

Read Novel Alpha Asher Novel [by Jane Doe] Chapter 231

Chapter 231

It was terrifying how easy it was to use my magic now.

A single thought woven with intention, entwined with a thread of energy, and reality itself bent beneath my hands.

Holly and I left the garage, walking through the kitchen and into the living room where everyone had gathered. Breyona was talking animatedly to Mason and Clara, while the two Vampire's standing close by watched with interest. Dad and Asher had come back inside and were now sitting on the sofa still deep in conversation. 1

Asher's head snapped up, his eyes locked on my face as Holly, and I entered the room. There was no dark light of suspicion in his eyes, only exhaustion and endless love. He opened his muscular arms and I stepped into them, my breath catching as I waited for what might happen next.

What my mate didn't know was that the girl he held in his arms wasn't real.

Through one of the many living room windows, Holly and I watched the illusion I crafted unfold. Everything, from the stitching on our clothes to the part of Holly's hair, was a product of my magic. I'd taken the extra precautions to make the illusion tangible on the off chance someone was to reach out and touch one of us. Nothing would blow our cover like a hand passing through our arm or torso, proving we were made of nothing more than mist and magic.

It took seconds to conjure up two clones of us, to slip through the front door without a single person in the house noticing. Without Rowena's cursed amulet around my neck, it was all too easy.

"It's a little unsettling, isn't it? Seeing yourself from a distance." Holly murmured in a low voice, even though it wasn't needed.

Another droplet of magic and any sound we made was undetectable. The Shadows themselves cloaked us outside, obscuring our forms from the window we stood in front of.

I couldn't bring myself to answer her.

Guilt ran rampant in my chest the longer

I looked at Asher. He and Breyona were talking to me- to the illusion. Their lips moved, but I didn't dare tune into what they were saying.

Forcing myself to turn away, to go against my family and friends, was the hardest thing I'd ever done. It made every breath I took sting in my lungs, but I couldn't-wouldn't lose anyone else. If this power I had was so incredible, then there was no reason I couldn't do this on my own. 1

"Let's go. We're wasting time and I need to make a pit stop." I ushered Holly away from the window, compelling the Shadows to follow.

We jogged around to the front of the house, going down the driveway to where Tristan had parked the sedan. A tiny push of magic and the engine rumbled to life. With betrayal roaring in my head, an acrid backdrop to the song the dark magic whispered in my veins, Holly and I peeled out of the driveway and into the night.

Neither of us spoke, but I gathered she was nervous by the way she tapped out a hasty rhythm on the armrest, eyes scanning the passing forest.

Peeling down the back roads brought up a time when I'd been afraid of driving. I wasn't sure when that fear had subsided, but at this very moment, I felt absolutely nothing. Blame it on the icy kiss of dark magic, or the fact that I'd been maxed out with my brother's death, but it was a break I had longed for.

"How long do we have to do this?" Holly asked, her voice soft as it peeled past the layers of darkness.

The backroad we coasted down widened as we drew closer to town. Businesses began to pop up, their windows darkened, and open signs flipped to closed. Most of the parking lots were empty, except for the one I was looking for.

"Without me there to [search control](#) them, the illusions will slowly unravel. I'd say we have an hour tops."

There was no way for me to actually know this, yet I did. The answer came in the form of a kick to the gut, an eerie feeling that smacked me upside the head and demanded I listen.

I made it to my first and only pit stop within ten minutes, swinging into a bay before putting the car in park.

"Lola, why are we here?" Holly craned her head to stare out the window, a strange note of suspicion plaguing her voice. Her brows were furrowed when she finally turned my way.

Again, I didn't respond. She knew why we were here and what my plan was. I wasn't going to waste the time answering.

"Be back in five." I turned away, closing the driver side door.

With a single thought the air around me folded, weaving itself over my body and erasing my form from view. To Holly, it would look like I had vanished in thin air, but I was still very much present.

An iridescent film of magic only I could see floated in front of my face, encasing my body in a cocoon of energy.

Without looking back, I strolled into the Hospital through the ambulance's bay doors, one step closer to bringing my brother home.

Nurses flitted by left and right, a sea of colorful scrubs that blurred as they passed. There weren't any more than a dozen, and while they moved with purpose they lacked that sense of urgency present when someone was teetering on the cusp of death.

It seemed it was a normal night for them. For me, it was anything but.

Not a single one of them looked my way. Mots of them chatted as they walked, slinging medical phrases I didn't know the meaning to. More than once I had to move out of the way to avoid running into one, but I doubt they would've noticed if I had.

Even the nurses sitting behind the main desk failed to notice me pass. As for the badge I snagged, one of them would be missing that, but they'd most likely chalk it up to a case of forgetfulness.

Five minutes would pass, and they'd find it in the exact spot I'd swiped it from.

The morgue itself was cold, but not nearly as cold as my hands. By the time I made it to where Sean was being kept, that iciness had injected itself into my veins and traveled to the rest of my body, encasing me in frosty stone.

When I pulled his body out of the cooler, my first urge was to drink him in. To stare at the face I'd grown up besides, to think about how much it had changed during his progression from boy to man.

I didn't give myself so much as a second, because this-this wasn't the end.

Getting into the Hospital was the easy part. Escaping, now that was a bit harder. With another speck of magic, any sound I made was silenced. Making sure I didn't run any nurses down with the giant metal cart I pushed, that was the hard part. 1

I did wind up clipping a few with the corner, but the most they did was hiss in pain and turn to see nothing but empty hallway, before going back to their jobs.

“Fuck, Lola. Don’t tell me that’s what I think it is.” Holly squeaked as I approached the car, slapping a hand over her mouth. She fumbled to get her seatbelt off, though I wasn’t sure why.

I was too wrapped up in sliding Sean’s body onto the backseat to notice that Holly had cursed for what was most likely the first time in her life. Once I got him situated, I slammed the door shut and climbed into the driver’s seat. Holly was turned in my direction, her eyes wide with some vagrant emotion I didn’t care to process.

