster because of my heritage, and I was quickly beginning to realize that as useful as Conjunction could be, it would certainly turn some heads.

Clara snorted. "I know you wouldn't intentionally hurt me, but the last thing I need is to p**s you off and you have some insignificant thought about me gettin' run over by a bus or some s**t. I don't know about you, but I like my legs the way they are, long and thick."

Her eyes veered toward Mason as she spoke. Judging from the way his eyebrows slumped together and his mouth opened, I thought he was going to comment. Before he got the chance, there was a heavy pounding off in the distance, muffled through the thick metal walls.

"That would be your Vampire confidant." Zeke said.

I must've looked confused because Zeke took the moment of silence to explain.

"Tristan showed up a few minutes after you passed out. He said something felt wrong, so we let him in to see for himself. He didn't say much, but I think he was kind of relieved you managed erase his mark." He shrugged, leaving the holding cell only to return with Tristan at his side.

Zeke was more intuitive than I gave him credit for. Sure, Tristan's usual scowl was painted across the sharp angles of his face, but there was a lightness to him that hadn't been there before. It felt like some of the shadows had dissipated from his high cheekbones and bottomless eyes. A faint smile spread along his lips as my face lit up at the sight of what he held in his hand.

"Never seen someone so excited over blood." Clara murmured, eyeing the water bottle warily.

I snickered, waving the bottle at her. The crimson liquid inside sloshed around, coating the inside of the bottle. "Between this and Asher, I'll be feeling better in no time."

"Good, because we got to talk. Just keep that away from me, I get squeamish around too much blood." She said firmly, the weight of her tone instantly putting a dampener on my good mood. "Something happened during your mate's fight with that Alpha. Something serious."

For the second time today, I found myself sitting at the metal observation table just outside of the holding cell. There weren't enough chairs for everyone to sit, so Mason and Tristan hovered along the outskirts. I couldn't help but notice how Mason seemed to orbit close to Clara, even though I was more than sure that his job as her babysitter had come to an end. When I tossed a pointed look in his direction, all I got back was his signature lopsided grin, which didn't exactly tell me much.

I never got the chance to ask, because Clara started by dropping a bombshell on all of us.

"Alpha Bran was working with the witches."

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Asher grew still in his seat, chiseled from stone as he stared at Clara with a blank expression on his face. "How do you know this?"

"They probably promised him power in exchange for his help, and like the dumbass he is, he accepted." Zeke muttered under his breath. "They were probably going to k**l him off once they got what they wanted."

"Yeah. Me." I swallowed, glancing at him. "They would've used my magic, I'm sure of it."

"When you two were fighting, he had a witch using magic on you. I sent Mason off to find her, but he didn't have any luck. Chances are she was being protected and whoever was doing the protecting pulled her out the minute you won, which shouldn't have happened, by the way." Clara replied to Asher's question, leaning back in her chair.

I swallowed the knot of unease in my stomach at the thought of Asher losing. "What do you mean it shouldn't have happened?"

Clara looked me straight in the eyes and said, "Your mate should be d**d, but he isn't and I don't know why."

"What—" Zeke sputtered, his eyes going wide. "What do you mean he should be d**d? I've seen Alpha Bran fight dozens of times, there's no way he should've been able to beat him. There isn't a single Alpha that can one up Asher. H**l, even I only stand a couple minutes against him before I tap out."

"The magic that witch was working should've weakened him until he couldn't fight anymore. At that point, I assume Alpha Bran would've y'know...ended things." Clara winced, her eyes flickering to where I sat.

I felt a rumbling in my chest and realized I'd been growling. Both Maya and I hated the thought of that a*****e using magic against an Alpha he challenged himself. Not only was it disrespectful, but cheating like that was grounds for an immediate disqualification. Also commonly referred to as an e*****n.

Clara held up her hands in an act of surrender, "Look, if I had the power, I would've stopped the b***h. If Mason had gotten his claws on her, I would've zapped her into next week. That being said, the witches magic didn't work on Asher. If it had, he'd be d**d."

“No one’s blaming you. Alpha Bran was known for being a coward. I think it’s just a bit shocking he stooped as low as working with the witches.” Mason said quietly, his words directed to Clara.

If I’d been paying more attention to Mason rather than what Clara had said, I would’ve noticed the way his tone softened when he spoke to her and how there was an obvious lack of hostility in his voice that hadn’t been there before.

“Her magic didn’t work on Asher?” I blurted the question out loud, not expecting any sort of response.

“Sure, didn’t. Alpha Bran seemed surprised at that fact.” She replied.

Zeke chimed in, “That’s why he looked so d**n shell-shocked?” He chuckled. “I thought it was because Asher had just put him on his a*s.”

“I’m sure he wasn’t too happy about that part, but that wasn’t why he looked like his eyes were gonna pop out of his head. No, someone used magic on your mate and that’s what kept him safe from Alpha Bran’s witchy ally.” Clara nodded, her tone confident. Clearly, she’d thought this through and after analyzing each and every alternative, the only answer she could come up with is that someone else had protected Asher.

Oh.

Suddenly, all eyes were on me. Even Mason had stopped mid-sentence to tilt his head and peer at me curiously. Clara shifted in her seat, leaning forward.

