Maybe, Someday

by DAgron01

Summary

Hope figures she owes it to her father to find some peace for both of them. But first, she feels compelled to help Josie find hers. Because that's what it means to be a good friend, right?

or

The one where Josie was never just Hope's friend, it just takes Hope a while to realize it.
Hope knew that if her week sucked after everything that happened with the Necromancer and the fallout with Alaric, that Josie’s was a million times worse. Josie was buried alive by something possessing her bio mom and then had to actually kill her bio mom to stop it. That is fucked up, even by a Mikaelson’s standards. And it should have felt strange to Hope, having empathy and caring about someone else. But this was Josie. Hope tried for most of her lifetime not to care about anyone, especially the kids at school. Especially Josie.

She could at least admit to herself that she did care though. Hearing the Necromancer’s words about her father; about how he wouldn’t have peace until she did, it only made her feel worse about everything that she had done. She pushed people away because it was easier, at the time, to be alone than to risk losing another person she cared about. It was easier to keep people away because when no one was around, then no one could hurt you. But that had always been a lie. Because she’s been hurt for years. Every time the twins gave her the cold shoulder. Well, Lizzie did that. Josie tried to be kind only to have Hope poke at her in retaliation. And every time she let her guard down and stopped poking, Lizzie (and Josie) would reach out only to be shot down again. In response, Lizzie would be bitchy again and then the whole process started over.

But Hope was tired of being hurt by it all the time. Because it did hurt, as much as she pretended she didn’t care about it. About them. And mostly, Hope was tired of being lonely. She knew that self preservation was only part of the reason that she had always kept her distance. The other part, the bigger part, was how guilty being happy made her feel. There were a few moments over the years, when she and Josie shared a moment. Or when Lizzie actually smiled at her as if they could have been friends in another lifetime. It was in those moments that she was reminded that they didn’t actually like her. They liked Hope Marshall. The girl she had to pretend to be to protect herself from the world.

Hope Marshall had been a lie. And being friends with anyone made her feel like she was lying to them because she couldn’t be honest about who she was. In class, whenever Klaus Mikaelson was brought up and portrayed as the big bad wolf, she had to pretend that she was just as appalled by her father as everyone else was. And it sometimes was easy, because he wasn’t around and she was mad at him for it. So it was easy to hate him. To wonder. Especially, after the vision she had seen all those years ago. The one where her father had killed someone—was killing someone.

It didn’t get easier when she returned to the school, after everything went down. Everyone knew she was really a Mikaelson now; and a tribrid at that. And maybe things should have been easier now that she didn’t have to pretend anymore. But she hated the world back then. Sometimes she still does. Because not only did they know exactly who she was now, but they all knew exactly what she lost. Her mother. Her father. Her uncle. And as far as she was concerned, all three of them were entirely her fault. Most days, she hated looking in the mirror.

It wasn’t just that she hated looking at herself, most days she simply hated herself. And it would have been easier to wallow in peace if Josie had actively hated her, too. Lizzie sure did. That was what upset her the most when she got back, the fact that Josie somehow still refused to look at her as if she was a monster. It wasn’t like they were friends. Not at all. And Josie did actively dislike her, but for very specific reasons this time. She knew that Josie disliked the fact that Alaric took Hope under his wing and spent special time with her at the expense of time spent with his own daughters. Josie disliked the fact that Hope was often rude to her without any provocation. And Josie probably disliked the fact that Hope had spent most of their lives lying to her about who she was. Hope knew that her dad and Caroline, Josie’s mom, had some kind of history. A semi romantic and not all bad
one. So she assumed that Josie knew as well. The fact that they basically had a shared history, a common ground, and should have been instant friends rather than merely acquaintances was not lost on Hope.

So, yeah, Josie had valid reasons for disliking Hope. And Hope didn’t blame her at all. What made Hope upset, was that all those reasons still didn’t add up to Josie hating her. And it actually was almost painful that Josie looked at her as if still hopeful for friendship, because it gave Hope, well...hope. It made her feel less like a monster and more like a normal teenage girl. A girl who wanted friends. A girl who used to believe in love. A girl who missed her parents. A girl who just wanted someone to understand what it was like to feel so much that it was easier to pretend that she didn’t feel anything at all.

But wanting those things and deserving them were two completely different things. She didn’t deserve happiness or friends or peace or love, not after the things she had done. She didn’t deserve any of it because her parents were dead, because of her, and she was here. Alive. When she laughed she felt guilty. Or she had. Until two nights ago, when she learned that the only thing her father wanted for her was for her to find peace; so that he could as well. And she owed him that much at least. So she decided she would try her best to find peace. That meant that she likely would have to actually open herself up. Knowing that life was full of pleasure and pain was one thing, but actually inviting the possibility of pain and hurt and sorrow in her life was still terrifying. Scarier than any monster she had ever faced.

It had become more and more difficult to keep herself closed off though. Josie had that way about her that sort of just seeped into the cracks of her armor. It wasn’t intrusive, she realized. Or even a weakness. Just a fact. Josie had a quiet calm about her, which was the exact opposite of her sister. And she was genuinely kind. Selfless in a way that was new to Hope; being a Mikaelson and all. But kindness and gentleness didn’t make Josie weak, not in the least. She was fiercely protective of her family; a fact that Hope could admire, being who she was. Josie was also not without imperfection. She had dated Penelope Park after all. And then lit her on fire (which is a entirely different matter). Josie was also a powerful witch in her own right. Hope had gotten to see that first hand. Her strength and conviction. Her passion. But if Hope had to pick apart Josie’s weaknesses, or imperfections, she’d have to say that the one thing Josie could really use help with (aside from her romantic preferences) was confidence.

When Hope decided that she wanted to put herself out there (more like was forced to by the school counselor, but that was beside the point), she knew that Josie was her first choice as a friend. And it felt natural to give the girl a gift for her birthday. Well, not natural. She had been embarrassed and nervous, so she hid the gift in Josie’s room. But when she saw that Josie wore it the next day, she wasn’t embarrassed anymore. It made her happy that Josie appreciated the gift enough to adorn it for all to see. She even overheard her proudly explain to MG that it was a gift from Hope. Lizzie had given her a strange look, which may have been envy since Hope hadn’t thought of getting her a gift as well. The gift was more than just thoughtful, it had also been practical however. She wanted to help Josie gain confidence by allowing the girl to be heard.

Hope knew that Josie likely had a lot to say, and she wanted her to be able to say it. To feel confident enough to speak over her sister. To be seen for her own merits and achievements rather than just being Lizzie’s twin or Alaric’s daughter, or as of late, Penelope’s ex. Most of all, Hope wanted to hear anything and everything Josie had to say. She had been in the background far too long, she deserved the spotlight.

How could Hope have known that the gift meant to empower Josie, was the very thing that saved the girl’s life? She would never be more grateful that the charm worked. She (and MG and Penelope) were able to save Josie from being buried alive. But Hope started to worry that they didn’t save Josie
from everything else. From everything that came after. Surviving was hard, Hope knew that first hand. And killing a parent, yeah, that sucked, too. Hope wasn’t naive enough to assume that just because Josie lived, that she was somehow fine and dandy. She knew life didn’t work that way. And she knew that she wanted Josie to be okay. That she wanted to be the one to help make sure that she was. To be there for her. To help heal her. The problem was that she didn’t know how to do that. Especially, when Josie was god knows where with Lizzie and Caroline.

She had left two days after the whole ordeal. And then the whole Necromancer happened and Hope was preoccupied and then completely shattered. And now that she knew that she wanted to find peace, for her dad’s sake, she also had to admit that she needed Josie to find peace as well. More So than ever. She wanted to be the person Josie needed her to be, but it’s been two days since she last heard from Josie. Two very long days. They had only texted four times since Josie left. And Hope wasn’t sure how to be a friend anyhow, but it was much harder to be a friend to someone who was in another continent and only answering her texts sporadically.

She let out a heavy sigh as her wandering mind returned back to the present. She toyed with the phone in her hands, as she twirled it around in her fingers. Josie’s last text had been a simple “Yeah, I’m good” when Hope asked if she was doing okay. She knew it was a lie. There was no way in Hell that anyone could be good after what Josie had been through. So she responded with a follow up text about missing her and telling her that she was there if she needed or wanted to talk about it. Again, that was two days ago. And maybe Hope had been rethinking her text and second guessing it. Was it clingy to admit that she missed her? They were hardly close enough friends for that to have been the case. Except that somehow it was.

Did she go too far? Push too hard? Was Josie in danger? Did she get kidnapped and murdered and was therefore unable to answer her phone? Did she just simply forget to pack a phone charger and her phone finally went dead and she was unable to contact her? Or maybe she was far enough away and removed from the situation that she realized she no longer wanted to be Hope’s friend. That thought somehow terrified Hope nearly as much as if Josie was dead or in danger.

She couldn’t control the onslaught of thoughts. Some more ridiculous than the others, but all of them troubled her. Hope mostly just needed to make sure that Josie was alive. Not okay or fine or good, but at least still above ground. And also that they were still friends. With that in mind, she closed her eyes and decided to bite the bullet, so to speak. She took a deep, steadying breath and released it as she opened her eyes.

She shakily found the name in her phone and pressed SEND to place the call.

“Speak of the devil.” Lizzie answered in lieu of a proper greeting.

“You were talking about me?” Hope wondered sincerely.

“Yeah, mom and I were talking because Josie’s been texting you.” Lizzie explained. “She’s in the shower now, so we won’t have long to talk.”

“Josie’s hasn’t really been texting me, which is why I’m calling. I wanted to see how she really is doing.”

Hope heard Lizzie sigh loudly on the other end of the line.

“Give it to me straight, Saltzman.” Hope demanded. She didn’t want Lizzie to sugarcoat anything.

Lizzie actually chuckled. “Straight. Funny.”
Hope rolled her eyes, not that Lizzie could see her.

“Come on, you said we don’t have a lot of time.” Hope practically growled.

“She has been texting you, even it it is only a few times...it’s basically more than she talks to anyone else. She hasn’t said more than a whole sentence to me or mom since we’ve been here. And I get that she is usually the quiet one of the two of us, but even for her...it’s…” Lizzie lowered her voice to a near whisper, a plea. “I’m worried. Mom is too. Well, I’m terrified actually. I think it’s like the twin thing...I’m feeling what she’s feeling and she’s...she’s terrified. Or something else, anxious maybe. She usually calms me, because she’s usually calm. But…”

Hope listened intently. Normally, it would piss Hope off that Lizzie was somehow making Josie’s pain all about herself, but it didn’t feel that way this time. It felt like Lizzie was actually reaching out to her, and trying to explain how Josie was feeling the best way she knew how. She felt how Josie was feeling. And all she had was the feeling because Josie wasn’t saying a word. So much for the stupid charm and making quiet things heard.

Her eyes widened. Maybe this was the charm doing its job. Josie wasn’t speaking so the charm was communicating for her.

“Does she still wear the necklace I gave her?” Hope asked in a rush.

“Seriously? I tell you that I’m worried about my sister and that she is not doing well and you’re concerned with whether she’s wearing your necklace?” Lizzie hissed. “And you call me selfish and egotistical.”

“Come on, I’ve never called you that to your face.” Hope replied sardonically. “Answer my question, Lizzie.”

“I...she wears it. She hasn’t taken the damn thing off since you gave it to her. Which I’m still upset about by the way. It was my birthday, too, why didn’t you get me anything?”

“Focus, Lizzie, remember why I called.”

“I know. I just...if I pretend that everything is normal, then I don’t get overwhelmed by how helpless I feel that I can’t help my own sister. That I wasn’t there to save her...that she could have…”

“Lizzie…” Hope breathed soothingly. “I would love to unpack all of this later, and I’m not even saying that sarcastically, but right now I want to help Josie just as much as you do. Okay? And the necklace, you may not know this but...there is a charm I put on it. It’s what helped us find her. It’s supposed to make quiet things heard. I think...I think that since she isn’t talking right now...that the charm is trying to work through you. Like through your connection with her. That’s why you feel her emotions so strongly. So you have to listen to them, Lizzie. Promise me that you’ll do that.”

“I will.” Lizzie told her emphatically. “Mom and I were talking, just before you called, and I know that she hasn’t texted you very much since we’ve been here but she has texted some. And she hasn’t texted MG yet at all. She also hasn’t spoken to dad when we video chat with him. So...whatever you’re doing to make her respond to you, keep doing it. Okay? Just know that even if it seems like she isn’t answering or paying attention to your texts, she does read them. I’ve seen her. And...I don’t know. I guess...I guess I want to say thank you for being her friend. For saving her. And even though I am still kind of jealous, I am really happy that you got her a gift, now that I know it’s what saved her.”

That was the most Lizzie had probably ever spoken to her and none of the words were insulting,
well, for the most part.

“Where are you guys? When will you be back?” Hope wondered.

“Oh, she’s coming. Gotta go!”

Hope held her phone in her hand as the line went dead and she frowned. She even considered throwing the damned thing against the wall. But before she could do so, it buzzed her in hand to let her know she just received a text.

From Lizzie.

Huh? Maybe they were friends now, too. Sort of.

Ask Josie those questions.

We’re only staying away because she didn’t want to go back yet.

Hope frowned again. She typed up a response and then deleted it and then typed again. Finally she sent one.

Okay, I will.

She quickly sent another.

Thanks, Lizzie

She received a thumbs up emoji in response. And then she bit her lip as she struggled to think of the words to send Josie.

After a litany of attempts, she finally held her breath as she pressed send on one that she found semi-adequate.

A lot has gone down here since you’ve been away.

I know that you may not be ready to talk about it or come back,

but I could really use a friend.

I’m having a rough time and it sucks.
Sure it was the absolute truth. And it was pretty shitty to throw more on Josie’s already full plate, but she was trying to get a response from the other girl. And everyone knew that Josie cared more about others than she did about herself. So maybe she wasn’t ready to talk about herself yet and Hope decided she wouldn’t push her to. But that didn’t mean she had to shut down and shut herself away completely. (Yes, that is hypocritical coming from her and she new it, but damn it. Josie didn’t deserve to feel the way that Hope always did)

The text got the desired result when Josie instantly responded.

Are you okay?!?!?!

Sorry I’ve been MIA, but I do want to be there for you.

You saved my life, I at least owe you that much.

Hope smiled even as she rolled her eyes.

You don’t owe me anything for saving your life, Josie.

If anything it was selfish, I don’t want to live in a world without you in it.

She bit her lip and shook her head at herself. She was coming off as a sentimental idiot and it was embarrassing.

Thank you for saying that, Hope.

But you still didn’t answer my question.

Are you okay?

I’m better, now.

I did something foolish, again.

Your dad probably hates me.

He doesn’t hate you.

No one ever could.

Believe me, Lizzie and I have tried.
Hope laughed out loud. Josie was actually making a joke. That was the best thing ever. She made a mental note to let Lizzie know. And then to also razz Lizzie about the fact that she didn’t actually hate her even though she always acted like she did.

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_I am offended that I have somehow lost my edge,_

_my family may disown me._


Well, you’re welcome to mine.

You’ve pretty much stolen my dad anyway.

_Ouch. Two insults in two minutes._

_I thought we were friends, Josie._

We are. I promise.

_What did you do that you think my dad will hate you for?_

_I may have accidentally been responsible for letting the Necromancer escape…._

What?!??!

How?!??!

Why?!??!

_It was selfish. He could raise the dead and I...I guess I wanted to see my parents again,_

_Regardless of the repercussions._

I understand that.

_Your dad didn’t._
He does. After seeing his...my...after seeing Jo again, he has to understand what that means. I’m sure he’s just disappointed in you. Not that you wanted to see them, but that the Necromancer got away.

Disappointment. That’s somehow worse that actual anger. But you should have seen his face. I don’t think he’ll forgive me any time soon.

Yeah, well, I helped to re-murder the love of his life. I wish he was just disappointed in me.

Hope’s heart tore in half at Josie’s words. She felt like she couldn’t breathe and was being crushed by the weight of them. She struggled to swallow.

Josie…

He doesn’t blame you for that. No one does.

She waited thirty minutes for an answer but never received one. So she texted Lizzie. And instead of teasing her like she had wanted to earlier, her heart wasn’t in it.

I may have said the wrong thing. Tell Josie, I’m sorry.

She didn’t get a response from Lizzie either. She sighed as she chucked her phone across the room. The screen most likely shattered, but it wasn’t like she had any use for a phone now. She didn’t have any friends left. She knew she’d screw things up with Josie eventually, but she didn’t think it would be so soon.

Hope tried to busy herself with homework and then got restless enough to go for a run. Being a wolf, like her mom promised, was the most free she ever felt. It helped her clear her mind and the fresh air was exhilarating. When she finally returned to her room, she gave in to the impulse to check her phone. The screen was cracked, but it still seemed to work. Not that she received any messages to
know for sure. When it was finally time to try to sleep, she lay in her bed anxiously. Her mind had
been clear during the run, but now she was replaying all the possible ways she truly screwed things
up with the only friend she ever had.

The only reason she fell asleep that night was because she was too exhausted not to.

Xxxxxx

Hope woke up in the middle of the night startled by the ringing of her phone. She snapped forward
in her bed as she blinked her eyes owlishly. Then she checked the clock in her room, and frowned
because it was 3:30 in the morning. As she reached for her phone, a whole new set of dread set it. It
wasn’t Josie’s name that lit up her broken screen, it was Lizzie’s.

Great, she was about to get yelled at. Or worse.

“Hello?” She croaked into the phone and then quickly cleared her throat.

“Yeah, well, I’m awake now so don’t feel obligated to apologize.”

Lizzie sighed. “Sorry, Hope. I wanted to let you know, not through text, that…well, I wanted to say
that you didn’t make things worse or screw things up. I wanted to say, ‘Thank you.’”

Hope was stunned. “You’re thanking me? For what?”

She was fully awake now, so she sat up straighter in bed and pulled her legs up into her chest as she
rested her arms against her knees.

“Whatever you said to Josie…she…she isn’t calm, but she, I think it was contentment that I felt from
her. Or at least it was nothing scary or painful this time.”

Hope smiled to herself. “Where is she now?”

“Sleeping.” Lizzie admitted quietly, as if remembering that fact and deciding not to wake her sister.

“Sleeping? What time is it over there? Where are you anyway? You never said.”

“It’s afternoon.” Lizzie paused for a second and Hope listened to her breathing while she waited for
the blonde to gather her words. “Josie doesn’t sleep at night. She hasn’t since…” She trailed off.

“Anyway, mom and I think she’s too scared to close her eyes because she’s scared of waking up in
the dark and thinking she got buried alive again. So she stays up all night and then eventually, after a
day or so of no sleep…she’ll just pass out in the middle of the afternoon. Like her body can’t take it
anymore and just shuts down for a few hours. But she doesn’t sleep long because she always wakes
up screaming, yelling for help. She has really bad nightmares, Hope. Or we assume so. Because she
has never actually told us about it or the lack of sleeping. Not really. A few words here and there, but
the rest we had to piece together.”

Hope hated that it was that bad for Josie, but it wasn’t like she thought the girl was fine. She knew
she wasn’t. That’s why she’d been so worried.

“Where are you guys? I’ll come to you.” Hope told the other girl.
“You can’t just...I mean, you shouldn’t come here. You’re helping already, Hope, you don’t need to fly halfway around the world just to sit and pray that she’ll say an actual sentence to you.”

“I know I don’t have to. I want to.”

“Why?”

“Why what? Why do I want to help, Josie? Because it’s Josie. She’s the best person I know.”

“Well, I know that. Since when did you? The two of you were barely friends three months ago.”

“Come on, Lizzie. We’ve known each other most of our lives, we don’t have to be best friends to care about each other.”

“So...if it were me, you would hop on the first plane to Romania just to check on me?” Lizzie sounded understandably skeptical.

“Well, not the first plane.” Hope admitted.

Lizzie actually chuckled at the admittance. “I wouldn’t do that for you either.” Then she sighed thoughtfully. “But Josie would have. The only reason I reached out to you every couple of years was because she begged me to. She hated that you were all alone. It didn’t matter that you chose to be, she just wanted you to have someone in your corner. Someone at the school that you could count on, if you ever needed it. So I would go out of my way to try and be your friend and you always shut me down. It actually hurt, Hope. Because contrary to popular belief, I do have feelings. And even though it hurt my feelings and I admit, my ego, the real reason I was always so pissed at you was because it hurt Josie even more.”

Hope actually felt like shit. She was a shit person.

“I…”

“No, I get it. You had to hide who you were because people were hunting you and your family. When we found out, Josie actually compared you to a superhero who had to hide their secret identity to protect the people they cared about. The fact that you were the tribrid spawn of a supervillain never even crossed her mind.”

Hope let herself smile at that. Josie really was something else.

“I never actually hated you though.” Lizzie continued. “I wanted to because you stole all of dad’s attention, and you somehow always seemed unaffected by everything. By everyone. And I envied that. I care what people think and it sucks. And Josie...not only does she care what other people think of her...but she also feels their pain, you know? Like not literally, but she empathizes with them. When I hurt, she hurts. When you hurt, she hurts.”

They were both silent for a moment. Lizzie must have realized she was rambling to Hope of all people.

“I don’t mean to overstep my bounds…” Hope laughed humorlessly at herself which made Lizzie laugh too. “I can’t believe that I was about to censor how I talk to you. I must be tired.”

“Tell me what you need to, Hope, I can handle it.”

‘Because I’m used to it’ went left unsaid.
“Why don’t you let people see this side of you?” Hope wondered honestly.

“What do you mean? I’m oversharing and rambling and I’m still somehow being a bitch to you.”