Once again, we drove in silence. This time around, it was thick with tension. Nearly a dozen times Holly would open her mouth only to snap it shut, never once saying anything.

What was there to say, after all? She knew my plan and had even offered her blood to help. There was no backing out now. Not for me, not for her. Hell, not for any of us.

All I needed was a patch of land directly under the full moon. I didn’t drive far before finding the perfect spot. A cut out alongside the main road wouldn’t even garner attention for most. It was unimportant, an easy detail to overlook. For me, it was everything I needed and more.

“Help me with his body.” I told Holly, barely waiting to put the car in park before jumping out.

She twiddled with her fingers, once again opening, and closing her mouth. I guess she could tell I meant business because with one look at the expression on my face, she snapped out of her stupor.

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We set Sean down in the grass off the side of the road. I stood over the body of my big brother, still not allowing myself to process what had happened. The gashes across his neck and chest were unimportant. His skin was almost translucent, blending in with the muted colors of the grass so well that it was both beautiful and haunting. The way the moonlight streamed down onto his body, turning him silver, was a sight I’d never forget.

“I’m so sorry about Sean, Lola. I’m so sorry.” Holly’s shaky whisper came from behind.

Her voice was swallowed by the night, stolen by the stillness that surrounded us. I sank to my knees at Sean's side, trailing my eyes over his dark hair and long lashes.

"What are you planning to do?" Holly asked.

The clear note of hesitation in her voice prompted me to turn my head in her direction. I scowled, confused as to why she needed me to say it aloud. A chill skated down my spine, one I ignored as I looked down at Sean once more.

"I'm going to bring my brother back from the dead." I couldn't look away from him. :

Holly gasped audibly, circling Sean and I until she faced me. She lowered herself to the ground at his side. Her hands were trembling, and the whites of her eyes were visible, large, and bright despite the darkness.

"Lola, you-you can't do that."

My head snapped up without my say. Crimson tinted my vision, my fingers tingling from icy cold.

What exactly did she mean by that?

"Yes, I can. You read the book, you know what Conjunction is and what it's capable of. I can do anything. You knew this was my plan, Holly. I'm not seeing what the sudden problem is." I laughed at the absurdity, but there was no warmth, no humor in it.

"You read the book too, which means you saw the part where it talks about what you're tapping into to do these things. Something like this, raising someone from the dead-you know that's not the kind of power you want to tap into. It won't let you go. Even now, it's holding onto you." Her eyes full of knowing, trailed down to my hands, to the dark veins that crawled up the tops of them.

My fingers twitched, joints aching and bones grinding against one another.

"You knew this was my plan, Holly." I said carefully.

Holly shook her head, a small, panicked laugh sliding past her lips. "Lola, I thought your plan was to use my blood to find my mother by yourself. You wanted to keep your friends and family safe. That's why you left them behind. Now, this-this I never saw coming.'

She stood from the ground, towering over Sean and me. With her hands raised, she took a step back, and then another. My fingers twitched, my brain fogging with every passing second until each thought was drenched in a thick mist that made it hard to focus.

“I shouldn’t have done this-I shouldn’t have agreed to help you. You need to talk to someone, Lola. I-I can’t do this anymore. Please, just take me back.”

She was taking back her promise to help me with this. She was leaving me to do it myself.

‘How dare she? We can make her. All we need is her blood. Just one tiny little drop. The dark magic in my veins sang soothingly, gliding its icy fingers over my face and neck.

It was right. It had always been right. I should’ve never thought Holly would understand, that any of them would understand. How could she? After all, she’d been locked away by our father.

Spending an entire life without anyone—

without friends or family. How could she possibly understand the bond Sean and I had?

I barely registered the sudden temperature drop, or that I’d been the one to will it into existence.

“Lola, what’s going through your head right now?” Her teeth clacked together.

There was fear in her voice, wafting into the air the same way her breath did.

Knowing I had been the one to put it there felt good.

“You shouldn’t have done that, Holly.” I said darkly, succumbing to the siren’s song oozing in my veins. “Now, I’m going to have to make you. Now, you have no choice.”

A burst of magic exploded from my chest, spurred on by my thoughts. Holly’s yelp was swallowed by the night, her body jerked forward before being brought to her knees. I held her there with nothing more than my own will, rooting her in place where she’d once been.

“Lola, what are you doing?! Stop this! This isn’t you.” She begged, blue eyes bright and fearful, watering with every plea.

I stared at her, and even though some distant part of me knew who she was, I felt nothing for this girl. There was only unending cold, a bitter ice that covered my soul and held it in a soothing embrace.

There was no guilt, no pain, and no shame.

“You’re wrong, Holly.” I said, not recognizing my own voice.

From behind my half-sister, the Shadows crawled from the forest, slithering along the ground just out of sight. Holly thrashed, but I had her pinned from the shoulders down. Tears budded along her lash line before falling free. Somewhere deep beneath the ice, I felt a twinge of...of something, but it was just out of reach.

“Lola don’t do this. If you won’t think about yourself, think about Asher! Think about what this would do to him. I know losing your brother hurts, but do you think this is what Sean would want?!”

Another burst of magic and I wrenched her hand forward, turning it palm side

Bending her to my will was addicting, spreading the silky veins of darkness further up my hands. The part of me that cared was buried too deep, and no matter how much she cried out, her voice was smothered by the beautiful siren’s song. 1

“I think Sean would want to be alive. Why don’t we ask him?” I mused, flicking my hand in the direction of the Shadows.

One leachy tendril jumped up from the ground, slashing the palm of Holly’s hand. She let out a quick shriek, and the two of us watched as droplets of pure crimson began to bead along her skin.

The others on the outskirts began to writhe impatiently, scenting her magical blood and wanting to drain her dry.

“No, you will not feed from her. If any of you take so much as a single drop I will send you into oblivion.” I snarled, forcing them back into place.

With my magic, I tilted Holly’s hand and allowed the blood that pooled to splatter along Sean’s chest and stomach. It was bright against his pale skin, shimmering with a magic I recognized instantly.