“Now, my intuition ain’t that great, but if I didn’t know any better, you look like you just figured something out.” She said pointedly, tapping one of her manicured nails on the surface of the table.

“So, uh-I kinda, sorta did a protection spell on you.” I cringed at the sound of my own voice, and waited for Asher’s reaction.

He tilted his head, and if I didn’t know any better, I swore he looked almost... impressed?

“You put a protection spell on me?” He repeated.

I nodded, nibbling on my lower lip as I fought the urge to look away. A quick glance around the room told me how everyone was feeling, but there was one face I purposefully skipped over. Clara looked at me like she couldn’t tell if I were a genius or an idiot, while Mason and Zeke had identical looks of surprise.

Clara narrowed her eyes, skewering me with shards of amber. "When exactly did you do this protection spell?"

"The same day he left, I think." I cleared my throat. "Maybe the day after."

"You don't remember when you did the spell?" She asked, her voice oozing with skepticism.

"Look, I-" I began, but Tristan's brittle laughter cut me off.

"A sleepover, huh?" He said, his incredulous expression making me want to laugh and apologize all at once. It was the most expression I'd ever seen him display. His eyebrows were lifted and baby blues piercing as they stared me down. His lips were flattened into a thin line, that amplified the harshness of his jaw and cheekbones. "Boy talk, pillow fights, and sappy romance movies, right? You just conveniently left out the witchcraft part. Was it Holly's idea to help or did you recruit her?"

Biting my tongue, I replied with only a small hint of sass. "Does it really matter? What's done is done, and Asher's well and alive because of it. As far as I'm concerned, it's a win. Who knows what would've happened if we hadn't done it."

"I can tell you what would've happened..." Clara muttered, her eyes darkening.

Tristan scowled, and somehow I had the feeling my response was the answer he was looking for. He huffed, "I should've figured she'd offer her help. She's just as much trouble as you are, she's just better at hiding it."

"I could hide it if I wanted to." I shot back.

He snorted, his lips twitching as he fought a smirk. "I don't believe you in the slightest. Tell me, what did your witchy trainers have to say about this?"

I opened my mouth to respond before remembering neither Cordelia or Rowena knew about the protection spell. At the time, I knew they'd only try to stop me. Going behind their backs was a necessary measure considering it had saved Asher's life in the end.

The pale tones in Tristan's eyes darkened as he stared me down. I refused to squirm under his gaze. After all, I was the Queen here, not him. Even if the image was amusing to conjure up.

"They don't know, do they?" He grunted, swiping a hand down his face.

"I got the spell from one of Cordelia's books, and I got the book from using Conjunction, I just didn't know it at the time." I confessed, turning to Asher who had remained neutral throughout all of this. "Look, I don't regret what I did, especially knowing it kept you from being k****d by Alpha Bran. I cant even imagine what would've become of this pack with

him in charge. I shouldn't have used magic on you without your consent, just like I shouldn't have gone behind Rowena and Cordelia's backs. I plan on returning her spell book today along with telling her the truth."

"I assume you'll ask her what the risks were in casting a spell like this." Tristan murmured, his tone softening.

Zeke frowned, "Maybe that's what made Asher go all feral."

It would've been an easy answer, but something about it felt wrong. How would a protection spell cause someone's wolf to go insane? The math just wasn't adding up. Judging from Clara's crinkled nose and down-turned lips, I'd say she agreed with me.

"Somethings telling me that's not what caused it, but it still wouldn't hurt to ask." I replied, then looked towards my stoic mate. "How do you feel about all of this?"

As his warm eyes settled on mine, swirling with hints of gold that told me his wolf was nearby, he opened the bond between us and let me into his head. There was no blame within his thoughts, all of which were neatly organized where mine was a straight cluster-f**k of madness. He'd already moved on from the surprise of learning about the protection spell, and was sorting through different theories he had surrounding my newly discovered magic.

His smile was soft and intimate, an expression anyone else would overlook. "You did what you thought was right at the time and it paid off. I think returning the book and getting Cordelia's advice is a sound idea. Perhaps there's more you can ask her."

When his eyes drifted to my family tomb, which was still sitting on the table, I realized he might be onto something.

"You think she might know something about Conjuraton?"

Asher half-shrugged, "It couldn't hurt to ask."

With my eyes still on the book, I hummed. "No, no it couldn't."

I looked around the room, at the people who surrounded me, the emotions that were carved across the canvas of their faces. Each one had their own stake in this, their own fears and hopes when this battle finally came to its head. I couldn't afford to be afraid any longer. Fear wouldn't help me master my magic, nor would it help me defeat the blood witch. I swiped the book from the table and stood, straightening my spine as I inhaled sharply. "Well, I guess I know what I'm doing today."

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It took Asher some convincing to leave the holding cell. The last thing he wanted to do was have another episode and wind up hurting somebody. The two of us planned on speaking to Cordelia and Rowena together.

I'd bite the bullet and give Cordelia her spell book back, while also apologizing for stealing it, even if it had been unintentionally, and Asher would have Rowena check him over a second time for any hint of magic or spell work.

We had a few hours to k**l considering Rowena was currently with Holly for their training session, which gave me plenty of time to swing by the house to grab the spell book and to do something that returned just a shred of normalcy to my life.