“No, you’re being honest and vulnerable and you. You’ve said more to me in the last two days than you have in the last ten years. And not only that, but hardly any of it was about yourself. It was about Josie. And the parts about me were rather insightful. Yet, you let everyone think that you’re a narcissistic and selfish bitch. I’m pretty sure that Penelope broke Josie’s heart because of you. Because she didn’t understand who you were and how much you cared about Josie. Not that it excused her behavior or her cheating, but...you have to know that the girl is still completely in love with Josie, right?”

Lizzie huffed. “Don’t get me started on Penelope. You do know she and Josie kissed on our birthday. After you guys saved Josie. Right?”

Hope didn’t know that. And for a reason she tried not to dwell on, she didn’t like it.

“I didn’t know that.” She stated as she tried to keep her voice even. “Are they getting back together then?”

“Ha! You forget that Josie doesn’t talk to me anymore. So how would I know? I had to learn about the kiss from Satan herself.”

“Penelope told you they kissed? How do you know it’s true then? As I was trying to point out, she has made it her life mission to destroy you.”

“Yeah, she hates me. And you’re right, she believes I’m the real reason that things didn’t work out with Josie. She tried to get between us. She thinks I’m a leech on my own sister, and that I drain the life out of her. But what she always failed to realize is that whenever she struck out at me, it also hurt Josie.”

“Not to mention the cheating. Don’t forget that part.” Hope growled.

“You seem to hate her more than I do.”

Hope inhaled deeply as she closed her eyes tightly. Then she opened them and exhaled slowly. Evenly. “I don’t actually hate her. Anymore. She helped me and MG save Josie. When she found out Josie was in danger, she dropped everything without question and helped me look for her. I just hate what she did. To Josie.”

“Huh…”

“What?” Hope asked when Lizzie seemed like she wasn’t going to elaborate on her own.

“I didn’t realize you were even paying attention to what was going on around you. Most of that was almost nine months ago. You barely left your room except for class and even then, it was sporadic. How’d you know all of that was going on?”

Hope bit her lip shyly as she contemplated how vulnerable she was willing to be with the other girl.

“Just because I kept to myself, that didn’t mean that I didn’t know what was going on around me. Dad always said to ‘know thy enemy.’”

“Uh huh. And which one was your enemy, Penelope or Josie?”
Hope would have sworn that Lizzie wore a smirk as she asked the question.

“Anyone and everyone at that school was a potential enemy. It was recently announced that I was actually a Mikaelson, so I didn’t know who to trust. Trusting anyone at all was hard for me, after Roman.”

“Wow, you really are more screwed up than I am, aren’t you?” Lizzie mused, but it wasn’t laced with any sort of malice.

“I never denied it.”

The blonde hummed. “You’re right. You actually always warned us about it.”

“I may be a lot of things, but I try not to be a liar.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“You’re going to whether I say ‘yes’ or not, so just ask, Lizzie.”

“Were you shocked when you found out that Josie liked girls?” Lizzie wondered. “It surprised the hell out of me when she first told me about dating Penelope.”

Hope thought about the question sincerely. “At first I was a bit surprised, but it wasn’t like I shouldn’t have expected it. Josie loves people. So I guess it shouldn’t have been all that surprising that she didn’t rule out loving someone just because they were a girl.” Her eyes widened. “I’m sorry if that isn’t politically correct or whatever. It wasn’t meant as an insult or judgement, just an observation. And honestly, I guess I feel the same way. It’s about the person, you know. Love is love.”

“Wait?!?!? Are you...did you...” Lizzie lowered her voice to barely a whisper. “Are you saying you’re gay, too?”

Hope sighed. She honestly didn’t know what she was saying. “I don’t know. Is it okay to not know?”

“It’s absolutely okay not to know. And it’s also okay to know and not feel the need to come out to anyone. It’s your prerogative. You don’t owe anyone anything. But in case you’re wondering, whatever you are or aren’t is fine with me. And it will be more than fine with Josie, too.”

“Thank you, Lizzie. That means a lot.” And it did.

“I actually enjoyed our talk, Hope. But I should let you get some sleep. And I think I’m going to run to a cafe and grab some hot chocolate and pastries for Josie before she wakes up. Also, my mom told me to tell you ‘Hi.’ She just walked in the room and wants to talk to me.”

“Goodbye, Lizzie. And thanks again for checking in. I was moments away from buying a plane ticket to fix whatever I thought I ruined.”

“You didn’t even know where we were, how were you going to buy a ticket?”

“I would’ve figured that out when I got to Europe. If I couldn’t have found you, I’d always just go visit my Aunt Rebecca.”

“You really are something, Mikaelson.” Lizzie responded sounding almost wistfully.

“Night, Saltzman.” Hope yawned in response before hanging up her phone.
She was able to fall asleep quickly after the conversation. Although, thoughts about Josie and Penelope Park kissing may have soured her dreams a bit.

She woke up when her alarm went off three hours later. As much as she hated it, she made herself go to her classes. It was about lunchtime when she received a text from Josie. It had to have been close to nighttime there. Hope assumed that perhaps the brunette was having trouble sleeping.

Instead of responding via text, she decided to call her. She knew that Josie might not answer, but she had to try. She really wanted to hear the other girl’s voice so that she could know for herself that she was okay. Or at least, relatively speaking.

To her delight, Josie answered on the second ring.

“Hey you. Sorry I fell asleep on you earlier. I didn’t mean to just stop texting.” Josie greeted softly as she answered.

“It’s okay. Sleep is important.” Hope rolled her eyes at herself because she sounded like an idiot.

“Yeah, well, I haven’t been getting a lot lately.”

“You’ve been through a lot, Josie, it’s okay to not be okay.”

Josie just hummed an affirmative before she sighed. “Is it okay if we don’t talk about me? You said that you were having a hard time, I want to hear about it.”

“I already told you that I made a mistake and disappointed your dad. And well, I used MG to do it, so now he hasn’t really been talking to me. I feel bad that I got him in trouble, and that I used him the way I did. I don’t want to be that person.”

“Then don’t be.”

“You make it sound easy.”

“It can be. You’re a good person, Hope. You’re the only person who doesn’t believe that.”

“I’m not though. Not really.”

“You saved my life, twice really. You saved Lizzie from that gargoyle. You helped Rafael through his stuff. And that’s just what I can think of off the top of my head.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s all there is. My greatest hits. All three of them.”

They were both silent for a moment.

“What about the time when I was in fourth grade and I was being teased by one of the other witches, I don’t remember her name…” Josie started, but Hope interrupted her.

“Sadie Freeman. She’s still a bitch.”

“She picked on me because I didn’t have any friends besides Lizzie and you kicked her in the knee and then cast a spell where she couldn’t talk for a week. You also sat beside me at lunch that day, I always thought it was to prove to Sadie that I did have another friend besides my sister.”

“I almost forgot about that day.” Hope commented. She remembered it like it was yesterday as soon as Josie brought it up, but she hadn’t thought about it since that day.
“And every time I felt sad when my mom or dad left the school for official business, I would always somehow find a little sketch of something cute in my room. Underneath the door, waiting for me. Little cats or puppies and sometimes, just a pretty sunset or beautiful flower. But it was always there and I know it was you, even if you never mentioned it.”

“I hated seeing you sad. I always have.” Hope didn’t realize that Josie always knew they were from her. “If you knew it was me, why didn’t you say something?”

“I guess I figured that if you wanted me to know, then you’d say something. And I didn’t want you to stop making them.”

Hope smiled sadly at that. If she had been confronted, she likely would have stopped. Josie really did know her better than pretty much anyone else ever could.

“Tell me about your dad.” Josie said out of nowhere.

“What?” Hope’s voice cracked.

“I only know what we learned about him in school or from my dad’s point of view. And then later from my mom’s. He sounded like two completely different people when you hear them each talk about him. So I figured the truth is somewhere in the middle and what better way to get the whole picture than from his daughter.”

“Why do you want to know anyway?”

“Because he’s your dad.”

Hope sighed shakily. “My dad did do some really bad things. A lot of bad things. But he was still my dad. And I know that he regretted some of the things he did. He and his brothers and sisters had a very complicated relationship, but they were his family and he loved them so fiercely. Sometimes, I think he loved them too much and that is where all the problems stemmed from. He also just wanted to be good enough for them. He tried so hard and then when he failed he would get so frustrated and angry and then do worse things. But I understand that about him, the need to be enough. To have someone love you back just as fiercely and completely as you love them. He was very protective of the people he loved. It took a lot to get on his good side, because he didn’t forgive or trust easily, but if you were lucky enough to be loved by him...to be one of his chosen family...then he would kill for you. And he would die for you. He died for me.”

“Hope…”

“He also...he loved music. I think that’s why he loved New Orleans so much. It’s the birthplace of jazz. And he loved to read. History or poetry, it didn’t matter. He loved it all. He tried to pretend that he didn’t care as much as he did. But he was sort of a romantic at heart, and poetry was something he loved. My dad was also the most talented painter. Painting calmed him, I think. Or it seemed to. It calms me. I paint when I’m happy because I want to share it with the world in a way that is real—-a way that lasts. Because happiness is so fleeting, it’s important to document it. But I also paint when I’m sad, as a comfort. As a way to feel connected to him. It’s nice to share something with him, to have something like that in common. Something that is beautiful and not scary or deadly or horrible.”

“You sound like you have the very best parts of your dad in you. And from what little I’ve heard about your mom, you’re a lot like her as well.”

“My mom was wonderful. She was perfect. She was the only person I ever knew that commanded the respect of witches, werewolves and vampires. Everyone loved my mom. Well, not everyone. I
mean, she was murdered because she was a hybrid. And people are scared of what they don’t understand. But she was a great person, Josie. You would have loved her.” Hope smiled to herself in memory. “She would have loved you. You remind me of her a lot, you know. She was selfless and strong and full of compassion. Everyone respected her not because they feared her the way they did my father, but because they adored her. People adore you too, Josie. Witches, vampires and werewolves.”

“You’re not just referring to yourself are you, because you’re all three?”

Hope laughed. “Not at all. I was thinking more of MG, Penelope and Rafael. But yeah, I think you’re alright also.”

Josie actually chuckled a bit at that. And to Hope, it sounded genuine.

“Speaking of Penelope…” Hope trailed off hoping that Josie took the bait.

“What did she say?”

Well shit. It wasn’t like Hope could lie to Josie. She couldn’t bring herself to, no matter how much she wanted to continue this avenue of discussion. Her paused made Josie sigh in frustration but she continued talking anyway.

“She won’t stop texting me. I don’t know what to say to her. I told her after I kissed her that it was a mistake and that I didn’t want to get back together. But I also knew how she felt about me and shouldn’t have kissed her to begin with if I had no intention of being with her.”

So Josie was the one who initiated the kiss. Hope didn’t see that coming.

“You had just been through something traumatic. You weren’t in the right frame of mind.” Hope supplied helpfully. “I’m sure that Penelope doesn’t hold any of it against you. She’s probably just reaching out to check in on you. She does care, Josie. And so does MG. And your sister. We all care. And you don’t owe us explanations and you don’t need to smile and pretend everything is fine when we know it isn’t. We just want to let you know we’re here in whatever capacity that you may need or want us. So don’t be so hard on them or assume that they want anything more from you than to just be your friend. You’ve been there for us all plenty of times, we’re just trying to return the favor.”

“You don’t think I’m a horrible person for leading her on?”

“She hurt you really bad Josie, and she knows it. I’m sure she also knows that doing one good thing doesn’t nullify all the bad things she did to hurt you. She understands she has to work to be back in your good graces again. At this point, I’m pretty sure that she’d settle for being just friends with you again. I know from personal experience that it’s better to have you in my life in any capacity than to not have you at all. Even when we were basically frenemies, I liked knowing that you were there. The world needs you, Josie. We all need you.”

Josie was quiet for a long time and Hope started to think that she said the wrong thing again.

“So that’s a ‘no’ then?” Josie asked tentatively.

Hope laughed wholeheartedly. “That is definitely a ‘no.’ You are not at all a horrible person.”

“How do you not hate me?” Josie asked shyly.

“How? Did you not just hear everything I said?”
“I did. I heard how much you love your dad and how much you miss him. I heard about how you made a deal with the Necromancer so that you could try to see him again. But Hope...I’m the reason he’s dead. Lizzie and I...we killed him. When we took that dark magic from you and we put it in him...”

“You listen to me, Josette Forbes-Saltzman. I never once blamed you or Lizzie for any of that. You took that dark magic out of me because you were asked to. You took it to save my life. My dad...he wanted to save me. He wanted to protect me, from him. And when he took it, he saved us all by dying. That was his decision. I spent most of these last few years hating myself because it was my dark magic to begin with. And I’ve hated him for being noble for the first time in his life and doing the right thing for everyone else, even if it broke my heart. But I never once hated you. Not even a little bit.”

Hope heard Josie’s soft sobs on the other end of the receiver.

“Josie, are you...it’s okay. I promise, I mean it.”

“You don’t hate me.”

“No.”

“You don’t blame me?”

“No.” She repeated emphatically.

“And you don’t think dad hates me for Josette?” It was barely a whisper, spoken through broken sobs.

“I think your dad loves you and I think your dad was grateful that he got to see her again, even if for a little while. I think it was great that she got to see how you and Lizzie grew up, and witness the wonderful people you became. I think it’s horrible that you were forced to do what you did and it breaks my heart that you’re hurting over it. But no one could possibly think any of it was your fault or think any less of you for what you had to do.”

“I was scared to go back home because I was scared he wouldn’t be able to look at me. He said that I remind him of her the most. And I’ve even got her name. I just...if he looks at me like I...”

“You’re scared of him seeing you the way you see yourself...like a monster.” Hope concluded.

“Yes.”

“I’m responsible for my own mother’s death, Josie. Not directly, but...well, anyway, I’m at fault. And I’m also at fault for my dad. Plus, I did actually, although unintentionally, kills someone. Which I’m sure you assumed since I triggered my werewolf gene. But when you look at me...you’ve never once seen me as a monster, or pitied me. Why is that?”

“Because I don’t think you are a monster. And you may have not made the best choices sometimes, but it doesn’t make you a bad person either. Like I said before. You also don’t deserve my pity, or anyone else’s. You’re stronger than that. You deserve better than that.”

“How about we make a pact then? I will try to see myself the way you see me, if you try to see yourself the way I see you. Deal?”

“I think I can do that. I’ll try.”
“Okay, good. And when you’re struggling...when you start to see yourself as something other than you are, I will be there to remind you that you are anything but a monster. Just like you’ve always done for me.”

“That sounds good. I like that idea.”

“And could you do something else for me, Jo?”

The nickname slipped off her lips and she didn’t bother to correct herself. Josie didn’t seem to mind.

“What is it?”

“Next time someone reaches out to you, will you answer them? You don’t have to spill your guts or carry on a conversation. Just let them know you’re still alive.”

“My friends?”

“And your sister.”

“Lizzie...I’m scared that…”

“Scared that what?”

“I’m scared that if I start talking to her that I’ll start crying and then I’ll never be able to stop. I think it’s easier to not talk than it is to admit that I don’t know what to say.”

“You did pretty good with me just now.”

“Because you’re an ocean away and I can’t see if you’re pitying me or not. I can feel how anxious and upset and angry Lizzie is. And I’m scared to learn if it’s all directed at me.”

“You’re twins. Maybe what you feel from her is a reflection of what you’re actually feeling. Like...she senses your anxiety and fear and it makes her feel that way. If you talked to her, you’d know for sure. Isn’t knowing better than guessing?”

Josie sighed. “I do miss her. It’s been strange to miss her when she’s right in front of me. And I know that a lot of it is on me because I’ve shut down. But now it’s been so long I don’t even know where to start.”

“Start wherever you want to. You don’t owe her anything more than what you feel comfortable giving, so long as it’s something.”

“I’m surprised you’re looking out for her. When did the two of you become friends?”

“It’s recent. In all honesty, I reached out to her when you didn’t return my texts. Not to go behind your back, but just to check in. And when the conversation didn’t turn into a string of insults, we realized that we didn’t hate each other as much as we thought.”

Josie was quiet.

“I wasn’t trying to hurt you Josie. I was just worried.” Hope pleaded for her to understand.

“What did you talk about? I know it was about me. What was it?” Josie demanded.

“I thought I might have said the wrong thing or ruined things when you didn’t respond right away and she just assured me that I shouldn’t give up. Not that I ever intended to. She was just glad that
you were talking to someone, even if it wasn’t her. Because she cares, Josie. She cares about you more than anyone.”

“And that’s it?”

“She admitted that she doesn’t hate me. So I had to let her know that the feeling was mutual.”

“So you are friends now.”

“You’re still my best friend.” Hope admitted truthfully.

“I am.”

“Come on Josie, I don’t spill my soul to just anyone. I don’t make friends with my mortal enemy for no reason. I care about you. I think I always have.”

“You’re my best friend, too.”

“That’s a lie. I know Lizzie is. And then MG. I’m third best at most.” Hope knew it and it didn’t even bother her. Well it did, but she’d get over it.

“You’re right. Lizzie is my best friend. But you beat out MG. Unless you also kissed my ex.”

“I did not kiss Penelope, no.”

“Good.”

“Josie...I was thinking, I know you may not be ready to come home yet, but I would like to see you. Face to face.”

“I’m not letting you fly all the way over here just to check up on me, Hope. I appreciate that you want to, but it isn’t necessary. I’m in good hands. I’ve got both my mom and Lizzie watching over me. Too closely if you ask me, but yeah, I’m fine. Or, I will be. Some day.”

“I knew you’d say that, that’s why I was thinking of a little something different.”

“What do you mean different?”

“Astral projection.”

“Magic. Are you even capable of doing that kind of magic?”

“My Aunt Freya is. She could teach me. Or help me.”

“You just got in trouble with my dad and you want to risk his wrath again by doing magic outside the classroom. You know it’s against the rules.”

“I won’t do it at school then. I’ll go down and visit my aunt. Your dad can’t punish me for breaking school rules if I’m not at school.”

“Hope, I’m not sure.”

“And so we’re clear, I would break the rules for you though. Just so you know.”

“I appreciate that. I think.” Josie took a sharp intake of breath before she exhaled loudly. “Astral projection, huh?”
“Yup. We could actually talk face to face. No more international phone charges.”

“I didn’t think of that! My parents are going to kill me when they get my phone bill.”

“Then aren’t you glad I’ve thought of the perfect solution.”

“The perfect solution is going back home and actually seeing you face to face. But this will have to do in the meantime. I mean, if you can figure out a way to get it to work.”

“I will. Trust me.”

“I do trust you.”

That small utterance warmed Hope’s heart.

“Well, I should go. I’ve got to get to class.” Hope announced.

“I guess I’ll see you later then.”

“Yeah, I’ll see you.”

Hope smiled as they said their goodbyes and she hung up. About ten minutes later she received a text from Lizzie.

Thank you.

She smiled to herself. The blonde had been awake for at least part of that conversation. It must have been frustrating for Lizzie though, knowing that Josie barely spoke three words to her and yet held a long and deeply sincere conversation with Hope. She felt bad for the other girl.

You’re welcome.

I hope she takes my advice and talks to you in the morning.

So do I.

Astral projection, huh?

I happen to like the idea.

It’s a good one.

I think so too.
Josie was right. You’re one of the good ones, Hope.

That’s high praise coming from you.

Yeah, well, it’s all you’re getting.

I’ll take it.

Goodnight Mikaelson.

Bye Saltzman

Hope didn’t even realize she missed lunch and the period after, but she also didn’t care at all. Josie talked to her. They were still okay. Instead of going to her next class, she went to speak with Alaric.

“I’m guessing your request to visit your aunt has something to do with trying to learn how to use astral projection.”

“How did you know?”

He sighed loudly and even produced a slight smile on her otherwise overstressed face.

“Josie actually texted me. I’ve been trying to get her to respond all week, and then suddenly out of the blue she texted me. About 10 minutes before you walked in. She wanted to make sure that if you did use magic in school, outside of a classroom, she wanted to make sure I understood why and didn’t expel you.”

Hope couldn’t help smiling. “She said that?”

He leaned forward across his desk and studied her face. “Caroline said she hasn’t so much as looked at her or Lizzie all week, but that she is glued to her phone when she talks to you. What’s going on between you and my daughter?”

Hope shrugged. “We’re friends. And I’ve been through Hell in my lifetime, as you are well aware, so I guess Josie just figures that if anyone could understand what she might be dealing with, it’s me. Or maybe she knows that I might be the only person who will never judge her or who will never get scared away by whatever demons she may have.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. It was as if he was scrutinizing her words for their verity. “Josie is a kind hearted selfless girl, and yes, she got buried alive and almost died...but I don’t understand...what demons could she have? I get that she’s traumatized and haunted by what happened, but Josie…”

“Josie is a pure hearted person who was forced to basically kill her birth mother, the love of your life.
How well do you think she can handle that?"

Alaric’s eyes widened and his mouth dropped open. He closed it as he swallowed harshly and shook his head as if to clear his mind.

“Has she told you this stuff or are you making assumptions?”

She raised an eyebrow at him questioningly. “Are you saying that she and Lizzie didn’t kill your wife?”

“She was already dead. She...they just returned her...they didn’t kill Josette.”

Hope nodded. “I agree with you. I know that they couldn’t murder someone who was already dead. And I know that Josie wouldn’t hurt a fly. But what we know doesn’t change the way that Josie and Lizzie feel about what they were forced to do. Again.” She knew that Alaric understood that she was talking about Klaus and what the young twins had been asked to do back then. “Lizzie might not be as noticeably silent and distressed about everything that happened, but she’s suffering as well, Alaric.”

Alaric stood up from behind the desk and started to pace anxiously. “I’ve begged Caroline to bring them home. She said that Josie refused. How can I help my little girls if they aren’t here?”