I placed my hands on my brother’s cold, hard chest. Holly’s blood was searing, almost painful from how cold I’d become, but within it’s heat I could make out the electrical current of magic.

Bracing myself, forcing Holly’s pleas to the very background of my mind, I began. 1

A single thought, a mere whisper of intention, and magic swelled in my body.

Every drop, I forced into my brother’s lifeless corpse. I couldn’t remove my eyes from his face, couldn’t stop staring, waiting for the moment his eyes opened and life returned to them.

The first burst of magic I forced into him sent me spiraling into the darkness, but there was something different about it.

I craned my head, looking around, but it went in all directions. There was an emptiness that surrounded me, echoing though there was no sound to latch onto.

“He’s not in there, Lola. His soul is gone. Can’t you feel it?” Holly’s distant voice cried out.

‘We can bring it back.’ The dark magic hissed.

Yes, we could.

I reached out with my magic, unfurling invisible arms that spread in all directions, delving past the thin fabric that separated worlds and into realms that I had no name for that I didn’t know existed.

There was this warmth, this speck of golden light that I couldn’t see, but feel.

Somehow, I knew it was what I was searching for.

My bones began to ache from the cold, my arms growing heavy and shoulders stiff. Its influence was spreading, but I was so close.

“I shouldn’t have done this. I shouldn’t have done this.” Holly’s sobs grew louder.

A prickling sensation raced up my spine, an awareness that told me someone was here. That they were approaching. I snapped into my own body, my vision returning in a burst of detail and color.

Holly’s blue eyes were torn in two. Sorrow, guilt, and regret poured from them in tandem with her tears. Her lips trembled, making out three words that would haunt me to my grave.

“Please, forgive me.”

A scuffle sounded from directly behind me, lifting the hairs along the back of my neck. I turned and my heart nearly seized as I realized who’s eyes I were looking into.

“You?” I gasped.

An excruciating pain encased my skull, stealing away my vision and the ground beneath my knees.

With that face burned into the depths of my mind, I fell into the open arms of darkness and let it swallow me whole.

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Chapter 233

One moment I'd been swallowed by the darkness, and the next it was nowhere to be seen.

Light assaulted my eyes, carrying with it colors so vibrant they practically glowed.

Sprawling hills of emerald grass wove in and out of the land in all directions, topped with lush trees whose branches dipped and bowed, providing soothing patches of shade to escape in when the sun became too unbearable.

Rays of glittering gold shone over everything. Over the birds as they flew, over the butterflies that darted from wildflower to wildflower. They even shone over the structures in the distance, the ones that rose up out of the grown at odd angles, with pieces that swung in the gentle breeze. 1

Wait a second. Was this a park?

I broke into a jog, racing down the hill I stood atop of. Silky threads of grass caressed my legs, gentle against my bare skin. The air was cool in my lungs and surprisingly sweet on my tongue. As it filled my body, my head became clearer.

Drawing near, the figures that had once been blurry in the distance were now sharp and vibrant with color.

A jungle gym sat to my left, one with spiral towers and a network of little wooden bridges that made it look like a child's dream castle. To the left was another tower with a slide curling around its base. A swing set sat next to it, the four seats swaying in the breeze. 1

In between the structures was a network of paths, dotted with benches and water fountains.

A pang of recognition struck me right in my chest, but it was nothing in comparison to the surprise that rendered me speechless when I heard his voice.

"Lola? It's about time. I was beginning to think you were standing me up."

I spun around so fast the world blurred, colors mixing and the air sparkling with hints of what I swore were actual magic.

None of that mattered though, because the man standing before me with a wistful smile on his face, was none other than Sean.

My big brother.

Looking back, I wouldn't remember sprinting to him or how the scenery seemed to change, the distance between us shrinking as though the earth itself couldn't wait to see us embrace. What I'd remember was throwing myself into his arms, taking in his scent and the way his skin glowed with life and warmth.

The wall I'd constructed in my heart, the one holding back every ounce of grief and pain, was obliterated the moment I stared into his eyes.

I couldn't stop crying, just as I couldn't stop staring at him, clinging to his shirt and skin because who knew when this dream would end, and I'd spiral back into the real world? The shards of my shattered, broken heart slipped through my fingers, slicing my skin as they fell to the ground.

My brother was gone, dead. The boy I grew up with, who was there for every single moment, was lost.

Sean took my face in his hands, smoothing away my tears and continuing to do so even when the action caused more to fall. The entire time, his wistful smile remained in place.

"Now, sis. This isn't the place for tears. Can't you feel it? Here, take some deep breaths. Let it wash over you. You remember this park, don't you?"

I had no clue what he was talking about but did as he said regardless. Swallowing a ragged sob, I inhaled deeply. The crisp air swirled in my lungs, sweet from the wildflowers sprouting in thick clusters. Some of the pain subsided, and with it came a feeling of peace.

Sean was right, I did remember this place. This was the park mom would take us too as kids. It was where I'd go with Sean after school. As children, we'd race to the swings and try to get as high as we could. Mom would always scold us, saying it was too dangerous, but we did it anyway.

With each breath I sucked in, the feeling grew. It settled in my bones, bringing on a weightless sensation that had me looking down at my hands.

My unblemished hands.

I had felt the dark magic crawling up my arms, slithering over my shoulders and down my back, but there wasn't so much as a speck as I looked down. I flipped them over to inspect them further and found nothing, absolutely nothing.

Sean shrugged, a knowing smile on his face.

"Evil can't exist here."

I snorted in his face. Only Sean would give me a half-assed explanation like that. Part of me wondered if they'd return when I woke up. It was something I could've easily asked Sean, but I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

Now that its influence was gone, I realized how strong it had been, how it had tainted every thought that passed through my brain, coating in malice, jealousy, and evil. It had been corrupting me from the inside out, and I had let it.

"Where where am I? You're dead. Does that mean I'm dead too?" I asked reluctantly.

After all that happened, tricking my family and friends to sneak away with Holly...only for her to betray me, to turn me over to her mother. It was all too perfect, the way I unknowingly threw Holly into her mother's arms. I'd been the one to set things up between them, thinking it would help Holly after everything she'd been through. 3

I was the one who thought she should talk to a therapist.