It had been days since I'd last stepped foot in a training class, and I was honestly beginning to miss sparring and testing out my skills. There was a comfort with training one couldn't get in the real world. I didn't have to think about losing my life on the mats, or whether or not my opponent was out to k**l me. Plus, it gave me the perfect opportunity to check up on Cassidy, who had been blowing my phone up since Tristan and I slipped out of the pack's boundary lines.

Asher dropped me off at training and went to see his parents. They were freaking out, and rightfully so, over everything that had happened to the two of us. It didn't help that Brandon had been the one to tell them, and undoubtedly added his own embellishments to the story, which was a mess Asher was eager to clear up.

When I plopped down beside Cassidy, I thought my eardrums might burst with how loudly she squealed.

"Lola! Thank the Goddess you're alright." She exclaimed, slapping a hand against her sports-bra covered chest. She blinked rapidly, her baby blues bright with relief. Lowering her voice, even though all eyes and ears were turned our way, she murmured quietly. "I was debating organizing a rescue team to go after you. Spearheaded by me, of course."

I laughed at her dramatics, already settling into the illusion of the routine I'd once had.

"It's a good thing you didn't. Things were chaotic and dangerous for awhile there, for Asher too, unfortunately. We're both safe and sound, though."

Cassidy glanced around the room almost warily, skewering all of the eavesdroppers with a cold look that had them turning back to their own conversations. She chewed on her lower lip, her nervousness bleeding through her every move. I went to put my hair into a ponytail but found I didn't have a hair tie. As many fights as I end up getting into, you'd think I'd have one on me constantly.

“For now though, right? Everyone’s been talking about it...you know, Asher’s victory. Tensions are rising, and I’m not talking about just inside the pack.” She whispered, “Bringing another pack into the fold, especially one that tried to stand against us, might put us all in more danger.”

“Asher wouldn’t do anything to put the people here in harms way, but he’s also going to do his duty to Bran’s former pack and take care of them, as well. Like the humans say, things get worse before they get better.” I sighed, gratefully accepting the hair tie Cassidy offered. Once my hair was out of the way and no longer tumbling down my back, I began stretching.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Cassidy asked, mirroring my movements, and bending to the side to touch her left foot.

We held the stretch for a few seconds before switching legs. I paused, thinking for a moment before responding.

“Right now all I want is a bit of normalcy. I know it’s silly, and things are far from okay, but I keep feeling like the world is just tilting under my feet and I’m fighting to stay upright. I just need a small break, even if it’s just for a couple hours.”

It was Cassidy’s turn to go quiet, and she stayed that way up until Emilia waltzed into the room. When the trainer took her position at the front of the classroom, Cassidy chirped excitedly. “Oh, I have the best idea! We should do a sleepover cookout!”

Emilia had us all split into groups and begin sparring, which meant Cassidy and I were paired together. We circled one another, not yet throwing any jabs even though some of the other groups had viciously launched into their own attacks.

I lifted an eyebrow at her, taken off guard. “You think so?”

She scoffed at me, swatting my shoulder playfully. Her golden ponytail swayed as she danced on the b***s of her feet. “You’ve never been to an event hosted by yours truly, have some faith! Are you free tonight, by chance?”

Shrugging, I said. “Unless something else horrible happens, which I’m praying it doesn’t, I’m free.”

“Awesome!” She beamed, punching the air. “You invite whoever’s coming and I’ll handle everything else. Oh, and the sleepover portion is no guys allowed, so relay the information to your mate.” She snickered, then shifted into a fighting stance.

“Alright, a sleepover cook out it is.” I nodded, a smile of my own forming as I mirrored her stance and plotted my first line of attack.

After training had finished and every ounce of anxiety had been beaten and forced from my body, I was pulled aside by Emilia. Cassidy waved goodbye and shouted a reminder that I needed to invite everyone for the cookout tonight, along with a heads up that she was going to drop by my place to set things up in just a couple hours. I didn't miss the lingering glance she tossed Emilia's way or how the fearless trainer returned it without flinching.

"Hey, I just wanted to thank you for contacting that trainer of yours. He accepted the job here and caught the first flight available." She said warmly, her eyes the same bright shade of amber as her curly hair. Noticing my surprised expression, some of her joy waned and she asked, "You did talk to him, right? Please tell me I didn't just invite some random here."

I giggled at the note of panic in her voice and shook my head. "No, don't worry. I'm sorry, I've just had so much going on that I forgot I'd asked my grandma to call him. I'm honestly surprised he accepted, he's kind of antisocial...and a grump, but he is an amazing trainer."

Emilia's smile returned tenfold, pairing with her muscular physique perfectly. She was often intimidating, but once her scowl melted away, she came off as friendly and approachable. "That's a relief. Your grandma must've gotten through to him somehow. All I know is we can use the new edition. Maybe I'll even get a day off myself."

"If anything grandma probably promised a lifetime supply of her baking." I chuckled, "Once he starts, you should definitely take some time off. With what's going on in the world, we should spend all the time we can with family and friends."

"Make sure you do the same, Luna." Emilia said, her expression softening.

I told Asher about Cassidy's idea in the car. He had picked me up from the training center and seemed considerably less stressed since talking to his parents. Apparently, it had all gone well. His parents were looped in on what was going on and were planning on calling his aunt to relay the news. Surprisingly, Brandon didn't embellish the story all that much and managed to stick to the truth.