“I can get them to come back. I know I can. If you let me do this. If you let me talk to her face to face...I only want to help Josie. I would do anything for her.” Hope begged.

He stopped pacing and turned to face Hope directly. “You’ve already somehow helped her more than I ever could. I…” Alaric walked toward her and rested his hand on her shoulder and looked her in the eye. “I used to talk to you about not turning out like your father. I was worried that your anger and your isolation and all the walls you put up...I was so scared about what you would become. But I was wrong to fear you, Hope. You’re so much more like your mother. Her compassion, and love, and strength. But you do have some of your dad in you as well. His sense of loyalty and, in his own way, his honor. His protectiveness over his family or the people he considered to be his family. He would be so proud of you. They both would be. I am proud of you, Hope. So proud.”

Hope hadn’t realized she was crying until her tears started to drip on her neck and her exposed shoulder. Alaric, bless him, didn’t comment on it. Instead, he stepped away and gave her room to wipe at the tears frantically. To distract from her current state, she decided to deflect as usual. Only this time, it wasn’t poking like she had always done to Josie or Lizzie. This time it was with a harmless, yet sarcastic retort.

“So, does that mean it’s a ‘yes’? I can go visit Aunt Freya and use the astral projection spell to talk to Josie?”

He smiled at her and shook his head ruefully. “It’s good to see some things never change. You’re always going to be a pain in my ass, aren’t you.”

Hope laughed at that. “I will certainly try.”

“Yes. Find out how to bring my daughters home.”

She nodded and turned to walk away.

“And for the record, you’re far better for her than Penelope Park ever was.”

Hope stopped suddenly and frowned. Then she glanced over her shoulder at him. “I told you, Josie
and I are just friends.”

He smiled again. “I know.”

She walked away with a furrowed brow trying to understand what had happened. Although, she didn’t dwell on it since she had a phone call to make and some packing to do. The idea of seeing her aunt again and then getting to talk face to face with Josie put a smile on her lips that didn’t leave for the rest of the afternoon.

Hope was nearly finished packing when there was a hesitant knock on her door.

“Come in.” She announced without looking toward the door.

“Hey.”

It was MG who stepped into the room, and he shut the door behind him.

“Josie finally responded to my text today. She said that she’s doing better, that she won’t be gone much longer. And that I have to forgive you.”

She shook her head with a smirk. “She’s really making the rounds.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was talking to her this afternoon, and…”

“Wait, like actually talking? Or texting?” He asked for clarification.

“Talking.”

His raised eyebrows looked hilarious but Hope didn’t tease him about his reaction.

“Anyway, we were talking and I asked her to check in with everyone else so that you all didn’t continue to worry. Not that you’ll suddenly stop worrying, but I know it sucks to be shut out when all you want to do is help.”

MG nodded his head thoughtfully. “That would explain why she also messaged Penelope. That girl has been on cloud nine ever since.” He studied her intently. “Should I tell her that she doesn’t stand a chance getting back together with Josie, or are you gonna do it?”

Hope shrugged.

“Come on! You can’t pretend that it doesn’t bother you that they kissed again.”

“It doesn’t. Do I think Josie deserves better? Yes, absolutely. But is it Josie’s choice? Yes. It is.”

“Come on, when you found out that Penelope cheated on Josie you were just as pissed off as Lizzie was about it. Which at the time was slightly odd, but suddenly is making more sense.” MG declared.

“If you’re implying what I think you’re implying…you’ve got it all wrong. I don’t know how many times I’ll have to say this today, but Josie and I are just friends.”

“Lizzie and I are just friends, doesn’t mean I don’t want more.” He countered.

She frowned and shook her head. “You shouldn’t go into a friendship hoping for more, MG. It isn’t fair to that person. Because then you are just, I don’t know, waiting to swoop in and be the knight in
shining armor, but all she really wants and needs is a friend.”

Her words made him frown. “It’s not like I’m not okay with just being friends. Wanting to be seen as more someday doesn’t make me a bad person, Hope.”

“That’s not what I meant. I just...I think honesty is important. I think both people have the right to have their feelings validated. As long as you give Lizzie that same courtesy, that she knows you won’t just ditch her if she only ever just wants to be friends.”

“I know! And I won’t pressure her, I just want to let her know that I could be an option. I don’t have to be, but I do want to be. If she turns me down, I promise I’ll walk away. No means no, right?”

Hope nodded at that. At least he seemed to understand what she was trying to say. She knew that her words didn’t always come out right.

“And just because I think Josie deserves better than Penelope, that doesn’t automatically mean that I think I’m the one who deserves her. I know she deserves better than me as well. Hypothetically speaking. Since we are just friends.”

He smirked at her. “Right. You’re right.”

“So, you came in here because Josie told you to forgive me. And have you?”

He nodded. “I helped you because you’re my friend, Hope. And I did understand why it was so important to you. I hate how it happened and I hate what happened after. But I don’t hate you. We’re still friends.”

“Thank you. I don’t have many of those. And I’d really like to keep the ones that I’ve got.”

He chuckled at that. “You and Penelope seemed close that night. Killing zombies together. Those who slay together stay together right?”

Hope genuinely laughed at that. She did enjoy MG as a person. He was kind and funny and full of positive energy. She felt lucky to count him as a friend.

“You seem dead set on playing matchmaker. How do you know I’m not straight?”

“You and Raf seem pretty close. And he is single, and you’re single.” He pivoted the conversation with ease as he smirked at her and winked.

“You are awful.”

“No, I’m supportive. I don’t care who you fall for, as long as it isn’t Lizzie.”

She laughed again. “Trust me. It will never be Lizzie.” She contemplated that statement for a minute. “We are friends now though.”

“Oh, friends.” He teased.

She threw the shirt she was currently packing at him and smiled when it hit him square in the face.

“You’re lucky I wasn’t holding something heavier.” She told him seriously.

“Believe me, I am well aware of that.” He said as he tossed the offending shirt back at her and she easily caught it. “What are you packing for anyway?”
“Roadtrip. I’m going to New Orleans to visit my Aunt Freya.”

“Really?” He sat on her bed and looked at her. “Scheduled visit or are you running away?”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “I cleared it with Alaric if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Aren’t you worried that you’ll be gone if Josie comes back?”

She shook her head. She was doing this for Josie. This was her attempt to get the other girl to come back. But she wasn’t about to tell him that. Not only would he likely tease her, but she also didn’t want to disappoint him if it didn’t work. She would be disappointed enough for herself if she failed.

“Well, I guess I could text you. If she does come back while you’re gone.”

“I appreciate that, MG. Truly.”

Instead of leaving after that, MG stayed put on her bed. “You’d appreciate it enough to do me a favor in return? Like put in a good word about me with your new friend, Lizzie?”

She rolled her eyes and swung her arm at him playfully, but it had the desired effect and he hopped off her bed to avoid her.

“Kidding. Sort of. Anyway, I’ll let you finish packing.” He walked toward the door. “And since you’re also the reason that Josie finally responded to my texts, thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She told him sincerely.

“Talk to you later.”

“Yeah, you too.”

MG walked out of her room without another word. Hope hurriedly finished her packing and made it to the bus station with time to spare. As she closed her eyes and rested her head against the cool window, she let her thoughts idly wander. Weeks ago, she was still in self imposed isolation. She was angry, depressed, alone and hurting. Currently, she was still many of those things, but she was also genuinely hopeful for the first time since she could remember. And she was full of...affection. Maybe something close to contentment. Not quite happy. Not with two of her friends still hurting so badly. But she was still happy from her talk with MG and Alaric and coupled with her recent closeness to both Josie and Lizzie–she felt almost full. Or in the very least, no longer empty. That had to be a good thing, right?

Xxxxxxx

Freya was at the station waiting for her when Hope got off the bus. She was immediately enveloped in a hug and it made her realize how much she had missed her aunt. How much she missed New Orleans.

“It’s so good to see you.” Freya said as she pulled away and held both of Hope’s cheeks in her hands. “You look more beautiful every time I see you.”

She shrugged with embarrassment. “Good genes I guess.”
Freya smirked at that. “Damn right.”

They walked toward her aunt’s car as they chatted about Keelin and the baby and life. Then the conversation moved to Hope and school and why she was there.

She talked to her briefly about the twins and what had happened and how she wanted to help when she was on the phone with her earlier.

“If I remember correctly, the twins were never that nice to you. I thought we hated them.”

Hope scowled at her aunt from the passenger seat as she buckled herself in. “I never said I hated them.”

“You never had anything good to say about them either.” Freya pointed out.

“I did complain about them often. Lizzie mostly. But that…I…”

“You wanted them to like you and you were hurt that they didn’t? Lizzie’s popular and one of those mean girls, isn’t she?”

Hope sighed. “Well, no. I mean, she’s popular because she’s Alaric’s daughter and she’s pretty and blonde.” Hope looked out the window as she spoke. “Josie is prettier though. And nicer. Plus, she’s actually likely to be Valedictorian of her class because she’s super smart. And yet, somehow, Lizzie’s the popular one.”

“That’s usually how it works. The nice, smart girls are often overlooked.”

“And unheard.” Hope mumbled.

“But what about you? I’m sure you’re just as pretty as those girls. Prettier, probably, if I’m able to be biased. And you’re really smart. You could totally have been part of their clique if you wanted to.”

“I could have been. I wanted to be.” She looked at her aunt. “But I also wanted to be alone. I was sick of people I cared about dying on me, so I refused to care about anyone else.”

“Oh, Hope….”

“So I was a bitch. Lizzie wasn’t one of those mean girls, Aunt Freya, I was. I was not nice to the twins at all, especially when they tried to be friends with me.”

“Then what changed?”

“I guess I did.” She looked back at the window. “I was sick of being alone. And it’s not like it worked anyway. They both still about died and it had nothing to do with whether or not they knew me. So I figured, why keep denying myself what I want.”

“And what is it you want?” Freya asked and Hope could feel the older woman staring at her.

“I wish I knew.” When Hope turned to face her aunt, Freya looked away toward the road. “All I know is that they are my friends and they are hurting. Especially, Josie. And I need to help them.”

“So…astral projection. You said they were in Romania, that’s a long way to project yourself. It’s hard without a deep rooted connection to the place or person. And you’ll need something of Josie’s to ground yourself with. Like I said over the phone.”

“I have one of her sweatshirts. She left it in my room when we hung out doing homework a few
days before her birthday. It still smells like her. Not as strong anymore, but I can still sense her. I
think it’s the werewolf part of me.”

Freya studied her briefly but didn’t say a word about it. She eventually looked forward again and the
rest of the ride to her house was in silence. Hope was grateful for it. She needed to get her head in
the game so she could prepare for the magic spell. She understood that it would take a lot out of her.
But she also knew that it would always be worth it. Josie would always be worth it.

They arrived at the empty house twenty minutes later, and rather than continue to exchange archaic
pleasantries, they both got right to work. Freya prepared the room as she followed protocol
succinctly. Hope busied herself with her phone. She texted Lizzie to make sure that Josie was awake.
Then she asked her to make sure that Josie stayed in the room so that when she projected herself
there, their time wasn’t wasted.

Lizzie’s resulting text made her blush.

Want me and mom to leave the room as well?
You know, to give you some time ALONE.

Ha. Ha.

She was not going to give Lizzie the satisfaction of rattling her cage when she needed to concentrate.
But she also knew that Josie would probably open up better if they were alone.

Actually, could you?

Please

Wow, you work fast Mikaelson.

Lizzie…

It’s for Josie.

Do you really think she’ll open up to me with you and your mom in the room?

Fine. I’ll make sure you have thirty minutes.

Anything beyond that is just begging for trouble.
She set her phone down with a smile. Lizzie really wasn’t so bad once you got to know her. And it was painfully obvious how much she cared about her sister.

“I’m about finished setting up. Did you make sure Josie’s there?” Freya’s question brought Hope out of her head and into the present.

“Yeah, Lizzie said she’s awake and she’s going to be alone in her room. At least for the next thirty minutes.”

“Lizzie? Why didn’t you just ask Josie?”

“Because, if it doesn’t work right away, I didn’t want to get Josie’s hopes up and then disappoint her.”

Freya nodded wordlessly. “Are you ready then?”

Hope set her phone down and grabbed Josie’s sweatshirt out of her bag. She brought it to her nose and inhaled deeply. The scent was pleasant to her nose and, in a way she didn’t want to think about, it reminded her about the best things about home. She slipped the shirt over her own and hugged herself.

“It’s kind of big for you.” Freya commented, although the way that she looked at Hope let the girl know that there was so much more on her mind that what she said.

“Yeah, she’s quite tall.” Was Hope’s simple reply.

Freya lit some candles and opened her grimoire between them. Then she reached across it to hold Hope’s hands. Hope chanted the words she had been told to practice. Distantly, she heard Freya chanting as well. She closed her eyes as she was instructed to and thought about Josie. Freya had told her that she had to focus on a strong feeling, a well remembered memory. So she did. She thought about her own fear when she couldn’t find Josie. She thought about how terrified she had been of losing the other girl. And she remembered so intensely the relief and happiness she felt when they dug up the shallow grave and Josie was still alive. Not just alive. But that she stared at Hope as if she was her hero. And that was when Hope noticed the necklace. The talisman that she had gifted Josie for her birthday. It brought her pride that not only had the charm actually worked in a way she didn’t anticipate, but that Josie still wore it at all.

When she felt something inside her change….a weird feeling overcame her. Freya’s voice was no longer heard in the distance and the flickering lights instead seemed to be beaming brightly around her. She took a deep steadying breath, then she slowly opened her eyes. She was in a room she didn’t recognize. As she slowly took in the empty room around her, a door to her left opened and Josie walked out.
The brunette was only wearing a towel and her dark hair was still dripping water. Hope’s eyes widened at the sight and she blushed furiously at having been caught staring by the girl in front of her.

“Howel!” Josie shrieked and her arms automatically went up to better secure the towel wrapped around her. “You’re here. Like actually here. It worked then?”

She seemed to be more intrigued than embarrassed as she walked toward Hope. “How real is this? Can I touch you?”

Hope swallowed thickly and shook her head. “I...no, you won’t be able to feel me. Or I you. It’s just...I’m here, but not.”

Josie nodded.

Hope stared at the ceiling awkwardly. “Could you put some clothes on though? But quickly? Lizzie is only giving us thirty minutes before she busts through the door and ruins everything.”

Josie blushed at that and then went to the dresser to grab some clothes. Wordlessly, she returned to the bathroom to get dressed.

Hope stood up and walked toward the now closed door and rested her hand on it. Or she tried to, but she couldn’t feel the door. She idly wondered if she could walk through it.

“I’m going to murder your sister, just so you know. She told me you were awake, she didn’t tell me you were in the shower. I would have waited. I didn’t mean to intrude.”

“It’s fine, Hope. I really am happy to see you, even if it’s not real.”

“It can be real though. I mean, our conversation is really happening. We’ll both remember it. It’s as real as it needs to be.”

The door opened again and Josie walked through it. And almost right into or through Hope. Both awkwardly stepped back in response.

“Sorry.” Josie apologized the same time Hope did and both girls giggled nervously in response.

“I heard you were looking out for me yesterday. Making sure your dad didn’t expel me and that MG forgave me. Are you like my guardian angel or something?”

She cursed herself for her cheesiness.

Josie shrugged as she walked passed Hope and continued to towel dry her wet hair. “I just thought since you saved me a few times, I’d return the favor. You may not know this because you don’t have many friends...” She smirked at Hope playfully. “But friends do that sort of thing for each other. It’s all about giving and taking. Sometimes some are better at giving and some are better at taking, but over time, it all evens out. Or it should, if it’s a true friendship.”

“Then I guess you’ll have to teach me.” Hope ran her hands through her hair and looked at Josie vulnerably as she sat on one of the empty beds. “I really do want to be a good friend to you, Josie.”

Josie’s hands stopped what they were doing, and she sat the towel down on the dresser then took a seat next to Hope. “You’ve already proven to be a wonderful friend, Hope. Don’t be so hard on yourself.”
“I just feel like I haven’t done enough. You’re still hurting. I would give anything to fix it.”

“I am hurting. But I’m also healing. And I know that someday, I will be okay. Maybe not back to how I was before...maybe I’ll be better. Because what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger, right?”

“Whoever said that is a masochist.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

“You don’t need to be better than you were, you’re already the best person I know.” Hope admitted shyly. But she tried to use enough conviction in her voice to make sure that Josie would believe her.

“Everyone can get better, Hope. We are always growing and changing and learning. It’s just the part of growing up.”

“Are you sure you’re only sixteen?” Hope asked honestly. Then she smirked at the girl. “You sound like you should be at least seventeen.”

Josie rolled her eyes, but she did have a ghost of a smile on her face. “How is everything at school? Any attacks since the Necromancer?”

Okay, so they were going to be changing the subject abruptly. Good to know. Hope tried not to respond noticeably to the awkward change of subject. She would talk about whatever Josie wanted to talk about.

“Nothing interesting or horrifying has happened since I inevitably screwed up and let the big bad monster escape.”

Josie scooted closer to her and rested her hand on Hope’s thigh. Hope couldn’t actually feel Josie’s hand, but it was the thought that counted. And the thought was a comfort to her.

“You never did tell me what he said to you. You said you used him to try to see your parents again, but you didn’t say whether or not it was successful.”

Hope’s eyes didn’t leave Josie’s hand on her leg as she spoke. “I didn’t see them. But just before he got away, he mentioned to me that my dad...that he wasn’t in peace. He told me that Dad would never be in peace until I was.”

She took a steadying breath, rested her hand atop Josie’s, and looked at the other girl. She really wished she could feel her now. To feel the warmth of Josie’s touch.

“I don’t know how to find peace, Josie. And it terrifies me that because I can’t...my dad will suffer for an eternity. I might not have actually killed him, but I am the reason that he’s still in pain. And that hurts worse than blaming myself for his death to begin with.”

She never intended to admit the truth to the other girl. Or to anyone. But when Josie looked at her with those big, compassionate brown eyes. Those eyes that held no judgement. The eyes that refused to view her as a monster. It was impossible to resist. The truth kept tumbling off her lips and she was helpless to stop it.

“I want to make him proud of me. I want to live a life that makes his sacrifice worth it. I’ve tried a bit since I’ve gotten back to the school.” She sighed. “No, I haven’t. At all. But I am trying now.”

“Can I say something?” Josie wondered quietly.
Hope’s eyes widened. “Of course! You don’t need to ask permission to speak your mind Josie. Ever.”

With her free hand, Josie touched her fingers to the talisman she was wearing and it was the first time Hope noticed she had it on.

“I talked to dad. Not long after you spoke with him, I’m assuming. And it made me realize something. They are our parents. They love us and are proud of us just for existing. We don’t have to be or do anything special for that to be true. And we can disappoint them from time to time, but it won’t change how much they love us.” She toyed with the necklace as her eyes fell on Hope.

“When I first came out to my parents...I was terrified. I thought that I was disappointing them. That I couldn’t be me and make them proud at the same time. But they hugged me and kissed me and they told me they loved me no matter who I loved. Now Lizzie...that’s another story.”

“Lizzie didn’t accept you being bi?”

“Lizzie was worried that people would tease me and that I was now apparently twice as likely to get my heart broken...as she put it.”

“But you won’t, when you find the right person.” Hope said without thinking. Then her cheeks felt hot and she was glad that she wasn’t really in the room or else she’d die of mortification. Josie didn’t seem to notice her struggle though.

“The point is, family is awful and beautiful and complicated. But it’s still family. You’re a Mikaelson, you should understand that more than most.” The noticeable uptake in Josie’s voice alerted Hope to the fact that the last sentence was meant to be playful banter.

“All I’m saying is that your parents love you regardless. And if they are watching you at all, then they also have to be so proud of the woman you are becoming. Because you are amazing Hope Mikaelson. You’re the only person who doesn’t see it.”

Before Hope could respond with a ‘Thank you’ the door opened and both Lizzie and Caroline walked into the room. Caroline’s eyes immediately zeroed in on their connected hands and the closeness in which they sat to each other. Though she didn’t comment on it. Lizzie, however, wasn’t nearly as tactful.

“I was joking before when I asked if you wanted some alone time.” She teased which caused Josie to blush and pull her hand away. That, in turn, made Hope growl. Lizzie waved her off easily. “Easy, little wolf, learn to take a joke.”

“A joke? That’s what you call not mentioning that Josie would be in the shower when I appeared in the room?” She stood up menacingly.

“How are you doing this anyway?” Caroline asked as she studied the girl. “I didn’t realize you had gotten so powerful that you could project yourself.”

“Aunt Freya’s helping me. I’m at her house in New Orleans.” She addressed the older woman and gave her a rueful smile. “In case you were thinking expulsion.”

Caroline rolled her eyes and shook her head. “You are absolutely your father’s daughter.”

“I am.” Hope replied defensively.

“Hey, that wasn’t an insult. I actually greatly admired your father.”
“You wanted him to be something that he wasn’t.” Hope countered. “He tried so hard to be what you wanted from him, but in the end he was still just a monster.”

“You don’t believe that.” Caroline demanded. “And neither do I. He wasn’t a monster. Not truly. Yes, he did monstrous things. But I’m a vampire, so I’ve also done things that were not entirely good.” She lowered her voice and spoke with a sort of compassion that brokered no doubt that she was the one who raised Josie to be who she was. “But even when I was human...I was still, just human, you know? I sucked as a person sometimes. I made mistakes. Luckily, I now have a lifetime to work at being the kind of person I always wanted to be. Wanting better for your father, for you….it isn’t about changing you. It’s about seeing you. And knowing what kind of amazingness you are capable of. And you are, Hope.”