This entire time, I had already met the blood witch. How many meetings did she have with Holly under the guise of therapy sessions? How many did it take for her to coax Holly into her arms and onto her side?

I couldn't be dead. This couldn't be how things ended. There was too much to fix, and a fight still left to be had.

"No, you're not dead. You're...just visiting." Sean explained, grinning when he caught my confused stare. "Don't think too hard about it. Not many people get the chance to say goodbye."

A tear slipped free as I closed my eyes. "

There's a good chance I might come back a second time...only to stay. I don't know what I'm doing, Sean. I don't know how to win this."

"Mm, maybe." Sean mused. "There's always that possibility. Life isn't a certainty, and anything can happen but..." He trailed off, eyes sparkling with mischief. "...but I have it on good authority to let you know if you win this if you defeat the blood witch, you won't be coming back here for a long, long while."

I tried hard to wrap my head around what he was saying, but the thought of living a long life with Asher by my side no longer felt like a certainty. It felt like a dream, one not nearly as tangible as the one I currently stood in.

“How can you know that?” I demanded, pausing to sniffle.

“Let’s just say, you’ve got someone looking out for you. Someone important.” He winked, and I had the feeling he expected me to know who he was talking about. “Now, we’ve got some things to talk about and not nearly enough time to do it. Tell me, how’s dad doing?”

As I explained to Sean the moments after his death, the tears continued to slip free. Sean’s smile faded, his eyes growing dark and mournful.

“Make sure he doesn’t blame Asher, Lola.

It’ll eat him alive if he does, and he’s not meant to come here for a long time.”

“I don’t know how, but he doesn’t.” I chuckled, wiping the moisture off my cheeks. “It shocked all of us. He hugged him, Sean...and—and they cried together.”

A soft smile returned to his face. “Tell dad

I’m proud of him-that mom is too. And even though it wasn’t his fault, tell Asher that I forgive him.” 1

“You’ve seen mom?!” I gasped.

Sean chuckled, glancing over to the forest’s edge. “Yeah, I have. She misses you, Lola, but she’s loved seeing how much you’ve grown.

At first glance, it was nothing more than your average forest, though the colors were much more vibrant. The longer I looked, the

more I noticed the subtle differences that made this forest anything but normal.

First of all, every bird and butterfly in the park seemed attracted to that one spot, weaving in and out of the trees, only to emerge and circle the park. The sunlight streaming down on the treetops sparkled like it had been imbued with flecks of gold.

Even the air itself shimmered with magic; a kind that felt familiar yet ancient.

“What is that place?” I asked, unable to tear my eyes away. “Can-Can I go in there?”

Sean was silent long enough for me to turn my head. When we locked eyes, there was a gentleness in them that I'd never seen before. It wrapped around my heart and stole away the pain, replacing it with a longing so strong my eyes began to water.

"Ah, I'm afraid you can't. That's the point of no return, sis. Like I said, it's not your time yet. Someday, you will, and when you do, I'll be there waiting."

I closed my eyes, fighting the wave of tears." I don't want to do this without you.

"Look at me, Lola." He demanded, though not unkindly. Reluctantly, I did as he said. "I'm right where I'm meant to be, and I will always be watching over you, little sister."

I couldn't help it; I didn't want this moment to end. I threw myself into his arms, wishing more than anything that I could will my magic to stretch these seconds into hours- into an eternity. It would never be enough.

As I sobbed into his chest, not wanting to let go, something rustled within the grove.

"Look up..." Sean whispered.

I craned my head towards the patch of magical trees, and when I saw what Sean was looking at, my heart split in my chest.

It was Kanyon, my brother's mate. 3

He stood at the cusp of the grove, a breathtaking smile on his face as he watched Sean and me. When he noticed me looking,

he waved. When I turned back to Sean, his eyes were brimming with joy and love, so much that I now realized what a horrible mistake it had been to try and bring him back.

Finally, after all this time, Sean had reunited with his mate.

"You're right." I said, but the words came out as a whisper. "You're meant to be here, aren't you?"

Sean tilted his head to look down at me. "I am, Lola. I promise."

Squaring my shoulders, I embraced every facet of the pain. Rather than shoving it down, I let it consume me. Then, like the birds and butterflies darting about, I let it all

"I think I can let you go now." I said, my voice cracking.

Sean pulled me into a hug, and I held on for dear life, committing every detail about my big brother to memory.

“You’re strong, Lola. So strong. You can do this, you hear me? You’re going to change everything, and I’ll be right there watching it all.”

He let me go, then took a step back.

“Walk me to the edge?” Sean asked, glancing in Kanyon’s direction.

“Of course.” I smiled, blinking to see past the tears.

With our fingers laced together, something we hadn’t done since we were children, my brother and I walked past the park that was once such a huge part of our childhood, and towards the magical grove that would cherish him always.

We stopped right at the edge of the towering trees. The sweetest scent trickled from in between them, coming from somewhere deep within the forest. I tilted my head, registering the sound of laughter and bell’s twinkling in the distance. The feeling of utter peace was stronger here, so much so that part of me wanted to take Sean’s hand and follow him inside. 1

I knew deep down that I couldn’t, that when it was my time to come here, it would be Asher’s hand I held.

Sean squeezed my hand once before releasing it. “This is where we part, little sister, but it’s not forever. It’s never forever.” Abruptly, he snapped his fingers. Oh, I almost forgot. There’s something I need to tell you before you go, something important.”

“What? What’s so important that you have to tell me now?” I frowned.

Sean swallowed, the first and only sign of nervousness I’d seen from him since coming here.

“They said you need to know this before you go back, that it’s crucial.”

I pursed my lips. “You’re freaking me out here. What is it? What do you need to tell me?”

Sean paused. The silence seemed to stretch. on for miles, far beyond the park and the magical grove we stood in front of. I wanted to ask who this ‘they’ was and if they were the same person Sean claimed was watching over me, but even more so, I wanted to know what he was going to say.

“I’m going to tell you the identity of the second witch. I’m going to give you her name.”