Asher was more than on board with Cassidy's plan, even if it meant we didn't get the night alone together. As much as I longed for some one-on-one time with Asher, I wanted to invite Breyona and get her out of the house. Giovanni had called not too long ago to check up on me, curious about how I had removed Tristan's mark. He let me know that Breyona had holed herself up in the bedroom and refused to see anyone or eat anything. I understood her grief and wouldn't try to force her out of it, but I wanted her to know that she had people here for her, people who cared and wanted to help however they could.

"I might invite my parents. What do you think?" Asher asked, squeezing my t***h with his meaty hand, drawing my attention back to the present.

I nodded absentmindedly, "I think that would be nice. Invite dad and grandma while you're at it, Sean, and Mason too. I think we could all use a night off.

"I'll take care of it. Just so you know, if I invite Mason, Clara's going to come as well. I also assume you're going to invite Breyona as well?" He commented, to which I nodded a second time. I'd have to ask him about the Mason and Clara development later. "Any ideas on how you'll get her to show?"

I didn't need to stop and think about my response. I'd already formulated a plan in my head.

"Good, old-fashioned bribery." I replied, a sheepish grin forming on my face.

When we pulled into the gravel driveway of the house the witches were staying at, I took my chance to mind-link Breyona. Asher stayed in the car, giving me the illusion of privacy as I walked towards the end of the drive and lingered by an old weeping willow.

'Breyona?' I called out to her, softening my voice before sending it over the mind-link.

There was a tug in my chest, one so very different from the mate-bond that it made me pause. It was the newly forged connection between Breyona and I, one of pure magic and shadow. I could feel her presence like it were right next to me, like she had just walked down the street and appeared in the driveway herself.

'Hey, Lola.' Her voice was quiet, hoarse from the crying I somehow knew had lasted all night and day.

I chewed on my lower lip, battling the guilt and frustration that swirled in my stomach, fighting off the hopelessness it spawned.

'Cassidy had this idea for a sleepover cook out thing at my place and I'd really like it if you would come. If you wanted to, I mean. I know you're going through a lot and wanted space, but we'd all love to see you. Everyone's going to be there, even Clara and Mason, who clearly have something going on. They've been glued to each other's sides since they got back even though Asher trusts her now and told Mason he didn't have to babysit her anymore.' I added, knowing she'd love a juicy tidbit of gossip, even if she was deep in mourning.

'It sounds fun and all, but I just don't think- wait, you said there's something going on with Clara and Mason? Clara, the witch?' She still sounded devastated, but her voice held a hint of curiosity I couldn't help but notice. 'When did this development happen and why weren't we the first people he's told?'

There's my best-friend, I smiled to myself.

'Seriously, I thought the same thing. It's like he doesn't appreciate our friendship. I was hoping you'd torment him with me at the cookout, but I suppose I can pick up the slack myself.' I sighed dramatically, feeling my heart skip a beat when her muffled giggle traveled through the mind-link. 'Anyway, there's more that's happened, and I really need someone to talk about it-someone I trust. I'll explain how the next time I see you in person, but I kind of discovered my magic and used it to get Tristan's mark off my neck. Insane, right?'

'Oh, it explains the shadow beast part. It explains a lot of things, actually.' I grunted.

Breyona went silent for a few seconds, and through the link I could practically feel the gears in her head turning. She let out a soft sigh, sniffled, then blew her nose.

'Alright, I'll be there.' She said, and I knew then that the grin that spread across my face would leave my muscles aching all day long.

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Rowena answered the door when we knocked, and immediately took Asher into the den to scan him for any charms, spells, or curses. She pointed me upstairs where Cordelia was, and as I climbed the stairs, I searched for the words to say. It had been an accident, stealing the book, but once I had it I'd knowingly cast a spell from its pages.

"Come in, Lola." Cordelia called out, her back turned to me as she rummaged through the old trunk in her bedroom. There were stacks of magical textbooks, the entire culmination of Cordelia's collection throughout the years. Most of which she'd gotten from her family, but there were a handful she procured from powerful friends and distant cousins. She'd told me previously that she had charmed the box to vanish should anyone try to break into it.

When I entered her bedroom, which was a cocoon of tapestries and billowing fabrics, she had just snapped the lid shut. The bangles around her wrists were clinking as they hit into one another, playing the same song as the numerous amulets around her neck. Her greying hair was braided, trailing down her shoulder until it stopped around her waistline

She met my gaze and frowned, the lines around her mouth becoming more prominent.

"What's wrong?" Cordelia asked, placing a hand against the amulets she wore. "You look positively torn.

"There's nothing wrong. Well, not exactly." I said, s*****g my nerves as I struggled to get to the point. Instead of speaking, I rummaged through the old tote bag I wore and pulled out her spell book. I could pinpoint the exact second that realization flooded her eyes, bringing on a light of distrust that made my stomach curdle and sour. "I-I casted a protection spell on Asher, but I swear I never meant to steal the book."

Her eyebrows, which were naturally soft, fell into a sharp grimace. With the wave of her hand, the bedroom door clicked shut. She looked down at the book, then thumbed through its pages, leaving me to drown in the uncomfortable silence.