For the second time in two days, Hope found herself crying uncontrollably. Only this time, she was unable to properly wipe away her tears. She glanced at Josie who was staring at her, not with pity but with adoration and it was too much. It was all too much.

“Shit.” Hope huffed. “I came here to help you, and here I am crying like an idiot.”

Josie was at her side instantly, but when she went to reach for Hope, the shorter girl raised a hand to stop her.

“Don’t bother hugging me, I can’t feel it anyway.”

“Well then, I owe you a hug when I get back home.” Josie told her with determination.

Lizzie’s eyes widened as she studied her sister. “Are you saying...can we go home now?”

Josie shrugged. “It would appear that my friend needs me.”

Hope rolled her eyes. Of course Josie would do something for a friend rather than herself. They had been begging her to come home. They had been trying to get her to talk, to cry, to feel. And the only thing that got her to really open up was the possibility of helping someone else. Hope wasn’t going to complain about it, because it meant Josie was coming back to the school. But that didn’t mean she didn’t feel guilty about it. Guilty that she was so beyond screwed up that Josie felt the need to rush home to help her.

“I don’t need you that much. I do fine on my own.” Hope couldn’t help arguing stubbornly. She even wore a pout for proper affect.

“Sure. You’ve been so lonely you made friends with me.” Lizzie teased and then stuck her tongue out to emphasize the poke.

“You realize that you just insulted yourself, right?” Hope responded with a smirk and it deepened when Lizzie’s arrogance was wiped off her face.

“Are you really sure you’re ready to go back there?” Caroline wondered as she addressed Josie directly. “You still don’t sleep at night.”

Josie embarrassingly glanced at Hope. “Mom!”

“Sorry. But it’s the truth. And you only started to talk to us yesterday. Kids back at school are going to want to ask questions and they’re going to keep checking on you. I just want you to be sure that this is what you want.”

Josie narrowed her eyes at her mother. “You’ve been trying to get me to go home since we got here.
Now you’re having second thoughts?”

“I just want you to be okay.” Caroline pulled Josie into her, then Lizzie. “I just want both of my baby girls to be okay.”

Hope felt like she was intruding on a moment. So she decided it was the best time to leave. She probably already stayed too long, she knew that she and Freya were going to be exhausted after this.

“I should go then. It’s taken a lot of power and energy to be here this long.”

Josie eased herself away from her mom and stepped into Hope. She wrapped her arms around her neck and leaned close to Hope’s ear. Hope wished she could feel the other girl’s touch.

“I owe you a real hug when I get back.” She whispered.

“I’ll hold you to it.” Hope breathed out.

When Josie stepped away, Hope closed her eyes again and refocused on her actual surroundings. The dining room of Freya’s house. The flickering lights. The touch of Freya’s hands in her own. Her aunt’s continuous chanting. And as she took a deep breath, she breathed in the scent of Josie’s sweatshirt. It grounded her. It brought her back to reality. And when she opened her eyes, she saw her Aunt Freya’s worried ones on her.

“You’re back. Are you okay?” Freya’s hands were suddenly all over her face. She wiped at her cheeks and frowned at the remnants of tears that she found there. “You were crying.”

“Caroline...she said some really great things about my dad.”

Freya’s concern fell from her face and she smiled at Hope. “Caroline Forbes. According to your father, she always was the one that got away. He would find it poetic that you and Josie are...so close.”

Hope’s face heated up at the implication of her aunt’s statement, but she didn’t refute it this time. She was sick of arguing with everyone who seemed to believe that she and Josie were more than friends.

“How did it go otherwise?” Freya asked when Hope had failed to willingly indulge her with the gossip.

She smiled proudly. “Well, Josie’s coming home.”

Freya’s eyebrows shot to her forehead in shock. “That was significantly easier than I expected it to be. The way you talked about her, I thought it would be a struggle to get her to come back home so soon.”

“Yeah, well, apparently she thinks I’m so emotionally scarred and full on screwed up that she needs to come home to take care of me.”

Freya stared at her. “Wait, you’re serious? She coming back because...she’s coming back for you?”

“No. For me. Because of me. Josie can’t stand the thought of someone else hurting. So she is coming back to make sure that I’m okay.”

“Huh?”

Hope looked at her aunt with confusion. “What’s going on in that head of yours?”
“Nothing.” She sighed. “I was worried that your feelings may be one-sided. I guess this is good, then.”

Hope frowned. “Good how? She thinks I’m a trainwreck that needs saving.”

Freya shook her head. “You just performed incredibly difficult magic to help her. How is that any different?”

“I don’t think she’s a trainwreck! She’s my friend and I just wanted to make sure she was okay.” Hope defended herself and her actions. Then the reality of the statement hit her like a gut-punch. “Oh. I see what you did there. Clever.”

“I think it’s good she’s coming home, even if it is not the way you expected it to go. I think you can help each other heal. You both could use a friend right now and I think you found a good one in Josie.”

Hope smiled to herself. “Yeah, I’m lucky she took a chance on me. After all these years and everything I put her through.”

“If you ask me...”

“I didn’t.” Hope interrupted with a grin.

“I’d say that she’s the lucky one. The magic you performed today...it...she’s lucky to have someone like you in her corner. Someone that would do what you did for her.”

“I’ll be sure to tell her that when she comes home.”

Hope smiled widely. Josie was coming home. And she promised Hope a hug. Friends were excited about those kinds of things, right?
The last two days had been wonderful for Hope. She got to spend some time at her aunt’s house and catch up with Freya and Keelin, and she also got to cuddle with her baby cousin, Elijah Niklaus. When she wasn’t being entertained (and interrogated) by her aunts, she constantly texted Josie. She even texted Lizzie, MG and Rafael a few times. And she had been pleasantly surprised that even Penelope checked in once or twice.

Somehow, without Hope noticing, she had stopped becoming a lone wolf and had started to create her own pack. These were people who started to mean something to her. And although it should have scared her, it warmed her heart instead. It actually felt nice to know that she mattered to them just as much as they started to matter to her. Not that she would ever tell any of them that. Just Josie. She had already admitted to the brunette that she was her best friend. But beyond that, her lips were sealed.

Now that she was back at school and, therefore, back to the grind and routine of morning classes and rules; she had expected it to dampen her good mood. But she quickly realized nothing could dull her good spirits as long as Josie was coming home today.

As she made her way down to the cafeteria for breakfast, she surprised everyone (including herself) when she forwent her usual isolation in the back corner and, instead, sat in the middle of the room across from a skeptical looking Penelope Park.

“Mornin’!” She greeted cheerfully as she sat her tray of food on the table and took a seat.

Penelope frowned at her with confusion. “You’re smiling.”

Hope shrugged as she took a bite of her apple. “Yeah, so?”

“You never smile.” Penelope stared at her briefly before her eyes went wide with accusation. “Either you killed someone or you slept with someone. Spill!”

Penelope’s assumption caused Hope to frown deeply. “Why are those my only two options for being happy?”

“It’s way too early in the morning to be happy for no reason.” The other witch answered before she took a large swig of her coffee, then she raised it toward Hope as if presenting evidence to her statement.

Hope shook her head and smirked as she took another bite of her apple. Then she set it on her tray and started to eat her oatmeal.

“Hey, guys!” MG greeted excitedly.

Penelope groaned. “Not you, too.”

“What’s going on?” He wondered and he directed his question at Hope.

She pointed her empty spoon at Penelope. “Apparently, one cannot be happy without either having sex or committing murder.”

“Isn’t that a mood.” He shook his head with amusement. Then his excitement overtook him. “Josie’s coming home today!”
Penelope’s eyes widened. “What?! When?!”

“Her flight gets in at noon. She should be here by one.” Hope answered.

Penelope glared at her. “Way to bury the lead.”

Hope’s eyes widened. “I thought you knew. I thought you were just being...you.”

The other girl sighed loudly, but didn’t argue. Instead, she stood up quickly and rushed out a “gotta go” on her way out of the room.

They watched her leave and when she was out of sight, Hope raised an eyebrow questioningly at MG. He shook his head sadly.

“I’ll actually feel bad for her this time when Josie breaks her heart.”

Hope nodded in agreement. “Yeah, but Josie knows to let her down easy.”

“Wait...you and Josie talked about Penelope?”

Hope’s eyes widened and her eyebrows shot up. “Not like that. We didn’t. I just know that Josie feels bad that she might have led her on. We weren’t plotting behind her back or laughing at her or whatever you were thinking.”

He nodded in understanding before he grinned at her mischievously. “All I was thinking is that it’s kind of soon to already be talking about your exes.”

She tossed her uneaten toast at his face. “Very funny.”

Then she took a gulp of her chocolate milk to hide her growing blush. Afterwards, she slammed the glass on the table harder than necessary which caused milk to splatter everywhere. As she wiped at the mess with her napkin, she addressed him again.

“I should actually go, too. I’ve got stuff to do.”

She stood up and grabbed her tray and started to walk toward the garbage bin.

“Sure, sure. Go get ready for your girlfriend!” He called after her.

She flipped him off as she continued to walk away. Despite the teasing, however, she was unable to wipe the smile off her face. Josie was coming home today.

Xxxxxx

Unfortunately, the rest of the morning went by far too slowly for her liking. She even decided to bypass lunch in favor of sitting anxiously in her room. At 1:48 her phone alerted her to a text. Since she already had it in her hand, she glanced at the screen. Josie’s name lit up with the visible message.

We just pulled in.
Those simple words set Hope into action. She didn’t even bother to reply when she could just run outside and see Josie in person. So that’s exactly what she did.

She reached the front door of the school as it opened. Lizzie walked through first and smirked when she saw Hope there waiting for them.

“Oh, look sis, your lap dog is already here waiting for you.” She teased.

“Hey, Lizzie.” Hope replied with a smile, but her eyes were not on the blonde. “Josie…”

Josie smiled when she saw Hope, then quickly cast a chastising glance at her sister. “I swear, she promised she’d play nice.” The words were punctuated with a genuine apology on her sister’s behalf. But then she stepped closer to Hope and wrapped the smaller girl in her arms tightly. “I missed you.”

The whispered admission ghosted the shell of Hope’s ear, and caused her to shiver. She fell into the embrace with a happy sigh and wrapped her arms securely around Josie’s waist. “I missed you more.”

She felt Josie smile against her. “Impossible.”

“God! Get a room!” Lizzie groaned as she threw her hands up and stormed away.

Josie chuckled which caused another onslaught of goosebumps across Hope’s sensitive skin. The real thing was so much better than the astral projection, and all of Hope’s imaginings of this moment; of the hug that Josie had promised her.

Josie seemed to be unaware of the affect her presence and proximity had on her friend, because she was currently attempting to start a conversation with Hope.

“I promise you that Lizzie is actually happy to be back, and she even was excited to see you now that you guys are officially friends. Don’t let her aloofness fool you. I think she might just be jealous that you didn’t wrap her in your arms and spin her around and make a big deal about how much you missed her.”

Hope actually had to laugh at that image. “I could do that for her if she wants. I suddenly have a newfound fondness for hugs.”

Josie, much to Hope’s dismay, untangled her arms from around Hope and stepped away slightly. She was still well within Hope personal bubble, but she wanted her closer yet. When that thought crossed her mind, Hope felt her cheeks heat up and cleared her throat as she stepped another half step away. It was then that she noticed Caroline standing behind Josie as she regarded both girls strangely.

“Hey.” Hope greeted shyly and awkwardly ran her hands through her hair.

“Good afternoon, Hope. It’s nice to see you again.”

“Yes, you too.”

“Come on, walk me to my room and we can continue our conversation. I’ll even let you carry Lizzie’s suitcase, since the drama queen left it here.” Josie told Hope playfully as she grabbed Hope’s hand and pulled her in the direction of their dorms.
Hope quickly took Lizzie’s suitcase and allowed herself to be lead away. Josie’s hand felt warm and pleasant in her own hand.

“Josie, don’t forget we’re having dinner with your dad this evening!” Caroline called after them.

“I know, Mom!” Josie called back.

They held hands the entire way back to Josie’s room and chatted about random nonsense. Hope thought it was altogether perfect. When they got to the room, Josie unlocked the door and invited Hope inside. Hope followed her in wordlessly. She sat the suitcase on the floor next to Lizzie’s bed and looked up at the blonde who had watched them come into the room together. Hope smirked and approached Lizzie, who sat on her the bed.

“What is that smirk? What are you doing?” Lizzie demanded nervously.

Hope grabbed the girl and pulled her off her bed and into a hug. Then when she felt Lizzie return the hug, she spun them around as quickly as she could and smiled when Lizzie laughed out loud.

“Welcome home, Lizzie. I missed you, too.” Hope said as she slowed to a stop and let her hands drop from around Lizzie.

The blonde slapped at her playfully with a large smile on her face. “You’re a dork.”

Hope shrugged half-heartedly. “I’ve been called worse.”

“By who?!” Josie demanded.

Hope stared at her defensive pout and couldn’t help finding it adorable. “Awww, if you want a list of names so you can light them all on fire…” She winked at her. “Then there won’t be many students left.”

She thought her playing on their inside joke would have made the other girl crack a smile, but it had the opposite effect.

“Josie...it’s okay. I’m okay. I was joking.” She back-tracked and tried to assuage the other girl’s anger.

“No you weren’t, not really. I know how mean the kids have been to you, and I always hated it.” Josie admitted.

“Yeah, Hope. I’ve been meaning to apologize for everything I’ve done or said that hurt you. I was wrong and you didn’t deserve it.”

Hope rolled her eyes at the unnecessary apology. “But I did. I was just as awful to you. Sometimes worse.”

“That doesn’t excuse my behavior and you know it. I really am sorry.”

Hope stared at Lizzie in shock and let the smile creep back onto her face. It was enough to warm her heart. Because yes, contrary to popular belief, she had a heart. And feelings. Lots of them, as it turned out.

Josie let them have their moment as she finished putting her things away, and slipped her suitcase under her bed. She then laid down on the bed and stretched out widely as she moaned in a way that brought Hope’s attention back away from the blonde and onto her twin sister. Distantly, Hope heard
Lizzie chuckled and mumbled something incoherent.

“The flight was so long and I hate airports. I am so exhausted right now. I could sleep for days if my parents let me.”

The significance of statement was not lost on Hope or Lizzie; if her reaction was anything to go by. Hope glanced at the blonde and saw her pained expression. If Josie was able to sleep for days, her parents would surely let her. But all of them knew that they were just words, that Josie (even as exhausted as she was) would likely only sleep a couple of hours and then scream herself awake due to whatever horrifying nightmares that terrorized her. Although she talked to Hope consistently now, and she was back to confiding in her sister again...she still hadn’t divulged to either of them what she saw in her nightmares.

“If you want to sleep, I guess I’ll head back to class and you can call me when you wake up.” Hope said as she made her way toward the door.

“Or…” Josie breathed out with a yawn as she crawled under the blankets and patted the bed beside her. “You could skip a few classes and take a nap with me.”

Hope’s eyes widened and she looked toward Lizzie in case she planned to object.

“She does sleep better when she isn’t alone.” Lizzie admitted. “I want to take a shower and go see my dad. So...if you don’t mind keeping her company…”

And that was all the approval Hope needed to accept Josie’s offer. She took off her shoes and crawled in bed beside Josie. Josie instantly snuggled into her and wrapped herself around Hope as if they’d done this forever. Hope didn’t realize she had stopped breathing until she started to cough.

Lizzie laughed at her as she gathered some belongings for her shower. The blonde paused on her way to the bathroom and studied the girls on the bed. Hope let her stare because she refused to be intimidated. She and Josie were friends and they were cuddling. They weren’t doing anything wrong. Except that Josie was already asleep and Hope was far too comfortable for this to only be a one time thing (if she had any say in the matter).

“Just be sure to leave room for Jesus.” Lizzie taunted as she turned around and closed the bathroom door essentially shutting off any retort Hope might have been able to come up with.

She tried to stay awake at least until after Lizzie had finished her shower, mostly out of stubbornness, but had been unable to do so.

It was dark in the room when Hope woke up. Josie was still asleep beside her. It took a moment to process that the room wasn’t dark because the lights were off, it was dark because it was getting dark outside. She blinked her eyes several times in an attempt to wake herself up more thoroughly. Then she planned to look around the room for a clock and her eyes fell on Caroline, Lizzie and Alaric.

“Shit!” She groaned and instinctively pulled away from Josie. Except she pulled away so violently that she ended up on the ground with a loud thud.

“Are you okay?” Lizzie greeted with what sounded like genuine concern even though it was masked by her laughter.

“Fine.” She growled as she rubbed at her sore butt.

“Has anyone told you that watching someone sleep is creepy? Like stalker levels of psycho.” Hope responded icily.
“She’s sleeping.” Caroline practically cooed. “Over six hours of uninterrupted sleep with no nightmares. I didn’t want to wake her. But...we were all going to go out to dinner...but when I saw her, she just looked so peaceful. So much like our little JoJo. I had to show Alaric.”

Hope nodded in understanding, then glanced at Josie and sure enough, the girl looked like a literal angel. It brought a smile to her face.

Her phone chirped with a message and she glanced down at it with a frown. Why was Lizzie texting her while they were in the same room together?

I tried to keep them out.

But when I told mom that Josie was still sleeping,

she had to come see for herself.

Sorry!

Hope smiled at the message then caught eyes with Lizzie and smiled at her. The blonde smiled back genuinely. Then Hope received another message from Lizzie. This time it was a photo—not a text.

Hope opened it up and her heart melted when she saw it. It was a picture of her and Josie cuddled together and both were completely asleep and at peace. She immediately saved the picture to her phone. Then she sighed and stood up from the floor.

“I think I’ll head back to my room. Get an early start on my homework. I also have to reschedule the appointment I accidently missed with Emma today. Sorry, Alaric.”

“It’s okay, Hope. You’ve been doing well with her. You’ve gone to all of your appointments each week and you’ve really been opening up to her. I’m proud of your progress. And I’m impressed that you’re taking it seriously.” He told her.

She nodded but didn’t respond other than that.

“Are you going to let her sleep...or should I wake her up?” Hope wondered when an awkward silence overtook the room. “It’s just...I would feel bad if she woke up and I had left without saying goodbye. I don’t want her to think...”

Josie’s parents looked at each other and both of their expressions softened further.

“I think...you don’t have to rush out of here, Hope. Unless you do have things to do and need to leave.” Caroline offered.

Hope didn’t know what to do. She was absolutely torn. She didn’t have any desire to awkwardly stay in a room with just Josie’s family. But apart from the awkwardness that overtook the room, she really didn’t want to leave Josie while the other girl was still asleep. Truth be told, she didn’t want to leave the girl’s side at all now that she was back. Hope had made a personal vow to make sure Josie was okay, and part of that promise meant that she was going to be around to ensure that the other girl was safe. Always. And forever. But not in a creepy stalker way.

Her decision was made for her when movement from Josie drew everyone’s attention to the no
longer sleeping girl. She looked confused for a moment, then disappointed until her eyes fell on Hope and they shared a smile.

“I would never leave without saying goodbye first.” Hope admitted. “Just so you know.”

Josie’s smiled deepened. She reached toward Hope and Hope instantly took her hand and entwined their fingers. This time it didn’t feel simply warm or peaceful, it felt right. Hope started at their linked hands in awe. She realized that she wasn’t the only one who noticed the gesture when she heard Caroline clear her throat. It made her second guess her actions and she nearly withdrew her hand from Josie’s, but the other girl’s grip tightened around her own and it grounded her.

“Sweetheart, are you still feeling up for our family dinner?” Caroline asked.

Josie nodded. “Yeah, could you give me a little bit? I never got to take a shower when I got back, so I’d like to clean up quick.”

“We’ll leave you be.” Alaric told her. “All of us.”

The fact that he pointedly added the amendment was not lost on any one in the room, especially not Hope.

“I was going to go work on my homework. I’m glad you all made it home safely.” Hope addressed the three girls in the room.

“It’s good to finally be back. And you and the girls will have plenty of time to catch up later.” Caroline replied, not unkindly, but a bit less warm and compassionate than usual.

Hope squeezed Josie’s hand and smiled at her. Then she released her hold on the girl and turned to face the others. She gave them a quick salute and retreated with embarrassment. Why was she such a spaz? No wonder she never had friends before.

She speed walked to her room and shut herself inside to die of humiliation in solitude. That didn’t last long, however, because a few minutes later, there was an urgent knock on her door.

“Go away!”

“Really? No wonder you have no friends.” Lizzie’s voice reverberated off the closed door.

“Fine. Come in.” She growled.

Lizzie let herself in and she looked extremely amused. “You’re about as awkward and hopeless as I am.” Then she laughed at herself. “Hope less?!”

Hope groaned and buried her head underneath her pillow. She planned to either smother herself or Lizzie. She hadn’t quite decided on which one yet.

After several moments of silence, Hope removed the pillow from her face and glared at Lizzie.

“I think I liked you better when I didn’t like you at all.”

Lizzie rolled her eyes. “That doesn’t even make sense.

It made sense in her head.

“And for the record, I have friends. MG, Raf and Penelope. And Josie. I’m on the fence about you right now, though.”
Lizzie sat down next to her. “I’m trying to...you and I both suck at expressing emotions and being sentimental and all that. So I thought….if I’m being too hard on you or my jokes are actually offensive, will you let me know? It’s just...it’s easier to poke when you’re scared of caring too much. I get that now. I understand why you always poked.”

Hope raised an eyebrow. “You know why I poked?”

She nodded. “You, just like me, lash out when you’re feeling vulnerable.” She looked at her softly. “My sister makes you feel vulnerable.”

Hope opened and closed her mouth awkwardly. But no words ever made it out.