Before I could react, he leaned in close. His lips grazed my ear as he whispered a name- a single name that threatened to tear the ground out from beneath my feet.

I wanted to deny what he said, ignoring the truth in favor of something more manageable, but I couldn't. Perhaps the old me would have but being tainted by dark magic left my changed in ways I couldn't quite name at the moment. Instead of disbelief or fear, I felt only determination.

I wanted that future Sean said I'd have, and I wanted it bad.

"I'll stop her. I'll stop all of them." I promised him, myself, and the mysterious person watching over me.

Sean's lips quirked up in a grin. "I know you will. We all do. When you wake up, you're going to notice something pretty quickly. Just trust me on this, will you?" He laughed, taking in my downright suspicious expression. "It's a gift, alright? From...from someone important."

"Who is this person?" I questioned stubbornly, planting my hands on my hips. As I looked around for this said person, I found only Kanyon and Sean staring at me with identical looks of amusement on their faces.

"She has a lot of names, but the werewolves know her by one." Sean replied with that mischievous twinkle in his eyes. For a split second, they glazed over, staring faraway before returning to the present. "She has a message for you. If you don't mind, she'd appreciate it if you didn't try to bring me- or anyone else, back from the dead again. She has a balance to keep, you know." He winked, backing into the grove. 2

All I could do was stare at him as my brain worked to connect the dots. The magic laced within the golden sunlight rippled as he passed through it, so ethereal and pure that it felt almost impossible- Oh.

From in between the trees, Sean threw back his head and chortled at the shock on my face. The sound was enough to break the spell and send me rushing forward. I stopped at the very edge of the grove, cupping my hands to shout at him.

"Wait, what am I supposed to do when I wake up? How do I defeat the witches? You can't leave me with all these damned questions!"

With his arm wrapped around Kanyon's shoulders, my big brother turned and smiled at me once last time.

"You live, Lola. You live."

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There was no doubt in my mind that the place I had been was not of this world.

Not only had Sean been there, confusing me with talk of some mysterious person watching over me, but the concept of pain had been elusive and just out of reach. The peace that hung in the air, shimmering as brightly as the magic interwoven to create a place that was both real and memory, could only belong to some kind of afterlife.

At least, that's what I was hoping.

Pain was the first thing I felt as that place slipped away. It held my head in its strong grip, claws digging into my scalp to produce a throbbing pain that chased me into consciousness. I hadn't even opened my eyes yet and there it was.

When I did manage to peel my lids back, I tried to recoil at the pale face staring out at me. More pain engulfed me, stinging my wrists, neck, and ankles. It blasted my mind, sapping my strength until even calling out to the shadows felt impossible.

I craned my head down, staring blankly at the silver-plated cuffs that pinned me to the wall. What was even more surprising than my restraints was the fact that my hands and arms were no longer covered in inky veins of dark magic.

As much as I wanted to wrack my brain for the identity of this mystery being watching over me, there was someone else vying for my attention.

"It's about damn time. I thought you were dead." A voice snapped.

The person staring at me from across the room came into focus. Toffee eyes sharpened, so familiar that my chest began to ache. Only, they didn't belong to Asher.

"Brandon?"

His name came out as a rasp, my tongue sticking to the roof of my dry mouth. My throat contracted with the effort it took to speak. When was the last time I had something to drink? I had a couple blood bags back at the house, but how long had it been since then?

"The one and only."

Brandon was chained against the far wall in the same position, silver cuffs around his wrists, neck, and ankles. His reply was dripping with sarcasm, but beyond it I could see clearly the rough shape he was in.

Dark circles ringed his eyes, and his cheekbones were just a tad more pronounced. There was dried blood where the silver had previously made contact with his skin. As he fidgeted, fresh blood sprouted from raw, cracked flesh.

“What happened?” I grimaced. It felt like I’d been hit upside the head with a sledgehammer. Every single thought was paired with a wave of nauseating pain. “How long have you been here?”

“Oh, lets see...” Brandon mumbled, blowing the hair out of his face with a frustrated huff.

He made a show of counting on his fingers, though I wasn’t sure what for.

After going over each one on his hand several times he grunted. “Since that bitch Ember and the other witches attacked the Vamp town.”

“That was days ago.” I blanched, my stomach sinking. “You’ve been here for that long?”

“Yeah, I fucking have. You wouldn’t happen to have a bottle of liquor stashed on you?”

I tried to snort, but my dry throat refused to let the sound pass. “No, I definitely don’t have any alcohol on me.”

He leaned his head against the brick wall, glaring at the singular light hanging from the center of the room. It was nothing more than a lightbulb on a thin wire, with a little string dangling from the side. The light it produced was shitty, but it was better than drowning in darkness.

“Fair warning, Lola. The service in this place fucking sucks!” He bellowed, thrashing against his restraints.

The chains clanked against the brick, spitting out a thin plume of dust, but he was clearly too weak to do any more damage. Blood trickled from his wrists, splattering on the concrete floor. It dribbled from his neck as well, soaking into an already blood-stained shirt.

When he was finished, he slumped against the wall, his chest heaving. He swiveled his head towards me, scanning me up and down the way I had done to him mere minutes ago.

“You look different. How are things back home?” He asked.

I swallowed, shifting in my restraints. The sting of silver split the thin skin around my wrists, and I winced as the wounds began to weep blood. They’d heal quickly, only to be torn open again. It was unfortunate that I knew how this worked.

“Not good.”

Holly’s face flashed in my mind, and with it came a slew of emotions I couldn’t handle dealing with right now. I’d trusted her, bonded with her, and thought of her as the little sister I’d always wanted but never had. Not only did I feel pathetic and stupid, but I also felt lost-betrayed.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t bring myself to hate her.

Brandon’s shoulders slumped, his lips merging into a thin line. “You might as well tell me everything considering neither one of us is leaving anytime soon.”

Starting off at the beginning, I recounted the moments leading up to when everything went horribly wrong. I’d expected a look of disgust when telling him about Asher’s proposal, but his face hadn’t changed in the slightest. When I mentioned what happened to Sean, that garnered a reaction.