"So, you accidentally stole my book then proceeded to cast a risky spell on your mate, one that could've had horrible consequences if you had messed up a single detail in the slightest, am I correct?" She said, pinning me in place with a look that could've easily belonged to my mom or grandma.

Ruefully, I nodded.

Cordelia made a sound of understanding, then began tapping her nails along the hard cover. "Thank you for telling me the truth. I was wondering when my book would turn back up. I was beginning to think the gnomes had taken it." She spoke.

"...the gnomes?"

She stared blankly at my confused expression before snorting and shaking her head. "It's a joke, Lola. Though, I would like to know how you stole my book, even if it was by accident."

With the book in her hands, and the jeweled rings on her fingers sparkling merrily, she turned to slide the book into her trunk.

Feeling a blush creep along my cheeks, I swallowed and asked, "Does the term Conjunction mean anything to you?"

She froze, her back still turned to me as she murmured, "That's a word I haven't heard in a very long time."

Clicking the lock on her trunk shut a second time, Cordelia stood and turned to face me. Her eyes were calculating, though not in a sinister sort of way, more like she was seeing me clearly for the first time.

"That's what your magic is. It's how you stole my book, through Conjunction." Cordelia wasn't asking. No, this was a statement, a fact she knew to be true.

The harder I looked at her, the more certain I was that she couldn't possibly be the spy the Blood Witch had sent. There was no trace of greed on her face. If anything, there was sympathy.

“You poor child.” She said quietly, nearly fracturing my heart with fear. She sank slowly onto the bed and placed a hand on the post for support. “That’s why they want you so badly. Oh, the damage they could do.”

“No, they won’t get the chance. I’m going to master this. It’s not going to control me, just like they aren’t going to control me.”

I was not going to be a pawn. Not now, not ever.

Cordelia lifted her chin, a hint of pride flashing in her eyes. “Good, because that’s your only option. It’s going to get worse for you now. It always does once the witch knows what her magical type is, and for a witch of Conjunction, it makes things incredibly dangerous.”

“How do you know about Conjunction, Cordelia? I thought it wasn’t well known.”

“It’s not, but I come from a very old family, from a long line of witches. Word travels through the generations, and I’m more than certain I’m not the only witch that knows.” She replied.

I thought back to Ember and Tessa, to what they had said in the warehouse. “Two of the Blood Witches assassins mentioned they needed to get to me before I realized the true extent of my magic. I’d bet anything that they know about Conjunction too. In the book I have, it says nothing about how to master it. There’s a handful of pages missing, and I can’t help but wonder what information they had on them. You don’t think it was important, do you?”

Cordelia frowned, “I think anything having to do with Conjunction is important, Lola. Wherever those pages are, let’s hope they aren’t in the wrong hands. I suppose we’ll have to up your training now. What I want you to do is to practice Conjunction every chance you get but do so very carefully. Mind your thoughts, don’t put too much feeling and energy into them, especially the ones born from anger. Try your magic out on harmless things.”

The minute the words left her mouth I found myself focusing on that trunk of hers. I dug into the pit of need hiding inside of me, nestled deep within bones, the same one I’d pulled from all those other times when I thought I was just invoking my magic. It wasn’t a particularly strong thought, yet the lid to the trunk flung itself open not a second later.

Cordelia jumped, slapping a hand against her chest as she shouted in surprise.

I blinked, my eyes darting between her and the trunk. A yawn tickled the back of my throat, but I kept it at bay. “I barely had to think about that, but I could use a nap now.”

“Yes, well...” She stammered, clearly surprised. “It’ll take time for you to build up a tolerance, which is why you need to practice. However, I do not recommend stealing any more of my book.” Her voice changed from surprised to stern within seconds.

I held my hands up in surrender. “I promise you it won’t happen again.”

“Good.” She nodded, pleased, and seemingly convinced. “Now, tell me about this protection spell you did.”

After explaining to her the spell Holly and I placed on Asher, down to the smallest of details like where we’d placed the candles in correspondence to one another, she made a sound of disbelief deep in her throat.

“You just can’t stay out of trouble.” She chuckled, shaking her head. I swore there was a hint of pride in her eyes that she fought to cover up. “You say the spell saved his life?”

“According to Clara he would’ve died if I hadn’t.”

“Well, Rowena will be able to detect if the protection spell is still on Asher, but typically it fades with time. The fact that it lasted that long with you being a beginner speaks volumes about your power. What’s done is done, but I still believe you should know the risks involved with what you did.” She tutted.

“The risks?”

“Oh, yes. Every spell has its risks, and there’s a reason even seasoned witches steer clear of protection spells. In essence, a protection spell links the life-force of one with the life-force of another. Asher was very much protected but should you have died. Well, so would he.” She explained, and only now did I fully realize the dangers of the spell I had done. She patted my shoulder gently, just like grandma did. “Don’t worry, dear. Let’s go see what Rowena has to say, shall we?”

When we made it downstairs, there was no sign of the auburn-haired witch. Asher sat on the sofa; his eyes glazed over from the mind-link he was currently in the middle of. Seconds went by before they cleared. He blinked rapidly and stood, coming to my side. I hadn’t realized how much I’d missed his touch until his arm was around my waist, pulling me into his side. All of the anxiety and stress melted away, vanishing much faster than it had during training.