“Don’t worry, your secret’s safe with me.” She smiled softly at her. “Although, if you continue to be so obvious about it, it won’t be a secret for long...will it?”

Hope’s eyebrows furrowed in complete confusion. “What are you even talking about? Stop speaking in riddles and just say what you mean, Lizzie. If we’re going to be friends...let’s at least promise to continue to be real with each other. Whether it’s playfully poking or not, don’t hold any punches. Especially if I’m being an actual ass and need to be reminded of that.”

Lizzie grinned. “Just so we’re on the same page...when you say not to hold any punches, are you giving me consent to actually punch you when you’re being an ass?”

“Focus, Lizzie.” Hope retorted firmly, then added as an afterthought. “And no, I don’t consent to you punching me.”

“Right.” Lizzie nodded and released a deep breath. “What’s going on with you and my sister. Really?”

“We’re friends. Nothing is going on.”

Lizzie studied her. Then she bit her lip and shook her head as if to dislodge any unwanted thoughts. “Right. Friends. Thank you, Hope. You have been a great friend to Josie recently, and a good one to me as well. For someone who doesn’t have a lot of practice...sorry, anyway , well, you’re pretty good at it. Being a friend, I mean.”

Hope smiled happily. “Thanks. I worry sometimes...all the time, really. I’m glad I’m finally getting it right.”

“Oh, Hope. You’re so much better than you realize. Someday, maybe you’ll see what the rest of us see.” Lizzie admitted sadly.

“That’s what Josie keeps telling me. We made a promise to each other, did she tell you?” Hope waited for Lizzie’s nod of affirmation. “I’ll dedicate my life to making sure she knows how amazing she is. I promise you.”

“Just so you let her do the same for you.” Lizzie replied.

“I will. I promised her I would and I keep my promises, Lizzie. I’m not a liar.”

“I know you’re not.”

They sat in a comfortable silence for a while before Lizzie had to finally excuse herself to attend the dinner with her family. Hope became restless when she was left alone. It almost amused her that she no longer craved the solitude. She decided to go for a run in the woods. The fresh air was a
welcomed gift. She loved her freedom, she loved to run.

When she was in her wolf form, time always eluded her. She had no way of knowing if it was minutes or hours. Some time later, a smell she was intimately familiar with invaded her senses. It caused her to stop dead in her tracks. What was Josie doing out in the woods alone so late at night? And what the Hell was she doing over there? Hope followed her nose, even though she knew exactly where it would lead her.

When Hope arrived at her destination, there Josie was. She sat on the ground on top of her own shallow grave—the place she had been buried alive not a month prior. Seventeen days. The memory of that night still haunted Hope. And yet, here Josie was. The brunette sat on the ground; knees pulled into her chest with her arms wrapped around them. She rocked herself back in forth as sobs wracked her body.

Hope wanted to shift back. Naked or not, she needed to comfort her friend. She needed to demand why the girl was here. Why she was doing this to herself. But mostly, she needed to hold her in her arms to prove that it really was Josie and that Josie was okay. But before she could do what she intended to do, Josie caught sight of her.

“Hope?” She asked, mid-sob.

She didn’t appear afraid of Hope, or even surprised to see her there.

“I don’t want to talk, please don’t make me talk about it.” Josie begged and it made her sound so small.

Hope tentatively crept toward the girl and waited for her to accept the advancement. In response, Josie reached out a single hand. She approached the offered hand and sniffed at it.

Josie giggled softly, and wiped her tear-stained face with her free hand. Then she softly, ever so gently, brushed her hand through Hope’s fur. It felt amazing to the wolf. Hope had never let anyone touch her so...affectionately while in her wolf form. She never usually let anyone ever see her in that form. Landon had been an accident. And when she approached him lurching in the woods, her wolf meant to attack him and she was forced to hold it back. This time, her wolf side was initiating the contact. And it seemed contented and calmed by it. Josie was not a threat in any way. And it was obvious to every part of Hope.

She laid down a arm length away from Josie and allowed the other girl to pet her. Then she slowly inched forward until she was in Josie’s personal space. Josie responded with a soft chuckle and a smile.

“You’re nothing but a big puppy dog, aren’t you?” She grinned.

Hope growled at Josie’s words. Not in warning or even in anger, mostly she responded in the wolf equivalent to a groan and eye roll. She knew she was being teased and she was okay with it. But she did have pride and she couldn’t let the jest go by without some sort of response.

Hope then relaxed more fully in Josie’s presence, and let her head fall into the brunette’s lap. As Josie ran her fingers idly through Hope’s fur, she talked to the wolf.

“I know you’re probably wondering why I came out here. Lizzie would murder me if she knew. But I couldn’t sleep, and you weren’t answering your phone, and...I thought if I saw this place...if I faced it...it wouldn’t keep holding power over me. Like, I lived and I won...so, maybe if I saw that it was just some dirt and grass and...I don’t know, it’s probably stupid, but I needed to try. I wanted to face
She stopped rambling and inhaled sharply. Then she slowly, and loudly released her breath in a puff that reached Hope’s coat. As if to try to coax more out of her, and let Josie know that she was listening, Hope nuzzled further into Josie’s embrace. Josie bent down and kissed the top of her snout.

“Honestly, I know I was just joking before, but you’re like a therapy dog. I don’t know how much you can actually understand in this form, but...I don’t know if it’s the wolf thing or a you thing...anyway, you calm me in a way I don’t understand.”

She continued to pet Hope thoughtfully. “It’s not a bad thing. I actually really like who I am when I’m with you. If that makes any sense at all.”

Hope nuzzled into her again. It made perfect sense. She felt the same exact way. Except Josie was better at putting those thoughts into coherent words. Hope would have completely butchered whatever she tried to say to explain how much Josie had quickly come to mean to her.

“It didn’t help. Coming out here. I’m pretty sure it’ll make things worse and I will probably be terrified to close my eyes again tonight. But...I cried. It felt good to cry. I didn’t realize that I spent the last couple of weeks hating myself for what Lizzie and I had to do...and so I never actually took the time to mourn what we lost. I almost had a chance to get to know my mom...my, well...my bio mom. Josette…” Josie hugged Hope to her tightly because it was obvious that she was struggling with words again. “I came out to her. She was so happy to learn all about me and she was so accepting and supportive. And she fixed my hair. And we gossiped, the mother daughter kind of gossip. The kind of thing mom and Lizzie do so easily. I never...I love my mom so much, but things haven’t always been as easy between us as they were with her and Lizzie. And part of me wondered if it was my being bisexual, which was just my own gay panic thing; or so I read somewhere….then I thought maybe, maybe it was because she and Lizzie look alike and act the same and I was just...I never fit in with my own family. But then I met Josette. And she looked like me. And I’m named after her. And she talked about girls with me. And brushed my hair. And she said I was beautiful. And that I was special. And then she was gone. And I’ll never have that again.”

Josie rambled and it was probably the most words Hope (or anyone) had ever heard her say at one time. And it broke Hope’s heart. She whined along with Josie as the girl finally and completely broke down. Hope wanted to switch back into human form, to say something comforting, to fix it. But she knew that what Josie was going through wouldn’t be a simple fix. And more than anything, she wanted to believe that her presence was enough for Josie. She hoped that what Josie needed right this moment wasn’t all the right words, but simply a listening and non-judgemental ear. Perhaps, Josie had been right when she said that what she needed was a therapy dog. A furry, companion who didn’t do anything but love her. Hope could be that. She could be someone who would just love Josie.

Once again, time was lost to Hope. They stayed like that, in silence and somehow wrapped up awkwardly in each other for a long time. But not quite long enough. Not really. Not for Hope.

Josie slightly pulled away from her, and ran her hands through the wolf’s fur once more then placed another soft kiss on Hope’s snout.

“Thank you for listening. You always somehow know exactly what I need.” She sighed and wiped at her face again, but the tear tracks already stained her face and were a stark reminder of just how much pain she was in and how much she still needed to heal.

Hope nudged Josie’s hands away from her face, and when they were clear. She licked at her cheeks which caused Josie to giggle happily. She playfully pushed her away.
“Gross, Hope! Stop licking me.”

Hope listened. She would always listen to Josie.

“We should get back. It’ll be light soon. And we don’t want to get caught having stayed out passed curfew.” Josie said as she stood up and wiped at her jeans to get the dirt off. “But can you do me a favor, and let’s not mention this...what I said. It was easier to talk to you without your concerned blue eyes staring at me. I just...I don’t want your pity. You promise you don’t pity me?”

Hope barked an affirmation. Josie smiled at that then nodded to herself.

“You really are a great friend, Hope. The very best.”

Hope stepped into Josie and bumped her leg with her own head. Josie automatically let her hand read on top of the wolf’s head. Then Hope led Josie through the woods and toward the tree she left her clothes next to. Without needing to be asked, Josie not only turned around but made a show of closing and covering her eyes. If she were not a wolf at the moment, she would have snorted in amusement at the gesture. She phased back into her human form and dressed quickly. With a blush on her cheeks, she hoped was covered by the darkness, she cleared her throat.

“Okay, I’m decent.”

Josie turned around and smiled. “Thank you for trusting me to see that part of you, Hope. You...wolf you...is magnificent. You are magnificent.”

Hope’s blushed deepened as she bit her lip to hide her grin. When she summoned the strength to look Josie in the eye, she was surprised to see a matching blush. It made her feel less...exposed.

She took a step closer to Josie and wiped at her cheeks where the tears had fallen. Then she brushed a piece of stray hair behind Josie’s right ear. And finally, she closed the distance between them and hugged Josie fiercely. She kissed the girl’s jawline, because Josie was a bit too tall to reach her cheek properly from her position. Then she stood on her tiptoes and brushed her lips to the shell of Josie’s ear. The girl shuddered in her grip, but Hope didn’t comment on it.

Instead she whispered with reverence. “You really are something special, Josie. You were the brave one tonight, letting me in. And I know I promised to not make you talk about it and never bring it up, so I’m not. I’m just saying that you are amazing and thank you for letting me in and trusting me. You’ll never fully comprehend how much that means to me.”

Josie’s arms tightened around Hope’s waist and she regretted that their night had to end because the sun was rising.

“As for me trusting you to see me... all of me, I’m glad I did. In all of my life, I’ve never felt so...seen. You really do see me, Josie. And I love the way that I see myself because of you.”

Josie’s smile was blinding. It was like the sun itself, and Hope stood helpless in its orbit. She didn’t know when or how it happened, but Josie literally had become her entire world. She wasn’t sure what it meant yet or whether she wanted to explore the thought; all she knew was that Josie wasn’t the one who came home. Hope had. Hope was home with Josie.
When Hope made it downstairs for breakfast, she didn’t even hesitate sitting beside Josie at the table in the cafeteria. MG smiled at her, and Lizzie looked amused to see her.

“Hey.” She said as she greeted them before she took a swig of chocolate milk.

“Hey.” Josie smiled in return. Then she set a container of chocolate pudding on Hope’s tray. “I know you like pudding, and they don’t have it here a lot, so I made sure to grab you one. Just in case.”

Hope smiled at Josie in thanks. She did already grab one, but she had no problem eating both of them.

“So, you’re making it official then?” Lizzie asked with a raised eyebrow.

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re actually admitting to the school that we’re friends.” Lizzie grinned smugly.

Hope rolled her eyes. “First of all, the school can fuck off. Secondly, I sat by Josie and maybe MG.... you weren’t even on my radar.”

MG snorted and Josie ducked her head to hide her smile. Lizzie’s mouth dropped open in mock offense. Hope winked at Josie which caused a cute little pink to tint her cheeks. At least, Hope thought it was cute.

Penelope interrupted them when she sat her tray on the table. “Hey, guys.” She smiled at Josie. “Morning, Josie. Welcome back.” Then she glanced at Lizzie. “You too, Lizzie.”


“Lizzie…” Josie warned and her sister raised her hands in surrender.

“Sorry, it’s just all so new to me. So...this is really a thing that I’m supposed to be okay with? Penelope is automatically part of our group just because she helped save your life?”

“At least, I helped. Where were you?” Penelope spat out.

Hope reached toward Penelope and rested her hand on the other girl’s arm.

“Careful.” She warned.

Penelope seemed to understand Hope’s warning. She realized that she crossed a line.

“For the record, Lizzie. Penelope isn’t just Josie’s friend. She’s mine, too. And as far as I’m concerned, she’s welcome here.” Hope stated in a firm tone that made no room for negotiation.

“Yeah, me too.” MG added. “She stays or we walk.”

Penelope smiled at both of them gratefully. Hope nearly jumped out of her skin when she felt Josie’s hand rest on her thigh and squeeze slightly in what she assumed was re-assurance, and, perhaps, also in thanks.

Lizzie sighed. “I’m sorry I snapped at you, Penelope. I will never be able to thank you enough for helping save Josie. I should have just started the conversation with that.”

“How about right this moment, we all forget about everything bad that ever happened between all of us and start over?” Josie stated. “Life’s too short, even without magical monsters trying to murder us
all.”

“Speak for yourself.” MG grinned.

Josie rolled her eyes and continued. “I think the only way we can survive the school year is if we do it together. So, no more apologies and no more grudges. Just clean slates. Deal?”

“I’m in.” Hope was the first to agree, but everyone else quickly followed suit.

They all happily chatted throughout the rest of breakfast before they had to separate for the morning and go to their own individual classes. They all met up again for lunch and this time, Rafael also joined them at their table. The group easily rattled on about their day, although Josie was noticeably quieter than she had been that morning. Hope finally leaned in toward her and whispered quietly enough that only she could hear her.

“Are you okay?”

Josie nodded then stifled a yawn. “Sorry, just tired.”

Hope bumped her shoulder playfully. “Hey, no more apologies. You made us promise, remember?”

Josie smiled at her and rolled her eyes. “I know, sorry.” Her eyes widened. “Shoot.”

Hope chuckled at the response, which garnered the attention of the rest of the group.

“What’s so funny?” Lizzie wondered.

“Nothing.” Hope bit her lip and shook her head.

Lizzie narrowed her eyes at them but didn’t press further, instead, she returned back to her conversation with the others. Hope noticed that Penelope had also scrutinized their interaction. Throughout the rest of lunch, Hope felt Penelope’s gaze travel between her and Josie but the other girl never asked whatever it was that was on her mind.

They broke away again after lunch, but Hope lingered behind to walk with Josie to the brunette’s class.

“So, I was thinking since you’re tired...instead of going out for a run tonight, maybe I could come over after my appointment with Emma and we could just chill. Watch movies together or something. If you want to?”

Josie beamed at her with a smile so wide it lit up her entire face. “That sounds great. I’ll look for some movie choices. What are your preferences?”

Hope thought about it. “I don’t want anything mushy or predictable. And nothing too heavy. Maybe a stupid comedy, or...I like cartoons.”

She blushed deeply at the admission. Then she raised a finger at Josie.

“Don’t you dare say a word about that to anyone.”

“If we ever get caught watching cartoons, I’ll just tell Lizzie it was my idea.” She said with a fond smile, then she pretended to zip her lips as emphasis. “Your secrets are always safe with me, Hope.”

“And yours with me.”
She hugged Josie briefly after they reached the brunette’s classroom, and then Hope basically ran across the entire school campus just to get to her own class on time. She made it, but only because of her supernatural speed. It had been worth it though.

After her last class, she wandered down to Emma’s office. The other woman was waiting for her, and didn’t even make Hope knock before telling her to just come in. Hope did as she was told and sat in the chair beside the school counselor.

“So, a lot has happened since the last time we talked. As I understand it, you finally kept to our deal and made a few friends.” Emma got right to the point.

Hope raised an eyebrow. “Since we last spoke, I went behind Alaric’s back and questioned a monster we had as prisoner. I then accidentally let said monster escape. I learned something really troubling about my father. I went to visit my aunt in New Orleans. And I performed astral projection. But all you want to talk about is the fact that I made a few friends?”

Emma shrugged. “I had wrongly assumed that of all of those things, you making friends would be the easiest topic for us to address.”

Hope bit her lip shyly.

“So, would you rather talk about something else?” Emma tried once more.

“I...I don’t know where to start. I feel overwhelmed and anxious, but in a good way not a bad one this time. I...last night, I went for a run and…” Her eyes widened. “How far does this doctor patient confidentiality thing go?”

“I’m not officially a doctor.”

“So...does the stuff I tell you stay between us or not?”

“I won’t talk about what you discuss with me with anyone...unless you disclose being a risk to yourself or others.”

“It’s the opposite actually. When I’m in wolf form, usually my instincts are all animalistic. To hunt. To kill. I obviously go out at night to blow off steam and to just run...because not having to think about anything other than running and hunting...it makes me feel free. But I try to avoid all people because I can’t always control what happens. I mean, I can, but it’s usually really difficult. I’ve never killed anyone as a wolf before...if that’s what you’re thinking. I’m not some mindless beast. It just worries me to be around people, because I don’t want to slip up.”

“I understand that. And you transforming when you want to keeps you from a lot of the urges that curse regular werewolves. You’re lucky to be a crescent wolf in that aspect. You aren’t a slave to full moons the way they are...or the urgency of the kill.”

She nodded. At least Emma understood her; it might make what she was about to say easier.

“I accidently found Josie last night...while I was in wolf form. And as soon as I sensed her...I...I was drawn to her. Not in a way that I meant her any harm. But...she calmed me in a way I have never felt while in that form.” She frowned. “She calmed me in a way I never felt as a human.”

Emma stared at her intently.

“That’s weird, right?” Hope wondered.
“Why do you think it’s weird?”

“Because when I’m with her, like this....” She gestured at herself. “It’s like...instead of calming me...my heart speeds up. I can’t control it. I feel...anxious.”

“In the good way, not the bad way.” Emma guessed.

“Yes!” Hope agreed. “So you know what that means?”

Emma closed her eyes slowly and took a deep breath. Then she opened them and studied Hope. “I’m not positive. I don’t know much about the werewolf thing. Maybe you can talk to someone who’s been through it.”

Hope had a feeling that Emma knew more than she let on, but didn’t press it.

“Keelin? My Aunt’s wife.” Hope thought about it. “I don’t...I’d rather not bring it up with her until I need to.”

If she talks about Josie to her aunts again, they’ll never let her live it down. They razzed her the entire weekend and asked her numerous questions about the other girl. She’d rather not go through that again any time soon. Not unless her confusion about the situation got worse.

“Okay, so...how about we talk about this astral projection thing? That’s a pretty big spell.” Emma redirected the conversation.

“I didn’t do much, I’m pretty sure my Aunt Freya did most of it.” Hope admitted regrettably.

“But you were still able to project yourself. Where’d you go? Why?”

“Romania. To bring Josie home.”

Emma’s eyes widened. “You...how?”

“I didn’t like...teleport her or anything. I swear, do you actually know anything about magic?” Hope teased sarcastically.

Emma grinned. “You seem lighter than usual.”

“I feel...different. I don’t know how to describe it.”

Emma nodded and thought for a moment before she spoke again. “You said that you found out something unsettling about your dad...but, you don’t seem as angry or as closed off as you usually are either.”

She shrugged. “I guess you were right all along...life is better with friends. Less lonely. More...yeah, I feel lighter. That’s a good word for it.”

“Do you want to talk about what you learned about your dad?”

“The Necromancer admitted to me that my father hasn’t found peace, that he can’t until I do.”

Emma regarded Hope thoughtfully. “And you’re trying, aren’t you? That’s what all of this has been about.”

Hope was silent for a long moment, then she looked up at Emma and told her with sincerity. “I blamed myself for his death, for so long. But even worse than finding out that he died to save me is
that even in death, I’m the cause of his pain.”

“Hope…”

She waved the woman off nonchalantly. “I get it. I do. Logically, I understand what he did and why he did it. Logically, I get that any father would just want their child to be happy and at peace, so his desires for me to have that isn’t the universe out to screw me over again. I get that. But up until recently, I didn’t think I was capable of happiness. Like, I actively wanted to remain unhappy because I believed that my being happy was somehow not fair to my parents. They were both dead. I should still be grieving them. I shouldn’t be happy and laughing and making friends.”

“What changed?”

“Being unhappy is sort of a slap in their face, you know? Like they died, for me basically, so the least I could do is live for them. And live the way they would want me to. Apparently, that means to find peace. And be happy.”

“I’m proud of you for learning that on your own, Hope. Most people never learn that lesson. Grief is an complicated beast. We’re conditioned to believe that if we aren’t sad or that we don’t actively think about those we’ve lost, that somehow we’re forgetting them. But moving on--it isn’t forgetting. It’s not like you being happy will somehow make their death less meaningful or less devastating. Like you just said, it makes their death and their life more meaningful, because you’re bringing the best parts of them forward into the future with you. If that make sense.”

“It makes great sense. I also...I realized that I can’t keep trying to help Josie and telling her things and trying to help her heal if I don’t allow myself to heal as well. Because if I don’t start to believe the things I’m telling her, then...I’m just being a hypocrite. And Josie deserves better than that.” She paused. Then locked eyes with Emma. “I deserve better than that, too. I understand that now. I was named for a reason. My Uncle Elijah said that I was meant to be the hope in my family’s dark world. I was always meant to be their future. I used to believe the opposite. That I was a curse to them all. That my entire existence was only meant to bring pain to the people around me. But I guess, after all of these years, I might finally be willing to embrace the role of my namesake.”

“You want to be the hope in Josie’s dark world.” Emma stated.

Hope nodded. “And going back to what I said about seeing her while I was in wolf form...she calmed me in a way I didn’t think possible. But I know that I did the same for her. I’m sick of being angry all the time. Of feeling responsible for the whole world. I just want to be selfish for a little while...and to focus on things that bring me joy and in the end, hopefully peace.”