Brandon’s eyes darkened in nearly the same fashion as Asher’s, but no amount of anger would coax Brandon’s wolf forward with all that silver touching his skin. His time here must’ve permanently altered his brain because the next words that left his mouth put me in a stupor.

“I’m sorry. Your brother was a good guy.”

I blinked the tears away, swallowing the knot in my throat. It ached as it went down, forming a weight in my chest that wouldn’t go away.

“Yeah, he was.” My whisper danced along each corner of the room before fading into the darkness.

Brandon’s eyes drifted to the floor. “I can imagine how Asher’s taking it. He’s never going to let that one go.”

“I’ll spend every day of the rest of my life reminding him it wasn’t his fault.”

“You might have to.” Brandon voiced his agreement.

I continued on, explaining what happened after Sean and grandma had been attacked. Brandon was more than angry to hear about grandma, which was another surprise. The woman truly did make everyone fall in love with her. My heart clenched painfully at the thought of the woman I considered my second mother.

She’d be so disappointed to know what I had attempted to do.

When I reached the part about Rowena, that was the first time I’d seen Brandon show any glimmer of happiness. His eyes flashed with just a hint of his wolf before the color

died off and the beast went back into hibernation.

I shouldn't have mentioned it since I had no intention on elaborating, but I finished by telling Brandon I knew who the second witch was.

"Who? Who is it?" He leaned forward in his shackles, tilting his head.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

Brandon opened his mouth, probably to goad me into telling him, when a sound came from beyond the heavy wooden door on the other side of the room. It sat to the left of me, far out of reach. There was a long groan, followed by a squeal from the hinges as it opened.

Even in shitty lighting, I could make out that head of hair anywhere.

It was an open flame streaked with golds and yellows, beautiful if not for the scowl marring the face of the person it was attached to.

"Ember." I snarled, but it wasn't nearly as threatening as it could've been had my throat not felt like I'd swallowed the Sahara.

Considering there was nothing else to focus on, it was all too obvious to notice the smirk

Ember tossed Brandon's way. She sauntered into the room wearing a pair of skin-tight leather pants and a low-cut blouse the same fiery shade as her hair. Propping her hand on the flare of her hip, she opened her mouth, but the only sound that filled the room was Brandon's voice.

"I told you not to come back here without that pizza. All that talking you did and you're doing a shit job at keeping me alive."

Ember visibly stiffened, her entire body going rigid. Her eyes, which were a deep brown tinted red, flashed like hot coals.

"And I thought I told you to shut your damn mouth." She hissed, barely craning her head to toss the words over her shoulder.

Seeing as Brandon's number one quality was running his mouth, I already anticipated what he'd do next.

"Fuck, I feel bad for any pets you've ever owned. You were the type of kid to squeeze her hamsters to death weren't you? Seems like the kind of psychopathic thing you'd do."

Digging the heel of her leather boots into the ground, Ember spun to glare daggers at Brandon.

“Oh, shut up about the stupid pizza!”

The two continued to argue, shooting jabs back and forth until Ember was quite literally smoking. It rolled off her shoulders in waves, filling the dingy room we were locked in. Brandon didn't seem to care in the slightest. If anything, I'd say he was enjoying riling her up so much, but that- that didn't make any sense.

She jabbed a finger at him, and Brandon snapped his teeth in response. The longer I watched two, the more I realized they had forgotten I was even here.

Fuck, they're arguing like a married couple -wait a damn second...

There was too much for my brain to process. Between my brother's death, Rowena and Holly's betrayal, the blood witch herself capturing me, and the identity of the second witch, I had too much information and emotion to sort through. It would take me years to process it all, to move on from the rage and the pain that followed.

There was no way-no way in hell that this was possible. It was too much of a coincidence.

I focused on Brandon's eyes as the two snarled and cursed at one another. There was clear hatred there, which would've been soothing if it weren't for the sharp edge to it.

I recognized that edge intimately.

It had been the same edge in my own eyes when I'd first met Asher-when I realized how much I wanted him.

“You two are mates.”

Two heads snapped in my direction so quickly I swore I heard one of their neck's crack. Just like that, their argument was snuffed out. There wasn't even a sliver of its heat leftover.

“Told you she'd find out.” Brandon sang, his teeth bared in a sarcastic grin.

Ember's stare burned into my face.

Somehow I knew her words weren't for me, but for Brandon.

“Shut. Your. Mouth.”

My heart downright shuddered in my chest. First Tessa, and now Ember. Two extremely powerful elementals both mated to Werewolves. There was an odd feeling tickling my spine, like a puff of breath blown at the back of my neck. For the smallest of seconds, my thoughts drifted to the stranger Sean mentioned, the one watching over me.

Why did it feel like they were responsible for this? No, that couldn't be possible. It must be the excitement messing with my thoughts.

"When did this happen?" I couldn't help but ask.

Ember's lips curled back, her nose crinkling and eyes flashing with anger. I wasn't stupid enough to think she'd actually answer me, which is exactly why I couldn't bite back my snort when Brandon shouted over her head.

"Remember when this one here attacked the Vamp town, and I chased after her? She found out what we were, then she captured my ass."

Ignoring Ember and her rising temper, I craned my head to the side to look at Brandon.

"That's why you're here?!"

It had to be, there was no other alternative.

No demands had been made in exchange for Brandon's return. Hell, none of us even knew he was captured to begin with.

"Why don't you ask my mate here why she chose to capture me." Brandon shot back, putting special emphasis on his words.

So, Ember made the call that landed Brandon here.

"It was your choice to capture Brandon? What, did you think you'd keep him as your pet?" I asked incredulously, thinking there was no possible way I could be right.

"That's exactly what she thought. She'll have another week with me before I starve to death. Clearly, her track record with pets is shit." Brandon drawled, making a show of rattling his chains.

Ember stalked up to where I hung on the wall. She was so close that I could see the sharp curve of her lips. Her scent was warm and surprisingly pleasant, like cinnamon and clove. There was a slight tang of fruit that reminded me of apple cider.