“Where did Rowena go?” I asked him, looking around but finding no sign of her.

“She got a phone call and had to leave, said it wasn’t a big deal.” He replied, “Cass made it to the house and said if we had nothing better to do we can help her set things up. I’ve already mind-linked your dad and the others. They’ll be there in a few hours.”

I turned to Cordelia, “Did you want to come? We’re having a cook-out tonight.”

Cordelia's eyes softened, taking some of the years out of her face, but none of the wisdom. "It's quite alright. Actually, I could use an afternoon of relaxing myself. I may just meditate some and take a long bath." Her eyes traveled to Asher's face, "Did Rowena find any magic clinging to you, Alpha?"

Asher shook his head, and a pang of relief stung my chest. "She said I'm clean, which is great but doesn't explain what made my wolf go feral. She felt the echo of the protection spell Lola did, but she was confident it wore off."

"Thank the Goddess." I sighed, earning a confused look from Asher. "I'll explain in the car."

The middle-aged witch nodded, her expression troubled yet thoughtful. "While that is a good thing, a protection spell wouldn't have affected your wolf in that way. If it's magic that made your wolf lose control, then I believe Rowena would've been able to sense it. Is there any chance stress could be involved?"

Asher and I shared a look. We both knew that Cordelia meant well, but she wasn't a werewolf herself. Stress might've been a factor at first, when Asher's protective nature had worsened, but stress alone wouldn't cause a wolf to go feral. Our wolves were meant to steady and guide us, not send us head-first into chaos.

No, what turned Asher's wolf feral had to be something else, something Rowena missed.

We made it back to the house within the hour. As we pulled into the circular drive, parking next to the granite fountain Asher had installed, the first thing we spotted was Cassidy's smiling face. Her cheesy grin made sense the moment Kendrick came into view, carrying bags of groceries from her car into the house.

Between the four of us, we managed to get everything set up before the first of our guests arrived, which just so happened to be grandma, dad, and Sean. I spotted Flora alongside them and smiled at how her and dad had their arms wound around one another's waists. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary, other than my dad smiling ear-to-ear, I went back to work and waited for them to come inside.

I could hear them before I saw them, pinpointing Sean's laugh first and foremost. It was raspy, which made sense considering my big brother was a grown man, but still had that squeak that reminded me of the scrawny little boy I'd grown up beside.

When the four of them made their way into the kitchen, I noticed instantly something had changed. It didn't take long to figure out what that something was. The second my dad moved, untangling himself from Flora's petite form to pull me in for a hug, I saw it.

"Dad, what the-" I stammered, pushing him away.

He didn't take any offense to my actions, and actually smiled when I held him at a distance and scanned my eyes up and down his body. The grizzly man looked the same, only he was freshly shaven for once in his d**n life. Instead of crazy cave-man vibes, his beard gave off more of a refined lumberjack look. What made me push him away like a mad woman was that he didn't limp when he approached me. Not only that, but his usual grimace was gone, the one signaling to the world that his knee was hurting him.

"Can you believe it, Lola? I'm healed." He grinned, like a full-fledged grin that brightened his eyes and removed just about every line and crevice on his face, making him look younger than I'd ever seen him. For emphasis, he did a little spin, splaying his hands out like he'd done a backflip.

His joy was contagious and his confidence inspiring as he said, "Not only did I spend the morning in the hospital getting x-rayed, but I also had Rowena check me out. There's no injury there to be seen. No shrapnel, no scar tissue, nothing. It's like the accident never happened."

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Dad's grin didn't falter, remaining intact while I picked my jaw up off the floor. He chuckled, the sound warm and throaty, while tugging Flora over to his side.

The woman with the kind eyes and soft curls smiled at me, her pink lips matching the petals on the dress she wore. She was clearly nervous, twiddling her fingers and glancing around the kitchen with interest. I felt a tad guilty considering I hadn't really spoken more than a couple words to Flora. The last thing I wanted her to think was that I had a problem with her and my dad being mates.

"That's great, dad! You're like a whole new person, but how did this happen?" I had to ask, glancing over at grandma when she made a noise in her throat.

She said nothing, currently hunched over as she stuffed our refrigerator full of her homemade sweets. There were tupperware containers stacked on the shelves, and from a distance I could make out a couple batches of cookies and even a plate of brownies. I'd have to sneak away later on and steal a few before Asher and Zeke scarfed them all down.

Dad heard it too, his grin widening as he shrugged. It made sense he wouldn't be too worried about how it happened, only that it had. He jutted his chin in grandma's direction and said, "Had to be your grandma working her magic."

"I told you four times now it wasn't me that fixed your leg." Grandma huffed, swatting at him as she closed the refrigerator door.

Dad shrugged, "All I know is I hope it lasts. Flora here has been teaching me how to dance. Can you imagine that, Lola? Your old man on the dancefloor!"

I had to grin at what he said, laughing at the excitement on his face and how it made him less of a gruff veteran and more of a lovesick puppy. Before I could get more than a chuckle out, my smile fell. What he said about dancing, it plucked a memory from the back of my head, one I hadn't thought about since Tristan and I sped out of the pack via motorcycle.