Emma smiled at her. “Do you remember what our last conversation was about?”

Hope thought about it. It had been a day or two before the twins’ big birthday party. “I was talking to you about what I wanted to get Josie for her birthday. I wondered if you thought using a charm on her talisman was invasive to her privacy. You asked me the purpose of the charm and I told you that I just wanted Josie to be valued and heard in the way she deserved.” Hope smiled at the memory. She had been so nervous back then, about doing the wrong thing and ruining their tentative friendship before it even got a chance to blossom. “I’m glad I decided to do the charm, it’s what ended up saving her life.”

Emma seemed to realize what Hope was telling her. “It made quiet things heard.” She shook her head and leaned forward towards Hope, and rested her hand on Hope’s forearm. “You believe you were able to find her because of the charm...because it let her be heard.”
“Well, yeah, of course.”

“How about your assignment this week, is to think about what other quiet things may have come to life in the presence of that charm.”

Hope frowned. “I don’t even know what that means.”

“Think about it Hope. Your wolf feels calm in her presence. You were able to use astral projection to talk to Josie face to face from thousands of miles away. You are able to understand and reach each other in a way that isn’t...natural. Not really. You’ve recently become friends, just in the last couple of weeks, right?” She waited for Hope to nod in agreement before she continued. “Have you stopped to wonder how it happened so fast? How you went from barely being civil to each other to being inseparable best friends?”

Hope shook her head. “Just because we weren’t always on the greatest terms with each other...I always cared. Even when I tried not to.”

“I think...if you really examine yourself Hope...you’ll understand what I’m trying to tell you.”

Hope sighed loudly. Petulantly. “Then why don’t you just save us both some time and tell me?”

“Because, I think this particular thing is something that you have to work through on your own. I promise, your reward will largely outweigh any of the work it takes.”

“I guess I’ll have to take your word for it.”

“I guess you will.”

Hope glanced at the clock. “Can I leave early today then, since you assigned me some homework to do?”

Emma smirked and rolled her eyes at the younger girl’s antics. “Sure, fine go ahead.”

Hope happily leapt from her chair and rushed to the door.

“Tell Josie I said ‘Hi’.” Emma called as Hope left the room.

Hope’s footsteps stuttered as she wondered how Emma could have possibly known that she planned to see Josie. She shook her head to herself for being so suspicious of everyone, and continued toward the dorms.

She saw Penelope alone in the corner of the common room and before she could second guess herself, she veered off her path and toward the distraught looking witch. As she approached her, the look on Penelope’s face made her own heart ache.

Penelope jumped and wiped at the tears that were threatening to spill from her eyes. “Are you here to gloat or laugh at me?”

Hope ignored the jab, and sat beside her. “What happened?”

“Like you don’t already know.”

“I don’t.” She pointed toward the hallway she just came from. “Mandatory counseling session. I just finished up.”

“Well, you’ll find out soon enough, so I’ll just tell you. I talked to Josie...I had hoped...we kissed on
her birthday and she told me then that she didn’t want to get back together. I know she was stressed and traumatized and I tried not to get my hopes up and I tried to take her words at face value...but she’s back and I missed her. And Lizzie and I are even...not planning each other’s murders anymore. So I thought. I hoped, that Josie would consider me again. Not right now. I know I have to work at it. I know I have a lot to make up for. But after her speech at lunch about starting with a clean slate...I figured if I ever had any chance at all, it was now. While she was feeling generous and optimistic. But she said that she wasn’t interested and that she didn’t think that would ever change.”

“Penelope...I’m sorry.”

The witch laughed without humor. “Sure you are.”

“I am. Having your heart broken sucks, I wouldn’t wish that on anyone.” Then she smiled in a way she hoped conveyed her mirth. “Not even you.”

Penelope rolled her eyes. “You seem to be forgetting the fact that when you found out that I cheated on Josie, you threatened me with bodily harm. You actually told me that I was lucky you were too depressed to actually enjoy murdering me and burying my body where no one could ever find it.”

Hope’s eyes widened at the memory. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it.”

“You did though.”

Hope did at the time. And she wasn’t going to try to defend herself now.

“It’s okay really. I found it somehow...comforting. Since I was no longer in the picture, I realized that day that Josie would always be okay. Because you would protect her with your life. I thought Lizzie had been the one who came between us. I was so sure that Josie would never reach her full potential if she kept standing in Lizzie’s shadow. So I tore Lizzie down every chance I had. I wanted to burn her life to the ground. But instead, I set fire to my own relationship. And I get that now.”

“They’re a package deal.”

Penelope nodded. “Yeah, but it’s more than that. I wanted so much for Josie to stand up for herself. To be confident and strong and everything I knew she could be. I thought if I just waited it out, that we’d get back together and she’d be who I always knew she could be. But I was wrong. Because she is that person. She always was. And she didn’t need me to achieve that. She didn’t need anyone. She didn’t need to be louder...she just needed someone willing to sit in the silence and hear what she couldn’t say. That was never going to be me.”

Hope didn’t know what to say to that. She felt bad for Penelope. The girl had finally gotten her shit together, she finally had started to understand Josie; only to be told that she was too late. That she didn’t have a chance. She was honest when she told Penelope that getting your heart broken sucked. She had never even been in love and she knew that she never wanted to experience the bad side of relationships. The inevitable heartbreak that she was sure to endure if she ever cared about someone enough to let them have that kind of power over her. Nope, it was not for her. Not at all.

“You know what I always thought was interesting?” Penelope wondered out loud and it brought Hope out of her own mind.

“What?”

“When all the shit went down with me and Josie...you were so much in your own world back then. Still grieving. Still a loner. You hated the entire world. And everyone in it.” Penelope leaned closer to Hope. “Everyone it seems, but Josie. The two of you weren’t even friends, you were barely
Hope hadn’t even thought about it when she did it. She saw how broken Josie was. She hated seeing the girl in so much pain. So she wanted to ruin the person who caused it. It seemed logical to the Mikaelson side of her.

“You know. I was more scared of you than Lizzie after that. Sure, I thought Lizzie would retaliate. Poison my food. Turn me to a toad. Set me on fire.”

“She didn’t have to. Josie did that part herself.” Hope smirked.

Penelope laughed genuinely. “She did. I was actually proud of her. She stood up for herself.”

“I was impressed by that as well. Although, I might have blackmailed her into doing dark magic with me afterwards...but that’s what jump started our friendship.” Hope admitted with embarrassment.

Penelope rolled her eyes. “Glad my pain was to your benefit.”

“It wasn’t like that.”

“I know.”

“How were you more scared of me than Lizzie, if you thought she was capable of doing something to you?”

“Lizzie would have surely done it. But it would have been just as much for herself as it was for Josie. Because she hated us together. Because we were enemies. Because I hurt her enough to make her want to hurt me back.” Penelope pointed at Hope and lowered her voice. “But you, had no other motive for destroying me other than the fact that I hurt Josie. And it scared me, because when you threatened me...it was the first time I realized I actually deserved whatever I had coming to me. I hurt Josie, of all people. I really was Satan.”

Hope nodded in understanding. It somehow made her feel better that Penelope was just as protective of Josie as she was. She may have hurt her in the worst way possible, but Hope knew without a doubt that given the chance, she would never make that same mistake again. In fact, Hope had to admit that Penelope hadn’t always done things the correct way, in regards to Josie, but she did seem to have her best interest at heart. And Hope knew that Penelope realized how wrong she had been about the way she went about everything. The ends did not always justify the means, and unfortunately, Penelope had learned that the hard way. And took Josie down with her.

“For the record, you’re good for her. Anyone with eyes can see it.” Penelope admitted softly.

The statement had seemed so intimate that it caused Hope to blush and look away from the other girl awkwardly.

“And you are actually good with Lizzie. I don’t know if it’s everything that happened that mellowed her out, or your presence as her friend. But Lizzie is not just tolerable now, she’s almost fun to be around. We share last period together, and she sat next to me today. She’s actually kind of funny...when her insults are directed at someone who isn’t me.”

“When you know that it doesn’t come from a place of malice, she’s even kind of funny when she directs her insults at you.”

Penelope smirked and nodded as if she could agree to that. Then her face turned sober again and she
looked directly into Hope’s eyes.

“I appreciate that you came over to check on me. And...I’m glad we’re kind of friends.”

“Kind of?”

“Yeah, I mean I’d like to be,”

Hope grinned. “Me too.”

Penelope reached out her hand and Hope took it in hers. They shook on it with smiles on their faces.

“Friends.” Penelope reaffirmed.

“Or as MG says, ‘those who slay together, stay together.’”

Penelope laughed out loud and Hope descended into laughter as well. After their laughter died down and she triple checked that Penelope would really be okay, she continued her original trek to Josie’s (and Lizzie’s) room.

Josie greeted her with a hug and Hope melted into the embrace with comfort and ease.

“Since Lizzie insisted on joining us, we had to settle on something we’ll all like.” Josie told her as she got comfortable on her bed and booted up her computer. “Comedy still okay?”

“Comedy is fine.” Hope didn’t presume to sit on Josie’s bed with her until the brunette patted the space beside her and gave the go ahead for the tribrid to get comfortable.

Lizzie exited the bathroom, raised an eyebrow when she saw Hope cuddled up beside Josie and then climbed on the bed on the other side of her sister.

“Mikaelson.”

“Saltzman.”

“I don’t know why you both insist on pretending you aren’t actually friends.” Josie muttered as she pressed play to whatever movie she had selected.

“I take comfort in the knowledge that not everything has to change.” Lizzie defended.

Hope shrugged. “Who says I’m pretending.”

Lizzie smiled at the answer and Josie shook her head as if she were exasperated, but the smile on her face belied the truth.

Hope had no clue what movie was playing because she couldn’t keep her concentration on it. Not when Josie had fallen asleep cuddled around her within ten minutes of pressing play. Instead, she tried not to focus on the way Josie had curled into her. How warm her arm was across Hope’s stomach and how the weight of it grounded her. Josie’s hot puffs of breath against Hope’s neck ignited her entire body with a feeling that coiled deep at the pit of her stomach. A feeling she didn’t understand, nor did she attempt to try. Hope’s rapid heartbeat was so loud to her own ears, she wondered how Josie could sleep pressed against her the way she was. Her own arm had wrapped around Josie and found purchase on the sleeping girl’s hip. She used her strength to pull Josie impossibly closer.

She was dragged from her own thoughts when Lizzie reached over to turn the movie off now that
the credits had started to roll.

“Josie’s been asleep since the movie started. I doubt we’ll be watching any more tonight.” Lizzie told her.

“We could...I mean, I don’t have anywhere to be. You and I could watch another one.”

Lizzie stared at her incredulously. “What movie did we just watch?”

“What?”

“Tell me the name of the movie we just finished watching.”

Hope blanched in embarrassment. “I actually have no idea.”

Lizzie huffed. “Well, at least you’re honest. That’s a start.”

“Do you want to watch another one or not?”

“We can. Or...we could talk. Josie...she didn’t sleep again last night...did she?”

“No. Not at all.”

Lizzie was silent for a minute. “I want to know everything...but...I also want to respect her privacy. So I won’t ask you what you talk about or what you guys do.” She raised an eyebrow at that. “Just keep me informed...like, let me know she’s still doing okay.”

“Of course.”

“Then beyond that, I think that if we’re going to be friends, that we need to talk about things other than Josie.”

“I agree, Lizzie.” Hope watched Josie sleep for a little while, she looked so peaceful. After a few minutes, she looked back at Lizzie. “You can talk to me, you know. Josie wasn’t the only one who had to...I know how badly the Josette thing affect Josie, so you can talk to me about it if you need to. I’ve been told I’m a good listener.”

“Never talking to anyone isn’t the same as listening to them.”

“And deflecting isn’t the best way to start a new friendship.”

“I’m trying to learn to talk about myself less.” Lizzie admitted shyly, in a self-deprecating way that Hope was more than used to.

“And as noble as that is...when someone directly asks you to talk about yourself...it is no longer selfish or conceited.”

“So you think I’m usually selfish and conceited.”

“I think that you let people see what you want them to see.”

“Are you always so annoyingly perceptive?”

“I’m beginning to think so. At least, Penelope implied the same thing earlier...except somehow nicer.”
“So...you talked to Penelope. You must know about the breakup that wasn’t actually a breakup then.”

“I do. But we were talking about you.” Hope lowered her voice and a softer look crossed her features. “If you don’t want to talk about it, just tell me. I won’t pry, I just wanted you to know that I am here. And I want to listen.”

Lizzie studied her and then glanced away. When she looked back at Hope, her entire demeanor had changed.

“I’ve always been curious about my...about bio mom. But I tried not to care, I didn’t want to listen to the stories. I didn’t need any reason to miss her any more than I already had. Because, how could you miss someone you’ve never met? So I tried convincing myself that wanting to know about her was somehow a betrayal of my mom. My real mom. I was always closer to her, than Josie was. Josie’s more of a daddy’s girl. And my mom is my best friend. And Dad is hers. I think that’s why Josie was so devastated about hurting dad, about taking Josette away from him again. But I saw the way Josie looked at her. The way she immediately bonded with her. Josie needs to belong, to feel like she’s good enough.”

Hope opened her mouth to argue. To tell her that Josie was always enough. But Lizzie raised a single hand to silence her.

“I’m not saying it’s true, just that she believes it.” Lizzie shook her head fondly. Then just as suddenly, all traces of amusement or playfulness left her face. “When we...when we did what we had to do to Josette...I could feel Josie’s pain. But I also had my own. It broke my heart to have to do it, I realized that even though I never wanted to know Josette or care about her, I did. The short time we had together and how happy she made my dad and Josie...I suddenly wanted to know everything I could about her. I wanted more time. I wanted her to be able to stay and for us all to have a happy ending. One big happy family. I wanted that for myself, but mostly, for Josie. But instead of a happily ever after...we had to kill her. And I had to struggle with my own pain on top of Josie’s. Hers was so strong...so loud. I hate that she feels that way and that I am part of the cause of it. We should have said ‘no.’ I should have said ‘no.’ She’s my sister and I’m supposed to protect her.”

“You can’t protect her from everything. Nor would she want you to.”

“I know. But we can’t change the way we feel, can we? I know you blame yourself for your own parents, and if it feels anything like this deep, unnerving sense of failure...I don’t want you to feel like this either.”

“Tell me...only if you want to...but, is the reason you feel so guilty about not figuring out a way to save Josette because you were also unable to save Josie?”

Lizzy nodded shakily. “Hope...it was our sixteenth birthday. I was predictably focused on my own happiness so much so that I didn’t even leave time for Josie to get ready before the party. She went to Josette to help fix her hair and get her ready. Because I couldn’t be bothered. And because of that...Josie not only was put in danger, but I didn’t even notice she was gone.” She dropped her head in shame. “And then, we were forced to make an impossible choice. If I had done something differently, then I could have possibly prevented all of Josie’s suffering. Maybe it isn’t my fault. But I will never not wonder about the ‘what ifs?’ I have to live with that. And I made a vow to myself since then...that from now on, Josie will always come first.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. I just...someone needed to know. I have changed. I’m working on
it anyway. I can be better. Josie always defended me against Penelope, but she had been right. I was like a leech—sucking everything good out of Josie and giving her nothing in return. There was no room left for her. That’s why you needed to make that charm...that’s why she needed magic to be heard. Because of me.”

“That’s not true. You mean everything to Josie. Not because you demand it, but because that’s who she is. She cares more about others than herself, she always will.”

“And I let her. I didn’t have to let her.”

“From my own personal experience, you can’t make Josie do anything she doesn’t want to do. Maybe she doesn’t always speak her mind and doesn’t fight for herself in ways we’d expect. But she knows who she is and she’s never felt the need to apologize for it. She is proud about her sexuality. She is proud of being your sister and my friend. She’s the smartest girl in the school and she may be bothered by the people who tease her, but she doesn’t let it change who she is. She lives unapologetically as herself, and if we want to make her proud and deserve her respect...then we should live that way as well.”

“I like that.” Lizzie said with a smile. “I can be unapologetically myself, but still want to be better. We all have room for improvement.”

“Very true.”

Hope smiled back at Lizzie. Then without thinking about it, she leaned into Josie and kissed the top of her head. She hadn’t realized during her talk with Lizzie, that she sought out Josie’s hand with her own free one, and they had been linked ever since. Instead of pulling away when she noticed, she laced their fingers together.

When she returned her gaze to Lizzie, the blonde was staring at her curiously.

“What?”

“You and Josie…”

“Me and Josie, what?” Hope sighed. She was really sick of people questioning her relationship with Josie. It was theirs. She didn’t owe anyone an explanation.

“You seem close. Closer than I was expecting.”

“We’re friends.”

“Yeah, because I cuddle with all of my friends and kiss their hair when they’re sleeping, too.” Lizzie replied with snark.

“She’s my best friend.” Hope corrected.

Lizzie stood up from the bed and stretched. “I’m going to get ready for bed.”

“Oh, right.” Hope made a move to detach herself from Josie.

“It’s late, why don’t you just stay. If you move, you’ll just wake her up and she probably won’t go back to sleep.”

Hope knew that forever reason, Lizzie was giving her an excuse to stay. It wasn’t late at all, barely 8:30. She had another hour and a half hour before curfew. Yes, Josie was sleeping well and it would
be rude to wake her. But for Lizzie to actually invite her to stay, rather than Hope having to make an excuse herself, was a pleasant victory. Because Hope did want to stay. She was comfortable. And Josie was warm. And it was all so perfect.

Hope fell asleep that night to thoughts of her friends. Sure, Lizzie and Penelope shared heart to hearts with Hope that evening, and she felt closer to them than ever. But Lizzie had been right, she didn’t want to cuddle with either of them. And she certainly didn’t crave their presence the way that she seemed to crave Josie’s.

She tried to think about what Emma had said. About the charm making what is usually quiet heard. Was her desire to be near Josie always there, but only now she was noticing it? Was their storied past only a prelude to what they had recently become? Like fate. Perhaps, they were always suppose to mean something to each other--they just needed to pay attention to what the universe was telling them?

Hope chastised herself for thinking too deeply about something that probably didn’t mean anything. She hadn’t slept at all last night, so maybe the lack of sleep was making her delusional. There had to be a valid explanation for everything. And when she had the time, and the desire to search for it, she would. But it wasn’t like any of that mattered. They were friends; Hope didn’t care how it came to be--she was just grateful that it happened. Because when it came right down to it, nothing else mattered. Not to her.

She was jarred awake when she felt Josie thrashing against her, the brunette was mumbling nonsensically in her sleep. Hope could sense how distraught Josie was becoming, and knew a nightmare was plaguing her. Josie’s mutterings hadn’t awoken Lizzie yet, so Hope, at least, counted that as a blessing. She wasn’t entirely sure if she was supposed to wake Josie up or let her wake up on her own. Hope never really dealt properly with any of her own trauma, but she wanted to make sure that Josie was able to get through hers. At least, she would try her best to help.

She shook Josie slightly, but the other girl just burrowed further into her. Hope became more worried when she felt the brunette’s hot tears on her neck.

“Josie...sweetie,..” She whispered as loudly as she dared.

Then she shook her again, more firmly this time. “Josie....”

The other girl shot up with a start and her head pivoted to take in her surroundings, as if it were on a swivel. Her breathing was labored and her eyes were wide with fear. Finally, she settled her gaze on Hope and stared at the girl in confusion. Maybe she couldn’t figure out why she was there. Or maybe she didn’t even register that she was there at all.

“Josie.” Hope breathed out with concern. With reverence. Then she reached out with both hands and placed them on either side of Josie’s face. She met her gaze. “I’m here. You’re safe in your room. You’re safe, Josie.”

Josie blinked a few times until her eyes were able to properly focus. “Hope?”

“It’s me, I’m here.” She reiterated. It sounded more like a plea to her own ears.

Hope was content to sit in silence as Josie processed what was real versus what was part of her nightmare. She didn’t mention that Josie had been crying in her sleep; it didn’t seem tactful. Although she decided it was best not to comment on Josie’s current condition or point out what the other girl might see as a weakness, Hope did want to acknowledge that she understood Josie was hurting and that her pain was not something to belittle or dismiss. So she did the first thing she could
think of that might bring Josie some sense of comfort.

Hope leaned into the other girl, and kissed her forehead. Then she kissed each cheek, directly wear the tears had fallen. She glanced up to see Josie watching her; but since the other girl seemed to calm at the contact, she continued. She placed one more kiss near Josie’s mouth, as close as she could without actually kissing her on the lips. When she pulled away, she instinctively licked her lips and tasted the salt from Josie’s tears on her tongue.

Hope closed her eyes to regain her senses and forced herself to control her own breathing. When she opened them, she was glad that they were shrouded in darkness because she was pretty sure her eyes were glowing gold. She didn’t trust herself to speak, so he remained silent.

After what seemed like forever, Josie broke the tranquility of the room.

“When it’s dark....when I wake up and it’s dark...I...it’s like no matter how much I try to remember I’m safe, I wake up thinking I’m still in that grave.”

Hope nodded in understanding. Okay, so Josie didn’t want to talk about the dream itself, but she was willing to talk about something and Hope was grateful for that.

“That’s an easy enough fix.” Hope smiled at her, then abruptly leapt from the bed and rushed toward the bathroom door.

She turned on the light and left the door cracked open. It was enough to illuminate Josie’s bed without thrusting the entire room into brightness. Hope returned to the bed and held one of Josie’s hands with both of hers.

“That might...it might actually help a little.” Josie admitted. Then she ducked her head shyly. “I think I actually sleep better with you by my side as well.”

Hope’s smile widened. “That’s an easy fix as well. I don’t intend to ever leave your side.”