"The Blood Witch approved my decision, not that it's any of your business. And why shouldn't I keep him? He's mine."

Once again, her eyes flashed like hot coals, but I wasn't at all focused on her magic flickering to the surface. No, there was something else there, a sort of raw emotion that bled through the cracks no matter how hard one tried to patch them.

She hated Brandon, but he was hers and she wanted him.

From Tessa, I knew that their parents had been murdered by rogues, but Ember didn't seem to care about that in the slightest. If she did, wouldn't she be disgusted to find out she was mated to a Werewolf?

A thought trickled to the surface of my mind, and once I latched onto it, there was nothing else I could think about.

Had Ember never been chosen by anyone before?

The Blood Witch chose her and Tessa to hunt me down, but it was common knowledge that they were all nothing more than a means to an end—soldiers for the Blood

Witch in the war she created.

“Besides, once your mate is dead, Brandon will assume the role as Alpha. His blood will hold incredible power.” Ember hissed, her lips curling in a victorious smile, but it was transparent now that I'd realized the truth.

She wanted Brandon not because his soul was bound to hers, but because he could never leave her.

I had one card up my sleeve, and just one chance to try and change the tide before it swallowed us all.

“Tessa, your sister, she found her mate too.”

Surprise flashed in Ember's eyes, dimming the heat of the coals she'd been feeding. Her head turned, and she glanced at Brandon. Uncertainty rippled across her face.

“I told her the same thing, but she didn't believe me. Go ahead, Lola. Tell her who Tessa's mated to. Maybe then she'll see I wasn't fucking lying.” Brandon called out.

Ember didn't snap at either one of us like I thought she would. Instead, she stared into my eyes. Within them, I watched doubt and certainty meet head on in a war that only one would win.

“Our friend, Alpha Zeke is your sister's mate.”

A shaky breath, so faint that I had almost missed it, slid past Ember's lips.

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“No. No, I don’t believe you.” Ember said after several seconds of silence.

She turned around, her face turned towards the door as though she might storm through it and leave Brandon and I to our own defenses. She didn’t, though. Her hesitation wasn’t just written across her face but was also in her posture. In the way she stood with her arms folded over her chest, her foot tapping incessantly against the concrete floor.

I needed to say something, because if Ember left, I had a feeling I wouldn’t be here when she finally returned.

“Why would I lie?” I asked her, truly wanting to understand.

She scoffed, shaking her head at the door.

I was met with a scathing eye roll when she spun on her heel. “Are you really asking me that? What a stupid question.

You’re lying because you want me to turn against Freya.”

“As if that would work.” Brandon muttered.

I sent him a warning glare which he attempted to shrug at, but it was hard to do so when you were bound to the wall by the fiery touch of silver.

“If that was even a possibility, wouldn’t I have started with that the second you came into the room?” I countered, pulling Ember’s attention away from her idiotic mate and back onto me.

“It doesn’t matter. Tessa’s probably rotting away in one of your cells, being tortured for information.” She snapped, her eyes flaring with magic.

There was a hint of vulnerability in her voice, a crack in her armor that I could use to my advantage. Clearly, she and Tessa were all one another had. Ember was stubborn, that much I could tell up front. She’d never believe me outright.

“You’re wrong, but if it helps fuel your hatred for us, you can go ahead and keep thinking that.” I replied indifferently.

The air in this dingy basement began to heat, radiating from Ember like she was our personal fireplace. Instead of the crisp scent of a bonfire, the air smelt of charred apples and burnt cinnamon.

“You’re insane, then. She’ll slit your mate’s throat in his sleep.” She replied.

If she was trying to goad me, it wouldn't work. I was running on limited energy as is and I wasn't nearly foolish enough to waste it screaming at her.

This was my one and only shot, and I needed to take it.

I chuckled humorlessly. "Yeah, I doubt that. She's got her hands full already with Zeke. Unlike you, she hasn't explicitly stated what she wants, but I have a feeling she'd like to keep her mate too. I'm not saying she hasn't seen the inside of a cell. She has, but that's not where she is currently. Oh, and we didn't torture her. Actually, I gave her a choice."

Ember narrowed her eyes into two small slits. "A choice? What kind of choice?"

"I told her to pick a side: mine or Freya's."

"What did she say?" She pressed.

"She said she's on the side of life." I replied, regurgitating Tessa's exact words.

Ember nodded once, tilting that slender chin of hers towards the floor. A look of understanding crossed her elfish face.

That's Freya's side. She's going to give our kind a home, a place where we can live in peace."

"What Freya's fighting for isn't peace, it's domination-total control. What makes you think she'll stop once the Vampire's and Werewolves fall into line?"

She'll go for the humans next. It's only a matter of time. Tessa knows that, and something tells me you do too."

"How exactly is that a bad thing?"

Humans have been running things for centuries." Ember shot back; venom laced in her voice.

Passion and fury fueled the fire in her eyes, but there was another layer hidden beneath the surface. The ground that fire burned on wasn't stable. It was cracked- eroding under her feet.

I never got the chance to reply because Brandon beat me to it.

"A witches magic comes from nature, right?" He asked, his eyes on Ember.

"Yes." She replied stiffly. "More or less."

“Then witches would know better than any of us that there’s a balance that needs to be kept. Can you honestly tell me that what this Blood Witch is doing doesn’t fuck with that balance?” Brandon said, effectively stunning me into silence.

Apparently, I wasn’t the only one. Ember glowered at her mate but said nothing. That was definitely going to take some getting used to if we survived this. I couldn’t help but wonder what Asher would think if he could see his brother now. Honestly, it was a bit scary how well he and Ember fit one another.

They both had stubborn and hotheaded. down to an art form.

Brandon’s voice took on a tone I’d never heard come from his mouth before. It was soft and warm in all the right places, both soothing and heavy with a dire plea. “You know as well as I do that she’s destroying that balance, Ember. She won’t stop until there’s nothing left. You think the witches won’t suffer from that, but they will. I promise you, they will.”