A familiar tickle started in my stomach as I remembered Flora and dad dancing at the wedding. Seeing him like that, his face contorted in pain and shame while his eyes b****d with longing, it broke a part of my heart that wanted nothing more than my dad's happiness. He'd been through so much, lost out on so many things with Flora that it didn't seem fair for him to miss out on this too.

Grandma was the first to speak, instantly noticing the fallout in my joy.

"What is it, Lola?" She asked, coming to my side, and placing a steadying hand on my shoulder. The scent of dried lavender followed her, mixing with her floral perfume to create a scent that was familiar and calming.

Hearing the seriousness in her voice, dad broke off his silent conversation with Flora and turned my way. His eyebrows creased with concern, the same salt and pepper shade as the hair on his head.

I was connecting the dots, realizing that the burst of emotion I'd felt watching my dad and Flora dance was my magic manifesting itself. There was no point in hiding this from them, from the people I trusted more than anything in the world. Even though I hardly knew Flora, the way she looked at my dad had me wanting to trust her in the same way. She'd never replace my mom, and I knew she didn't want to, but she deserved happiness just as dad did.

"I think I'm the one that healed your leg, actually." I admitted, "It's a long story, but Asher and I figured out my magical type. I can conjure things, make them real just by thinking about them. It's why the witches want to use me so badly."

Understandably, no one looked too relieved to hear the truth. Everyone, Flora included, now had identical looks of unease on their faces. Dad's was mixed with anger, while grandma's had small traces of worry. They both looked at one another, then at Asher who had just walked into the room.

"They're not going to get their hands on you though, isn't that right'?" Dad said, but his question was directed at Asher.

Asher came up behind me, his arms circling my waist and drawing an instant sigh of relief from my lips. His masculine scent and the heat of his skin melting against my own took the edge off and filled me with a sense of confidence that came from feeling safe. Dad knew as well as I did that Asher would sooner send the entirety of our forces into battle if it meant keeping me protected, but I didn't blame him for needing reassurance.

Apparently, neither did Asher, because he replied without a hint of offense in his voice. I could feel his chest vibrating against my back, quaking with the gravelly sound of his voice.

"Not a chance. We're going to take every measure possible to make sure she stays safe."

I craned my head to look up at him, momentarily d*****g in the amber pools that circled his pupils. His lips, which looked irrevocably soft and kissable, twisted into a small smirk. It didn't matter that I was openly ogling him. Any time our eyes locked, it was like the room melted away, leaving us both alone in our own small bubble.

"Taking every measure possible doesn't mean I'm going to be locked away like a princess in a tower, though." I reminded them both, "I have this power for a reason, and I'm going to use it to stop the witches."

"Lola, maybe that's not—" Dad began, putting on his stern parental voice.

"First, you need to master it. No point in running head-first into battle with this Blood Witch without knowing your stuff." Grandma chimed in, on my side as always. Pride sparkled in her eyes, but it had always been there, even when I was nothing more than a werewolf living in her little cottage in the woods.

Dad side-eyed her, still grimacing. "Mom, we're not sending my daughter up against an army of witches."

"Don't you look at me like that. I care about her just as much as you do, but even I can put aside my own feelings to see what's best for this world." She huffed, snapping her fingers. "This doesn't just affect this pack. Maybe it did at first, but things have grown bigger than that. This fight can very well change things everywhere, and not for the better. Your daughter's been given a special sort of power, and power like that demands to be used."

"H**I, yeah! Tell him, Grandma." Zeke's whoop sounded from across the kitchen.

The messy-haired Alpha appeared in the entryway; a lopsided grin pasted onto his face. Dad skewered him with a look so vicious that Zeke held up his hands in surrender. The smile didn't slip from his face, and after a moment Dad let out a deep sigh.

“I know you’re strong, Lola. Stronger than half the wolves in this pack, but that doesn’t mean I still don’t worry about you. You’ve taken on so much so young, and everyone has their limits. I’m just afraid of what might happen once you reach yours.” He grunted.

Dad’s eyes carried a weight I’d noticed my entire life, but never fully understood. He’d been an incredible warrior in his prime, shot down during battle and grievously injured. In the span of one day, his entire life had been flipped on its head. I wondered if dad had reached his own limits that day, and if that was why he mentioned what might happen once I reached my own.

I slipped from Asher’s arms and stepped into my dad’s, inhaling his woodsy scent, and smiling at the tobacco and leather notes of his cologne, a gift mom had gotten him a few years ago. Even though I wasn’t his daughter by blood, there was nothing but affection in his eyes.

“I know, dad, but I have to fight. I have so many people counting on me and letting them down isn’t an option. I’m trying my best not to go into this blind.”

His smile turned wry, and his eyes glistened with the emotion he fought to hide. “You’ve changed, you know that, kid? The old you would’ve charged in there and set the place on fire. You’re becoming a better ruler each and every day, making your old man proud. Just remember that you’re not in this alone, alright? You got so many people here wanting to help you, and you need to let them.”

I looked back at Asher, my heart stuttering in my chest at the intimate smile that ghosted across his face. It would’ve looked out of place to anyone else, clashing with his sharp jawline and bottomless eyes, but not to me. He was confirming what my dad was saying without words, reminding me that no matter what was lost, he would always be here.