Josie shook her head, but she did have a hint of a smile on her face. “I won’t hold you to that, but thank you for offering.”

Hope squeezed Josie’s hand in hers and then used one hand to tuck some hair behind Josie’s ear. She kept her hand there and leaned in carefully, leaving little room between them.

“That wasn’t an offer, Josie. It was a promise.” She smiled at her with affection.

Then she quickly placed a chaste kiss on Josie’s lips. As she pulled away, Josie chased Hope’s lips with her own. And soon, the girls were locked in a heated kiss. Josie’s soft mouth, and hot tongue set Hope’s body on fire. It may not have been Hope’s first kiss, but it was definitely her favorite. Distantly, Hope knew it was wrong. It felt amazingly right, but the timing was not. She felt like she was taking advantage of Josie and she didn’t want to do that. Regrettably, Hope pulled away. Barely. She still needed contact with the girl, so she rested her forehead against Josie’s.

Their eyes met. And she didn’t see regret or betrayal or pain, she only saw Josie’s beautiful brown eyes staring back at her. She refused to be the first to look away. She needed Josie to know that she wasn’t upset with her for deepening the kiss.

Josie eventually looked away; her eyes dropped to their linked hands and Hope breathed a sigh of relief when a ghost of a smile took root on the brunette’s face. She squeezed Josie’s hand again, in an attempt to refocus her attention. Josie’s eyes locked on hers again. This time she seemed hesitant. Unsure.
Hope pulled the girl into a hug, a warm and tight embrace. She waited until she felt Josie’s arms wrap around her before she allowed herself to breath properly again. They were alright. She didn’t ruin things. Nothing had to change. They were still...them.

“I know that you don’t need anyone to fight your demons for you, Josie. You’re more than capable on your own, and you’re the strongest person I’ve ever known.” Hope kissed Josie’s temple and then continued to whisper in her ear. “But I promise you that I’ll be there to hold your hand throughout it all. You don’t even have to ask. It doesn’t matter how strong someone is...everyone needs a little help now and then. Just because you can do it on your own, doesn’t mean you have to.”

She felt Josie nod her head against her, then she backed away until they were nose to nose.

“You better let me do the same for you.” Josie demanded firmly.

Hope’s eyes widened and she nodded her head in agreement. “Of course. I’ve come to realize over the last several days that I might just need you even more than you need me.”

Josie smiled at her. “Impossible.”

Then she surprised Hope when she quickly pecked her on the lips with a soft kiss and was gone before Hope could react. Josie situated herself more comfortably in the bed and waited for Hope to do the same. When Hope was finally were she wanted to be, she reached out to tug Josie more securely into her. Josie snuggled up beside her, and gently rested her head atop Hope’s chest as she wrapped her arms around her and hugged her with all her might. Hope had never felt more at ease. More safe herself. And even though her heart beat rapidly in her chest at the slightly more intimate contact, she felt calm. It didn’t take long for Josie to fall asleep again after that.

And when Hope finally surrendered to sleep for the second time that night, it was with a smile on her face.
Let me in

Hope had never been a morning person, so when her alarm went off she had no desire to actually get up. She could skip a day of school, right? It had been a while since she was delinquent in *that* way. Hope actually enjoyed learning and was doing quite well in almost all of her classes. Although, she enjoyed some more than others, she did appreciate the value in all of them. But that didn’t mean she had to suddenly appreciate mornings. Instead of even attempting to silence her dreadful alarm, she snuggled closer into the warmth beside her.

When she inhaled Josie’s scent, her eyes immediately popped open and she remembered not only where she was; but all of the events of last night. She fought the flush tinting her cheeks as she blindly dug her phone out of her pocket and silenced the alarm. With bated breath, she waited for Josie to move or even Lizzie. But nothing happened. So she tightened her grip on the brunette next to her, she inhaled deeply and felt calm. Her eyes fell back shut almost instantly.

xxxxxx

Something was intruding on Hope’s precious slumber. She was having the best dream and something...no, someone was interrupting it.

“Michaelson! Wake the hell up!”

“Hmmmm.” She nuzzled into soft hair that smelled so much like Josie it made her smile.

Then her eyes flew open. She surveyed her surroundings until her eyes fell on a disgruntled looking Lizzie Saltzman.

“Lizzie?”

“Don’t act all cute and innocent. I assumed when you stayed the night last night that you’d have been smart enough to get out of here before everyone in the school was awake. If you get caught for breaking curfew, I am not going down with you.”

“Relax. Or you’ll wake Josie.” Hope prompted. “Besides, I can just grab something of hers and walk to breakfast with you all. No one has to know.”

Lizzie narrowed her eyes at the other girl. “You say that like you’ve had a bit of practice. Do you make a habit of staying the night in random people’s dorm rooms?”

Hope rolled her eyes and regretfully detached herself from Josie’s grasp, although she didn’t actually make a move to leave the bed. She pulled her phone back out and looked at the time. Shit, she really did sleep in longer than she meant to. What happened to the alarm she set last night?

“Well…” Lizzie stomped her foot waiting for an answer.

Hope raised an eyebrow. “You really need me to answer that?”

Immediately, Lizzie looked a bit uncertain and far less aggressive. “I mean, yeah?”

The tribrid huffed loudly. “First of all, Josie isn’t a random person. And neither are you for that
matter. Do you really think that I am the kind of person who makes this…” She gestured between her and Josie where there was barely space between their bodies. “A habit? I didn’t have any friends up until a few weeks ago. Who the hell would I have made this a habit with?”

She whispered yelled at Lizzie and it made the other girl wince in return.

“So...you and Landon?”

“Never.”

“You and Roman?”

“God, no. You do know that he was the one who was mostly responsible for the death of my mother right. So...worst first kiss ever.”

Lizzie seemed to calm a bit more as her features softened. “And...Rafael.”

“Really? He already had you and Josie fighting over him, I didn’t want to touch that with a ten foot pole.”

Lizzie frowned. “Josie liked him, too?” She looked inconsolable sad. “I was such a horrible sister. I had no clue. I talked about him all the time and she...she just listened.”

“I’m also right here.” Josie said with her eyes still closed. Then she opened them and glared at both of them. “So please stop talking about me like I’m not.”

Hope reached out to grab Josie’s hand and squeezed it in apology. “Sorry.”

Josie nodded her acceptance, and twined her fingers through Hope’s. The other girl smiled at the action and felt relief overcome her.

“And for the record, Lizzie. You are not, nor were you ever a horrible sister. Yes, I liked Rafael. But not enough to make things awkward with you. And that’s over now anyway. So you can have him.”

Lizzie sighed. “But I don’t want him anymore either. There are more important things than boys.”

Josie sat up and stared at her sister. “Please don’t tell me you’re into girls now. I don’t want to think about us having the same taste in girls also.”

Lizzie looked downright offended. Hope smirked.

“I can tell you one thing for sure, I would have better taste than Penelope Park.”

Josie climbed out of bed and stretched. She didn’t seem to notice that Hope’s eyes followed her movement. Lizzie cleared her throat and slapped at Hope. Hope smirked as she shrugged her shoulders. She got caught staring at Josie and she didn’t even feel embarrassed about it.

“I don’t know why you hate her so much.” Josie said as she grabbed a shirt from her top right drawer.

She discarded her old shirt and replaced it with a new one without thinking about it. Hope’s mouth dropped open at the action and she involuntarily licked her lips. She frowned when she got slapped by Lizzie again.

“Stop perving on my sister!” Lizzie whispered yelled.
“What?” Josie asked as she looked over her shoulder.

“Nothing.” Hope firmly stated as she shot a glare at the blonde. “Lizzie’s just being rude.”

“Me?!”

“Lizzie play nice.” Josie demanded as she returned to rummage through her dresser for some pants. Hope smirked and stuck her tongue out at Lizzie. The blonde huffed and shoved at her.

“Before you continue to undress with company in the room...could you find your dog something to wear.”

Josie’s head whipped around and her face was bright red. “I am so sorry if I made you uncomfortable, Hope. I’m so used to it just being me and Lizzie. I…”

Hope waved her off. “It’s fine, Josie. But Lizzie’s right, I could use some clothes.”

Josie picked out a few things before tossing them toward Hope. “You can go ahead and change in the bathroom, I’ll just finish getting ready out here.”

Hope dutifully grabbed the clothes and walked to the bathroom. She closed the door and let her head fall against it. After taking a few deep breaths, she expelled the hot air from her lungs and squeezed her eyes shut tightly. She really did need to get a grip. What kind of person ogles their best friend? Then as if struck by lightning, the memory of the kiss from the night before electrified her body. Hope knew she was good and royally fucked in that moment. Then she blanched and coughed to recover from what that choice of phrase did to her body and the images it brought to her mind.

It took far longer to get dressed than it normally would. She even ran cold water over her face multiple times. Then she ran her fingers anxiously through her hair. Hope knew she had to get a grip. She also had to figure out what the hell was going on with her.

“Hope.” Josie hesitantly called through the door. “Breakfast is almost over, Lizzie and I have to brush our hair and teeth yet. Are you almost ready?”

Hope cleared her throat and shook all nefarious thoughts from her mind. “Yes! I’m done.”

As she opened the door, Lizzie pushed passed her roughly and Josie smiled apologetically as she brushed by her as well. It took the twins next to no time to finish getting ready. When they were ready to go, Hope basically stormed out of the room as Josie quickly followed with confusion and Lizzie strolled along slowly with absolute amusement.

Their friends stared at them strangely when they got to the table barely in time for breakfast.

“So...do we even ask?” Penelope prompted when they sat down wordlessly and all began to scarf their food down as if they hadn’t eaten in days.

“Not if you know what’s good for you.” Hope replied between unchewed bits of oatmeal.

“Charming.” Penelope replied at Hope’s sudden lack of manners.

In response, Hope opened her mouth and revealed the mouthful of food.

“Gross.” The witch groaned and grabbed her empty tray. “I’d say it’s been fun, but it certainly hasn’t. See you all at lunch?”
Their group of friends all nodded in response. She walked away without looking back.

“That was weird. Things are weird now.” Josie worried.

“No. That was just…” Lizzie tried to comfort her sister. “It’ll be fine. She’ll be fine, it’s not your job to care about her feelings anymore, Jos.”

Josie glared at her sister. “Just because I told her that we were never getting back together as a couple, that doesn’t mean I stopped caring about her. She’s been a really good friend lately. Or she’s trying to be. And part of me will always love her.”

Hope rested her hand on Josie’s leg under the table. “I’m sure she’s fine. She probably just needs a little time. And I don’t think her reaction this morning was about you at all...I think I was...not the most accommodating.”

“Penelope’s fine, Josie. We were talking before you guys got here. She wants to still be friends, you still mean a lot to her.” MG told the brunette.

Josie nodded and rested her hand atop of Hope’s. They finished the rest of their breakfast the best they could one handed. Then the bell rang.

Hope stood up first, she had every intention of walking Josie to class again today. She grabbed hers and Josie’s trays and put them away.

“Hope, I want to talk to you a second.” Lizzie said in a tone that made Hope immediately uncomfortable.

She glanced at Josie. The taller girl looked at her with concern.

“It’s fine. I’ll see you later?” Hope wondered.

“Oh course.”

Josie walked away with MG and the two of them started chatting animatedly. Hope watched them for a second with a smile before she turned to face Lizzie.

“I’m listening.” Hope declared when Lizzie had yet to speak.

“I know that I was probably...inappropriate this morning. But...you and my sister...I don’t have to like...invest in ear plugs or gouge my eyes out or anything dramatic, right? You’re still just friends? Not friends with benefits or...”

Hope’s eyes widened and she looked around the room to make sure that no one was listening to them.

“Still just friends. I promise. I’m not...we’re not...” She stepped closer to Lizzie and whispered. “I would never take advantage of your sister like that. I’m trying to help her, not get into her pants. I know you never thought very highly of me, but you have to know that I’m better than that.”

Lizzie relaxed and smiled at her. “I know. I just...she...I just needed to check where your head was. I don’t want to see her hurt.”

“I would never hurt her.” Hope told her solemnly.

“We don’t always intend to hurt the ones we love, but it still happens.”
Hope frowned. She didn’t want to ever hurt anyone she cared about. Not anymore. And especially not Josie. She jumped when she felt Lizzie’s hand on her shoulder.

“I’m worried about you, too. I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“I’ll be fine.” Hope punctuated with her trademark grin.

Hope noticed that the cafeteria was completely empty and it dawned on her what time it was.

“Shit! We gotta go.”

For the second time in two days she had to sprint to class. She walked in as the tardy bell rang and apologized to her teacher. Her mind spiraled the entire first period, so she skipped second period and went to talk to Emma. The counselor was surprised to see her when she opened the door to her office.

“Hope? Is something wrong?”

“I’m not sure.” Hope admitted. Then she took her usual seat in the chair across from Emma. “I...I have a dilemma. Or a question rather.”

“Okay?”

“I think that you were right about the charm and...I know that I cast the spell without Josie’s knowledge, but I think I have to remove it now. It’s causing...it’s...things are happening to me and I think it’s the charm’s fault.”

“What happened?”

Hope glared at her. “That isn’t the point. The point is...if I remove the charm now...do you think that Josie would still be able to heal and speak her mind? She’s been doing very well and is making some progress. And I don’t want to ruin that. But...isn’t it better to know that she healed on her own and not with the help of a charm? Or do you think Josie will feel like she needs the extra help, even if she doesn’t? Like a crutch or something.”

“I think...maybe it’s something you talk to Josie about and you figure it out together. If removing the charm will make her anxious, then don’t do it. But if she thinks that she wants to try healing without magical assistance, then you have your answer.”

Hope nodded.

“And have you thought about the other thing?”

Hope wrung her hands together and fidgeted in her seat. “I think that maybe the charm is causing unnatural side effects and I...I don’t want it to ruin the progress I’ve already made with Josie.” Hope slumped back in the chair. “But what if the only reason we even made progress at all is because of the charm and if I remove it, things will go back to the way they were before with us?”

“Would that be so bad?”

Hope stared at her incredulously. “We weren’t even on speaking term before. Not really.”

“Things won’t change that drastically, Hope. You’ve built a good foundation, if anything changes, it’ll just slow down. And that’s good, right? You both have been through so much and need to heal on your own before…anything else happens.”
Hope looked away from her counselor with embarrassment. She hated that she was so easy to read.

“So, you’ll talk to Josie?” Emma wondered after several moments of silence.

Hope nodded. “I think I have to.”

“It won’t be as bad as you think.”

Hope left the office full of anxiety and uncertainty. She got through the rest of her morning classes on auto-pilot. But just before lunch, Alaric found her and called her into his office.

“Great.” She muttered as she followed behind him and waited for him to close the door.

“You’re not in trouble. Yet. I’m just checking in. I noticed that you missed second period, but Emma told me that you met with her. Is everything okay?”

“Just peachy.”

“Drop the attitude, Hope. I’m just trying to help.” He told her sternly. Just like the disappointed father he always seemed to be.

“Sorry. I’m fine. Just had a bad morning so far. I’ll be fine.”

He softened at her admission. “You’ve done so well helping Josie lately that I almost forgot about everything that happened with you and the Necromancer.”

“No you didn’t. I literally jump started the apocalypse, you can’t have forgotten that.”

“You’re right. I…” He dispelled a loud puff of air and sat at his desk. Then he studied her briefly. “I’ve been dedicating all of my free time to that, and on top of that, I’ve been worried about my girls. But I haven’t checked in with you properly. If you need to blow off some steam or, I don’t know, punch someone...we could start up our training sessions again.”

She shook her head. “You’ve got too much on your plate. If I want to start training again, I’ll just grab MG or Rafael. They should be able to keep up with me better than you anyway.”

“Okay.” He drummed his fingers on his desk awkwardly. “Your Aunt Rebecca called today. She wanted to set up a visit. That or pick you up and bring you back down to New Orleans for a weekend.”

Hope’s face lit up. “Aunt Rebecca’s coming?”

He nodded. “She’ll be here on Friday. If that works for you.”

“Hell yeah!”

He pushed out of his chair and walked around the desk toward Hope.

“I always forget that most of the other kids either don’t have family, or they are able to go out and visit their family often. But this school has been most of your life. And...when you were younger and hiding, it made sense for you to stay here. You needed the anonymity and protection this school offered you. But you’re almost eighteen, Hope. You don’t have to stay here if you don’t want to.”

Hope frowned. The school was her home. She only had one year left of classes, why was he trying to get rid of her now?
“No, hey. I’m not saying you have to go or even that I want you to. I want what’s best for you, Hope. And maybe this school won’t always be it. You have a family who loves you...who can teach you far better than any of us can. You’re already the strongest witch I’ve ever known...aside from your aunt. You’ve basically been working with me for the last year by bringing in new recruits. You could even do that full time if you wanted to.”

“But I can stay?” Hope questioned.

“Of course. We’ll always have a place for you. I’m just letting you know your options. I keep trying to treat you like a kid, and I’ve only begun to realize you’re all grown up. You were forced to grow up far earlier than most, and for that, I really am sorry. But I don’t know what more I can teach you.”

“And this big revelation has nothing to do with my lapse in judgment with the Necromancer?”

“People make mistakes. Adults do, too.”

“And it has nothing to do with my new friendship with your daughters?”

He frowned at that. “I’m not punishing you, Hope. I’m just...you just seemed so excited to see your aunt. And you just spent all last weekend with your other one. I thought you were missing your family and I wanted to let you know that you didn’t owe this school anything more than you’ve already given it. Your life is yours, Hope. That’s all I was trying to say.”

“Okay. I appreciate that. But...I actually don’t mind this school or the people in it. I know I always acted like it was such a burden to be forced to live here...but most of that was an act, you know? I’ve never felt safer than within these walls. And yes, I love my family. But I’ve got people here that I’ve come to see as family as well. And...I made a really horrible mistake by losing the knife and I do intend to help you find it--if you want my help or need it. But I no longer crave excitement and danger, and I don’t need an outlet for my anger. I don’t feel anger as much as I used to. I feel other things now. Maybe the emotions that my anger was preventing me from feeling. Like fear, and sorrow, and sometimes depression. I feel pain, and regret and guilt. But Alaric, for the first time I can remember, I also feel excitement, and hope, and happiness. I also feel anxiety for reasons other than monsters attacking us or purists hunting me. Sometimes, it’s overwhelming and sometimes, I don’t want to dwell in those feelings. But feeling something is better than feeling nothing and I am sick of pretending that I feel nothing.”

He smiled at her sadly. “I’m proud of your progress, Hope. And for the record, if anyone deserves happiness in this dark world...it’s you.”

“Thank you.”

He glanced at his watch. “I don’t think you’ll be able to make it in time for lunch. Why don’t I run you into town and we can grab a bite and finish this conversation.”

She stared at him. “I’d rather not.”

He chuckled at that. “I guess I did press my luck a bit there. Can’t fault me for trying.”

Hope raised an eyebrow. “Right. So...why don’t you try with the twins then? Pull them from class and treat them to milkshakes and hamburgers. I think they’d really appreciate that.”

He smiled fondly at her. “I think I will. I’ll make sure Caroline can make it, too.”

“So...I’m good to go then?”
“Yes. Wait!” He walked back around his desk and pulled out a protein bar from his top drawer. “To make up for the lunch you missed.”

She rolled her eyes. “Thanks.”

Hope paced in her bedroom trying to decide how she was going to confront Josie about removing the charm from her talisman. She knew it had to be done though, because after the events of last night and this morning, she was concerned that her feelings were being manipulated by that thing. And if her were, she feared Josie’s were as well. Josie needed to heal and not be concerned with manufactured feelings that may or may not be there. It was the only option. The best option. She just hoped that Josie saw it too.

She sensed Josie’s presence before the girl even knocked on her door. Instead of waiting, she walked to the door and tore it open. Josie jumped back; startled by the sudden action.

“Sorry.” Hope replied as she swiftly reached for Josie’s hand and then forced herself to step way instead.

Then she dropped her hand awkwardly between them. Josie frowned at the action but didn’t respond.

“I was planning on finding you later...could we talk?” Hope asked.

“I don’t like those words...it sounds...bad.” Josie admitted.

“It’s not bad. I promise.” Hope assured. “Actually, I have an idea.”

She stepped out of her room and closed the door behind her. Then she started to walk away and hoped that Josie would follow her. It took a few seconds for the girl to register what to do since Hope just left without her, but soon her harried footsteps chased after the tribrid. Hope tried to school her features when she felt Josie take her hand. Without thought, she laced their fingers and sighed in relief. They walked in silence until Hope led them out of the school.

“Where are we going?” Josie finally asked.

Distantly, Hope noticed that Josie still had her school bag with her, and wondered why the girl hadn’t gone back to her room before she stopped by.

“How?’ Josie asked when she didn’t receive an answer.

“Oh, sorry. I just thought...we could go somewhere and talk...it’s important.”

“Yes...but where are we going?” Josie reiterated her initial question.

“Yours and Lizzie’s secret place.”

Josie rolled her eyes. “It hasn’t really been a secret for a while now. We had a party there a while back.” She glanced at Hope. “You didn’t go. You never go.”
“I don’t tolerate most people on good days...why would I want to be with them when they’re drunk and even more stupid than normal?”

“I’ve been told I’m more tolerable when I’m drinking,” Josie admitted.

Hope stopped walking which forced the other girl to do the same. She stared at Josie with wide eyes. “Who told you that?”

Josie shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. And it wasn’t just one person.”

Hope growled under her breath. “I really hate the people at this school.”

Josie started walking again and tugged at Hope’s hand to get her to move as well. “You can’t protect me from everyone and everything all the time, it’s not your responsibility, Hope.”

Hope stopped walking again, and pulled Josie to a stop in front of her. “That’s kind of what I wanted to talk to you about.”