With each word the tension in Ember’s body seemed to ratchet higher, reaching it’s peak when she whirled on him. Her cheeks were flaming nearly as bright as her eyes as she snarled.

“As opposed to what, Brandon. You’re telling me to give up my life’s mission for –for her?! What’s so great about her plan?” She spun around and let out a

cynical laugh that slapped me right upside the face. “You can’t tell me you think Vampire’s, Witches, and

Werewolves are going to be sitting around a campfire singing Kumbaya instead of killing one another. Please tell me you’re not that delusional.”

“You think it’s impossible for our kind to get along and I’m telling you, you are wrong. Your twin is mated to an Alpha, Ember. Do you think that’s a coincidence?

She was meant to rule, and you-you’re mated to an Alpha’s younger brother. Did you know Brandon here was the one that planned all of the protection detail for the Vampire’s safe haven? He wanted to take charge, and he did an amazing job. That is who you’re mated to. That is where your destiny lies.” I urged, all but begging her to believe me.

There was such anger on her face, such disbelief in her expression that I truly wondered if Ember had ever trusted anyone before in her life. I didn’t have it in me to feign indifference anymore. She needed to know how important this was and how much we needed her help.

“I want to create a world we can all live One where Witches and Vampire’s don’t have to answer to Wolves – a world we all rule. We can do more than just coexist, Ember. Your

Brandon's mate. You're meant to help us. We have a chance at actual peace, but it won't happen without you on our side. How could you not want that?" This time, I was begging. I let every broken, shattered piece of my soul shine through my eyes, brightened by the sheer hope that she would step up and do the right thing as her twin had.

Ember turned away, a scowl on her face as though she couldn't bare to look. Her eyes drifted to the door and my heart crashed, falling to the floor in a million charred pieces.

"What would you do if I were to let you go, Lola?" She asked in a low voice.

"I'd go home, find the second witch and I'd kill her. Then, I'd find a way to stop Freya."

"You'd put everyone you love in danger just to murder the other witch we sent into your pack?" Ember frowned, a strange light flickering in her eyes.

Didn't she know we're already in danger?

"Once Freya does the spell to enslave me, she can kill every werewolf in the world. They're in danger no matter where I am." I countered, just a tad confused.

Ember turned away from the door, her eyes growing wide as she cocked her head. "Wait, you think she's enslaving you to kill all of the werewolves?"

"Well, yeah?" I stammered. "What else would she be doing?"

Out of the handful of time's I had the displeasure of setting eyes on Ember, never had I seen her look like this. Her eyebrows were pinched and the fire in her eyes was nonexistent. She looked... worried, and I wasn't at all prepared for how unsettling it was.

"Something worse. Something so much worse." She whispered, her lips barely moving. "Enslaving you is only the first part of her plan. There's another spell, one she's been working on for years.

"What is it? What's the spell?" I croaked as what little spit coated my throat evaporated.

Brandon's chains rattled as he tried to step closer. "Tell her, Ember. What is it?"

Ember's eyes slid shut as though she didn't want to see our reactions. A wave of nausea hit me in the chest, and only grew worse when she spoke.

"She's going to bring your father back to life, and you'll never guess whose body his soul is going into."

My stomach was empty, but that did nothing to stop the bile from rising in my throat. I clamped my lips shut, swallowing it back before I vomited all over the floor. Brandon's eyes were heavy on my face, but that could've been the shock setting in.

"That's not possible." I barely recognized the sound of my own voice.

Would it change once my father's soul was forced into my body? Would he use my magic to change the way I looked and sounded? Goddess, it was wrong on so many levels. An act that only went against nature, but one that would destroy it completely.

"Isn't it?" Ember's voice dropped an octave. Within her eyes was a knowing light that made my face heat with absolute shame. "What exactly were you doing when you were captured, Lola?"

"Wouldn't you say something like that is impossible?"

"What was she doing?" Brandon butted

Ember didn't break her stare from my face as she said, "She was trying to bring her brother back from the dead."

"Did-Did it work?" Brandon asked.

Even after seeing Sean, I hadn't yet let reality sink into my skin. Keeping it at an arms length was the only thing holding me together. If I had to face the truth- that I'd never again see my brother in this life-I would break completely. This side of Brandon, the one that wasn't a raging dickhead, needed to back off a little bit.

"If it had, she would've been consumed by dark magic. Seeing as she's not, I'd say it didn't work." Ember drawled, inspecting me from head to toe.

I gritted my teeth and tried not to snarl at her.

"Jeez, Ember. Harsh much?" Brandon muttered.

Clenching my eyes shut, I sucked in a sharp breath and forced it out through my nostrils. Once the prickling sensation faded from behind my eyelids, I relaxed.

Ember folded her arms over her chest, not at all bashful as she grunted, "Sorry.

It's been...awhile since I've talked to anyone. My people skills are rusty."

I wanted to tell her I could think of a few better words than 'rusty' but shoved the urge down. Pissing her off wouldn't coax her into helping us. In fact, there wasn't much more I could say. Ember alone held the power here, and it was high time to make a decision.

“Are you going to help us, Ember?” I asked without hesitation.

This time, she looked nervous. She twisted her fingers and picked at the skin around her nails.

“She’ll kill me.” Ember whispered.

I shook my head. “She won’t, because you’ll be coming with us.”

“Let me guess, you have a cell waiting with my name on it?” She laughed dryly. Her discomfort was a tangible force that skated along my skin and set my jaw on edge.

Looking into her eyes, I forced what little power I had left into my voice, and hoped it was enough to show her how serious I truly was. It was a risky promise to make, but if it meant stealing yet another powerful witch from Freya’s side, I’d bend over backwards to make sure it was kept.

“You have my word as Luna and Queen of the Vampire’s that you will not be imprisoned or harmed in any way. You will be reunited with your sister and will be treated with the same respect and dignity as a member of my pack. Whether we win or lose, my promise stands.”

As my words sunk in, Ember ceased her fidgeting. Her shoulders lowered an inch and a fire flared to life in her eyes.

“Well, then. What are we waiting for? Let’s get out of this shithole.”