“I know, dad.” I replied, squeezing him one more time before returning to Asher’s side, drawn by that invisible tether between us.

He chuckled, swiping beneath his eye before gesturing my way. “Now tell us about this magic of yours and how it healed my leg. It won’t wear off, will it?”

Settling into Asher’s arms, I leaned against his chest and thought over my dad’s question. There wasn’t any way for me to test whether or not it would wear off, so I went with what my gut was telling me.

“I’m pretty sure it won’t wear off. If the doctors and Rowena said it’s fully healed, then it should stay that way.”

Flora glanced between my dad and I before speaking softly, stunning just about all of us in the room.

“When exactly did you heal him? If you don’t mind my asking, of course.” She said, toying with her fingers, drawing my attention to the pale pink nail polish she wore.

“It was at the wedding Claire hosted, when you two were dancing. I... I saw dad scowling, and I felt awful. I could tell he was in pain, but he was doing his best to hide it.” I frowned, remembering the guilt like it were yesterday. There was nothing quite like the pain of watching your parent struggle, so close to having it all, but still weighed down by the past. I looked at dad, matching his gentle smile with one of my own. “All I know is that in that moment, I wanted you to be able to dance with her.”

Sean piped up, his mouth full and one of grandma’s lavender cookies in his hand.

“So wait a minute. You’re telling me you can ‘conjure’ things? Where does that kind of magic end? Like, are you restricted to just physical stuff, or can you make something appear out of thin air too?” He asked, moving from his place against the counter.

There was a look of excitement in his eyes that made me snort. I might’ve been the troublemaker growing up, but anytime Sean had that look in his eye, he’d quickly end up tangled in his own mess.

I shrugged, waiting for the other shoe to drop. “I’m not sure. I still need to practice more. So far I’ve healed Dad’s leg, opened a trunk, and stole a book from Cordelia. I’m pretty sure I also turned Breyona into some kind of shadow wolf and opened a door back at the warehouse Tristan and I were escaping. So, thinking back on it, I’m not sure conjuration has any limits.”

Sean made a sound of absolute wonder, his mouth stretching into a wide grin that actually had me snorting.

“A shadow wolf, are you serious?!” He hollered.

He then proceeded to lean in and lowered his voice, whispering even though everyone in the room could still hear him.

“Do you think you could work your magic and do something about my hair? I’m pretty sure I’m going through some kind of early male pattern baldness and the only thing worse than me being bald is having to wear baseball caps all of the time.” He groaned, clenching his eyes shut. “I’ll take a mullet at this point, just fix me!”

Grandma made a sound of disbelief, then swatted at Sean. He danced out of her reach, using dad and Flora as cover. Flora held her hand over her lips to quiet her giggle, while dad scoffed at his son. Sean peeked over their shoulder and mouthed, “pretty please?”

“She is not using her magic to fix your silly hair problems.” Grandma scolded him, but there wasn’t any sternness in her voice.

Sean appeared around dad's bulky frame, his face a mask of defiance.

"It is not silly! Male pattern baldness is a serious condition." He shot back.

Zeke nodded, murmuring his agreement, then grinned when Grandma turned her sights to him. From behind, I could feel Asher's chest rumbling with amusement, watching the clusterfuck of a conversation the three of them were getting into.

"Who's going bald?" A voice called out, one that made me whip around, a smile spawning across my face.

Breyona and Giovanni stood in the doorway, both glancing around the room with identical looks of confusion. The curly haired Vampire that towered over my best-friend gave her an intimate look as he slid past. His pitch-black eyes met mine as he set a couple of two-liter sodas on the counter.

"Breyona insisted on bringing something." He chuckled smoothly, the sound oddly similar to melted chocolate. "I brought something a bit stronger."

He pulled out a bottle of whiskey, one whose label was covered in thin cursive lettering. Asher made a sound of surprise and with a chuckle, Giovanni handed him the bottle. The two men were so alike that Breyona and I found it hilarious. Both were reserved in their own ways but had this viciousness hiding just under the surface.

"This is good s**t." Asher said, handing Giovanni back the bottle.

Giovanni nodded, a quick j**k of his sculpted jawline. "Some of the best."

"Aw, they're bonding." Breyona whispered, a smile cloying at her lips as she slipped between the two of them and ended up at my side.

I didn't hesitate to throw my arms around her, squeezing her hard enough to make her groan. Even with her fake sounds of pain, I could hear the laughter in her voice.

"I'm so glad you decided to come." I told her.

She smirked down at me, tucking a wavy strand of her hair behind her ear. "You didn't give me much of a choice, bribing me with information and whatnot. You were right, though. I needed to get out for a little bit. I'm still not alright, and I'm not sure I'll ever be, but I'm not going to give up and check-out just because...you know."

I took a moment to admire my best-friend, marveling at her strength and resilience. It made sense that someone as radiant would be mated to a force like Giovanni. Everything would've been different if we hadn't started talking again—if she hadn't of forgiven me for ditching her for Tyler and his s****y friends. Looking back, I don't know what I would've done without her.

I laced my arm through hers and gave her a small smile, "You don't have to be alright. I think most people are a little bit broken, and that's okay. No one gets through life unscathed; we all end up wounded one way or another. I'm lucky I have such strong people in my life to help me get through those moments."