Josie was silent for a moment, then she started walking again. Hope allowed herself to be led away. “If this is going to be one of those serious conversations, let’s get to the clubhouse.”

“Clubhouse?”

“That’s what Lizzie and I always called it. It was our magical hiding place when we wanted to lock out the world. But mostly when we were having a fight with our parents and wanted to run away without actually running away.”

“Do you ever just wish things had been different? Like, I don’t know, normal? No witches or vampires or werewolves. We could just be oblivious to all of this supernatural stuff and maybe we would have met in elementary school and could have been friends this whole time.”

Josie didn’t answer right away. Hope watched her from the corner of her eye, but didn’t interrupt her seemingly deep thoughts on the matter. Finally, Josie replied to her.

“Even if we had been normal humans...life sucks sometimes, Hope. People we love still die. There are still bullies. The people we love don’t always love us back. And there are still monsters, even if they are only human. I think that might actually be worse, in a way. I doubt things would have been altogether different for us if we had lived a normal life.”

“You wouldn’t have been magically transplanted into Caroline’s womb.” Hope pointed out.

“True.”

“And you wouldn’t have been asked to remove dark, all consuming magic from me and transfer it to my dad. Or you wouldn’t have had to do what you had to with Josette. You wouldn’t have been buried alive.”

“And you would have gotten to grow up and grow old with both of your parents and all of your aunts and uncles.”

“See? Don’t you think that sounds amazing?”

Josie stopped when they reached the clubhouse. Then she turned to face Hope. “It sounds wonderful, Hope. But...would we be who we are if we had lived a different life? It’s taken some time, but I am really starting to like who I am.”
Hope’s eyes filled with tears. “Me too.”

Josie nodded with understanding. She wiped at Hope’s tears as they fell rapidly down her cheeks.

“It’s okay to wonder about things we wish we could have changed. I know I do often. But don’t get caught in the trap that even the life we have…the one that’s filled with pain and fear and so much sadness…don’t forget that there is more to our lives than just the bad stuff.”

“I know.” Hope whimpered as she wiped at her own tears, which effectively caused Josie to back away.

Josie continued to walk away. Eventually, Hope composed herself and followed the brunette. Josie had already set her bag on the floor in the middle of the room and spun in a large circle as she took in the view.

“I used to sit up there and read.” Josie pointed to a loft looking area to the far left of the room. “I was never scared of heights or of falling. Lizzie would get so mad at me because she wanted to sit by me but she didn’t dare climb up there. As we got older, she was more scared for me than for herself and would beg me to come down because she was scared that if I didn’t, I would fall and hurt myself.”

Hope nodded to let Josie know she was listening, but didn’t comment.

“Right over there...that is where I had my first kiss. It was a kid name Matthew and we were in sixth grade. A group of us snuck out here and played spin the bottle. It had all been Lizzie’s idea. And she was so mad that I got to kiss Matthew, because she had a crush on him. I was mad I had to kiss him, because I had a crush on a girl named Addison.”

Hope smiled.

“You see that over there...where the ivy has grown up the wall and covered the window?” Josie pointed and Hope nodded in affirmation. “That is where I lost my virginity.”

Hope’s mouth dropped open.

“I’m kidding.” Josie chuckled at Hope’s response. “I only made it to second base right there...it was with Penelope just before she asked me out and we made our relationship official.”

Hope rolled her eyes at Josie’s poke. It felt nice to be picked on by her, because it felt normal. Just like old times, except without the malice that usually occurred when they really started to poke each other.

“And right here…” Josie stepped a few paces to her left. “This is where I broke down the night we...when we saved you from that dark magic. Lizzie and I came here after...and we cried all night. We saved you...but even being young...we understood the cost.”

“Josie…”

“It’s okay, Hope. I just wanted to...we were talking about life on our way here. And this clubhouse represents that concept the best way I can describe. It’s the place where I have some of my very favorite memories…and also the worst. But despite that, despite what happened right in this spot...I love this clubhouse. Because, this is me, Hope. You want to know me? All about me and everything I could possible share or feel…it’s all right here.”

Hope stood in silence as she reassessed the area. She studied each of the places Josie had already pointed out. And she wondered how much more of Josie’s life was present in the memories that were
forever entwined with this place. She wanted to know them all. Everything that happened here, good and bad.

“I took my Aunt Freya here once.” She waved off the question on Josie’s tongue. “She wanted to know how I knew about this place and I told her that this had been yours and Lizzie’s secret spot. I was always jealous that you guys had this place...and that I wasn’t really included in it.”

Josie seemed conflicted about whether or not she should approach Hope in order to comfort her. She eventually decided to stay put, for which Hope was grateful.

“I stood right over there.” Hope pointed behind Josie. “When I told my aunt that you and your sister were Satan’s spawn.”

Josie frowned.

“Oh, I didn’t use those exact words. But I wasn’t really on the greatest of terms with you back then.” She thought back to that day. “Things were complicated and getting worse with my family and...anyway, I was pissed because I had enough to worry about with all of that, but I still hated that you, Lizzie and I fought all the time. And I know it was mostly me, but I was still just a lonely and scared kid who wanted friends. Who wanted to be part of the cool group.”

“I was never part of the cool group either. Lizzie drug me along and liked to pretend that people wanted me there, because she wanted me there. But I was always on the outside looking in. I’d rather have one or two real friends than a dozen fake ones. I think Lizzie realized the novelty of that as well.”

Josie sat on the floor, right there in the middle of the room. Then she patted the place beside her.

“I know that this trip down my memory lane isn’t what you had in mind when you wanted to talk, so what’s the real reason you dragged me all the way out here?”

Hope sighed and walked across the room to join Josie on the floor. “I’m not sure how to start. And I’m worried that it will all come out wrong.”

“I can wait until you find the right words.”

“I appreciate that.”

Josie’s eyes widened. Then she leaned over and pulled her bag toward her. She started to dig through it as if looking for something.

“I have something for you that I got when I was away. I keep forgetting to give it to you.”

She pulled out two things. One was a box of chocolates, and the other was a small bracelet. Josie handed the chocolate over to Hope first.

“I picked these up when we were in the airport. I know how much you love your chocolate.”

Hope blushed. She was touched that Josie thought about her enough to get her a souvenir. And her heart warmed at the fact that Josie also knew her well enough to know what she would prefer for said souvenir.

Hope had been so focused on the box of chocolate that she didn’t notice right away how much Josie had started to fidget with the bracelet in her hands. She reached over and rested her hand on Josie’s to calm her nervous movements. Josie looked up at her with an embarrassed smile.
"I ah, I also made this bracelet for you. It’s a friendship bracelet. Mom took us to an old antique shop in Bucharest. I found this charm that made me think of you, so I made the bracelet for it."

She handed it over awkwardly then pulled her hands back and placed them in her own lap. Hope studied the bracelet and turned it over in her hands. She noticed the small charm was a circle with a beautifully cursive ‘H’. It made her smile.

“Thank you, I love it.” She told Josie sincerely.

“It’s just...I wanted you to know that I’m not scared of you or any of your parts. You’ll never be a monster to me, you’ll just always be you. Hope. Just Hope. And that will always be enough. But I tried to find a wolf charm too, I’ll keep looking for one.”

“You don’t need to. This is perfect.”

For the second time in ten minutes, Hope’s eyes filled with tears.

“You can cry, you know. I won’t judge you.” Josie whispered. “I heard somewhere that the tears you don’t cry freeze in your soul.”

“Ouch, that’s...painfully accurate.”

Josie shrugged as if she didn’t think so. “I think it’s a beautiful reminder that crying is normal. It isn’t weakness...allowing that kind of vulnerability is a show of strength.”

Hope let the tears fall and didn’t bother to wipe them away this time. She was no longer ashamed of them.

“How’d you get so insightful so quickly?” She asked in jest.

“I’ve been reading poetry when I have trouble sleeping...a friend of mine mentioned how much her dad enjoyed it and I wanted to know what all the fuss was about.”

Hope released a laugh that turned into a sob. She wasn’t sad, per say, she was just very overwhelmed. Josie scooted over to pull Hope into her. It was an awkward position for both of them, but as Josie’s arms wrapped around Hope, it instantly felt perfectly comfortable instead.

“Why are we here, Hope?” Josie asked again.

They sat in silence for so long that the sun had started to set. The room was illuminated in very beautiful pink and orange hues. The image made Hope want to commit this moment to memory so she could paint it later.

Hope slowly pulled away from Josie and put some extra distance between them.

“You know how I charmed on your necklace...to help you be heard?” She finally asked.

“Yeah.”

“I think...it seems to be...I don’t know if you realized this, but it seems to be affecting other things, too.”

“Like what?”

“I know that when you don’t talk...it brings your emotions more fully to the surface. Like it speaks for you when you can’t.”
“How do you know that?”

“Lizzie.”

“Oh.”

“I think at first it was very helpful because it gave you the confidence you needed to stand up for yourself...it made the rest of us more attune to you, it made us listen better. But...”

“But you think that I don’t need it anymore. That it may be doing more harm than good now?”

“I’m just concerned that it may be bringing feelings and emotions to light that aren’t just yours. Don’t you think that everything feels heightened...or exaggerated? And like, Lizzie and I and even Penelope and I have become friends really quickly. Too quickly. And I’m scared that the same thing is happening with you and me.”

Josie frowned and her eyebrows knitted together in concentration. “So...you think we’re only friends because of the charm?”

“No!” Hope yelled then cleared her throat and shook her head. “I think that everything is there...at the surface. Your confidence, our friendship...it’s just...I don’t want it to manipulate us. I don’t want to think that it could. I want you to know that without the charm...that you can still be heard and seen and that without the enhanced...emotions...we can all still be friends. I don’t ever want that to be something that you doubt. That any of us have to doubt.”

“But you’re doubting it right now.”

“I’m not. I just noticed how some things are changing in a way that I don’t understand and it’s happening way too fast for it too feel normal. I just want to feel normal again.”

“Does normal mean that you plan to go back to the way things used to be?” Josie wondered.

“Not at all. I know what I’ve been missing now. I would never do anything to lose it. But if things keep moving forward beyond our control...I think that we could lose it. I don’t want to lose you. I want you to be who you were always meant to be, and I don’t think you need the charm to do that any more. That’s all I’m trying to say.”

Josie fiddled with the talisman in her fingers and stared at it reverently. “I don’t feel any different. I know I’ve changed...but I don’t feel it. If that makes sense...maybe that’s what you’re talking about.”

“I think it is.”

Josie nodded and looked pensive for a moment.

“I trust you. If you think the charm has adverse side effects, then I trust you.” Josie told her with determination. “Go ahead and remove it.”

Hope searched Josie’s eyes for certainty, but found none. She may trust Hope, but she also seemed to have grown used to the charm and all the things she thought it did to help her. Hope reached out to Josie, touching her chin and ensuring that they retained eye contact when she asked her question.

“Are you sure about this, Josie? Not because I told you to do it...but because you want to.”

Josie swallowed and looked away. Hope let her as she dropped her hand to her lap.

“I don’t know if it’s the charm that saved me or you. And...it scares me that next time...”
“There won’t be a next time, I’m not leaving your side.” Hope growled.

“And I appreciate you saying that, but you can’t always be there Hope. Not really.”

“The others, especially Lizzie...they know how to listen to you now also. They won’t let you go unheard again. It won’t be like last time, I promise.”

Josie nodded more sure of herself this time. “Okay.”

“Really?”

She nodded again. “Yes. Do it.”

Hope closed her eyes and performed the quick spell. When she reopened them she stared at Josie.

“It’s done.”

Josie looked at the necklace and held it in her hands. “I don’t feel any differently.”

“Maybe the charm already did what it intended to do then.”

They were silent for awhile.

“Why did you ask this time? You cast the charm without permission, why didn’t you just remove it without my knowledge? I obviously wouldn’t have known the difference.” Josie wondered curiously.

Hope shrugged. Then her eyes fell on the talisman. “I think I was wrong before, to do so without you knowing. I did it to help you. But I guess instead of performing a charm to make you more easily heard...I should have just listened. I’m sorry that I didn’t.”

Josie didn’t respond to that. An awkward silence overtook the clubhouse and Hope almost regretted removing the charm. What if it did change things between them? She didn’t care anymore if the charm was making her fall for Josie in ways that made her uncomfortable and seemed rushed. She was now terrified that things would return back to the status quo.

Josie would be okay, she wasn’t lying when she told her that her friends knew how to listen...how to hear her now. But Hope worried about them. She was afraid that they would go back to being merely acquaintances. And for some reason, she needed reassurance that they would be fine. That they were still best friends.

“Remember how we all had to exchange Valentine’s Day cards with the whole school? I think I was in, like, fourth grade. I don’t remember exactly when it started, but everyone had to buy cards for everyone else. Then when I was in seventh grade, we were no longer forced to do it. So that year...I only got one card. It was from you, Josie. And you’ve given me a card every year since. I know you probably still give the entire school a card, so it’s not that special for you. But it’s the only one I ever get.”

Hope didn’t mention that she kept every one of them. That they are tucked safely away in a shoebox under her bed.

Josie frowned. “You don’t get one from Lizzie? She tells me she makes you one every year.”

“And you believed her?”

“I can’t believe she lied to me.” Josie looked sadder than usual. “I’m also sorry that you don’t get
any. I…” She looked at Hope with confusion. “But…even though we were supposed to give them to the whole school, I never got one from you.”

“I guess I never saw the point. It was something we were forced to do and so I rebelled.”

“I always thought you just didn’t give one to me.”

It was Hope’s turn to frown. “You thought I singled you out to hurt you, and yet, you still gave me a card every year?”

“I… I was convinced that if I didn’t give up then we would eventually be friends.”

Hope smiled fondly at her. “Yeah, well, your tenacity paid off.”

“We’re still friends, aren’t we? It wasn’t the charm.”

“It wasn’t the charm. You’ll always be my best friend, Josie. I finally let myself see what was in front of me the whole time. I’m sorry I fought so hard against every olive branch you offered. You’ll always be the best person I know, it just took me a while to admit it. To admit that I wanted to be friends with you all along.”

“I’m still mad at Lizzie for lying to me,” Josie pouted.

“Don’t be. Your sister loves you. She didn’t want to disappoint you or let you down, so she let you believe that she was better than she is. But she’s getting there, she’s trying.”

Josie shook her head. “Maybe, but she didn’t have to lie. I don’t like liars.”

“Neither do I.”

Silence overtook them again, but this time it was pleasant, and calm, and comfortable. After nearly ten minutes, Josie spoke again.

“Do you think I expect too much from people?”

Hope’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“Like… do I have impossible expectations? For Lizzie and probably for Penelope. Definitely for my parents.”

“I don’t think you expect anything from anyone that you’re not expecting from yourself.”

“Exactly!”

“But Josie, you expect a lot from yourself. Too much sometimes. You don’t have to be perfect. You don’t have to be the fixer of everyone’s problems. You never had to work to steal the spotlight from Lizzie, you always outshone everyone without trying. But sometimes, you do try too hard. And you don’t need to.” Hope fought the urge to take Josie’s hand in her own, and instead played with her own fingers as she nervously addressed her best friend. “It can be intimidating to those of us who are mere mortals…”

Josie rolled her eyes at Hope and slapped her knee. Hope smirked in response but continued her speech. “Anyway, you mean so much to so many people, and sometimes they will let you down because they are trying too hard not to.”

“Like Lizzie lying to me, and Penelope pushing me to stand up to Lizzie, and MG drinking human
blood to be strong enough to protect me next time.”

Hope’s eyes widened. “Wait! What? What did MG do?”

“After the Necromancer...he felt bad that he couldn’t help you right after he almost couldn’t save me, so he thought he’d be stronger if he drank real blood.”

“I’m going to kill that little vampire.” Hope groaned.

“He already hates himself enough. He started to...he seemed to take to the blood too easily. He might’ve become a ripper.”

Hope’s face paled. She felt guilty for causing MG to spiral, and she felt guilty for not even realizing that he did.

“What happened? How did I not know about it?” Hope wondered.

“Dad had to lock him in the basement for a couple of days. He had to let it leave his system, I guess it’s a really painful process.” Josie looked at Hope. “I only found out after you told me to reach out to everyone while I was away. I think he felt horrible that he let me down and he kept trying to reach out to me, but I didn’t respond. And then when he let you down, then he just...I guess he snapped. Or he gave in to some peer pressure. Either way, he got over it. He knows the risk of drinking human blood. He has no intention of doing so again.”

Hope nodded as she tried to take it all in. She really had been so consumed with her own demons that she failed to see the suffering of those around her. Right then and there, she vowed to be better for all of her friends, not just Josie.

“Please don’t bring it up to him. He feels guilty enough. I probably shouldn’t have said anything. I just didn’t realize that you didn’t know.” Josie said.

“I won’t say anything. But I do plan to be a better friend. To everyone.”

“You’re already better than you know.”

“But there is always room for improvement.” Hope countered.

The sun had completely set and it was getting dark around them. Hope raised her hand and performed a quick illumination spell that made the room dance with beautiful colors. She smiled when she saw Josie look around in awe.

“Do you mind...I wanted to go for a quick run since it’s been a couple of days. You can stay here and I’ll come right back to get you and we can walk back together.”

Hope watched Josie’s gaze drop as the other girl fingered her talisman in worry.

“I won’t go far. And even without that charm...I can sense you. I can smell you. I can hear your heartbeat. Nothing will happen to you. Remember, I promised.”

“And you don’t lie.”

Hope smiled. “I don’t lie.”

Josie nodded barely perceptively. Then she closed her eyes and put her hands over them just in case. Hope’s smile widened at the gesture. She quickly turned her back on Josie and shred her clothes.
When she was in wolf form, she trotted up to the brunette and licked her face playfully. Josie ran her hands through Hope’s coat and chuckled whole-heartedly.

“Go! You wanted to run.” Josie muttered through squeals of laughter as Hope continued to play with her.

Eventually, Hope took off in a dead sprint. She ran around the clubhouse several times as quickly as she could just to blow off some steam. Then she took one swift lap through the entirety of the woods before returning to the clubhouse, to Josie, panting loudly and completely spent. She hadn’t run that hard in a while. She usually just ran for fun. Tonight she ran with purpose. She needed clarity. She needed to wear herself out. She needed to not think for fifteen minutes. Or at least she hoped it wasn’t very long, because she didn’t want to leave Josie alone for long.

When she returned, the girl was curled up in the middle of the floor. At first, Hope assumed she was sleeping, but her shallow and uneasy breathing told her otherwise. She rushed to her. She nudged Josie with her snout and crawled into the brunette’s arms. Josie’s trembling immediately slowed as she wrapped her arms more securely around the wolf. Josie sneezed when Hope’s fur tickled her nose but then she placed a kiss on the wolf’s forehead.

Hope waited until Josie was calm and lucid enough to talk, if she wanted to. If she didn’t, she planned to just lay with her until she was okay enough to walk back to the school. Hope lay there in Josie’s arms in silence for so long, that her own eyes started to drift closed. But when Josie finally spoke, Hope’s eyes popped open and she listened intently.

“For the last couple of weeks...since...you know, I have the same dream. It starts out fine, I’m with my friends, my family and even Josette is there. And we’re at my birthday party. There’s dancing and laughing. And then, one by one, everyone starts to disappear. First Penelope and MG. Then Josette and you. Then my parents. And finally it’s just me and Lizzie. And then she’s gone too and I’m all alone. I scream and no one is there to hear me. I look around and try to find anyone who can help me, but it’s like...I’m the one who’s not there. That’s when the dream shifts. And we’re at the party again...everyone I ever cared about is right there. But no one sees me. I try to dance with them. I try to talk to them. I try to hug them. But nothing. They don’t hear me or feel me. It isn’t like I just disappeared...it’s like...it’s like I never existed.”

Hope whined at the admittance. She started to get agitated by the retelling of Josie’s dream. It hit her all of a sudden, that her dream might be tied to the charm. Hope considered the fact maybe the charm didn’t save her...maybe the charm was the cause of Josie reliving her trauma. If she inadvertently made things worse for Josie, she’d never forgive herself.

“Hey, stop freaking out on me. I’m not telling you this so you can blame yourself or so you can fix it...you promised me last night that you weren’t going to try to fix it...that you were just going to be by my side as I figured it all out. That’s what I need from you, Hope. Can you do that?”

Hope licked the underside of Josie’s chin in response. Then she idly wondered how Josie had still been able to read her so well without the charm. She was still able to sense Hope’s racing heart and her agitated state and even acknowledged some of Hope’s worse fears. It made her wonder if she even removed the charm after all. Maybe it didn’t work. No, she got the spell right. She practiced it intensely ever since she made the decision that she wanted to remove it.

“The nightmares are bad enough. They terrify me and when I wake up screaming...part of me is still scared that no one will hear me. But last night...you did. You heard me even before I woke up. You brought me out of it. And it helped. But sometimes, even when I’m not sleeping...I’m scared that I’ll vanish Hope. That someday, I’ll just stop existing. And I don’t know what’s worse. Disappearing without a trace...or having my family not even remember I was there to begin with.”
Hope didn’t know the answer to that. A world without Josie would be horrible. But to have the world strip her of her memories of Josie. Yeah, that would be worse. Only...she wouldn’t even know it. At least she still had memories of her parents. That suddenly became a comfort to her. Good or bad, the memories always would be there to remind her that they existed. That for even a short time, she had people who loved her with their entire being.

“I think that the reason I was so hesitant about removing the charm is because I worry that it will happen. That my dream will come true. Like you said before, I finally found my voice. People finally see and hear me the way I always wished that they had. But what if I start to vanish into the background again. Only this time it will be worse that it was before.”

Hope cursed herself. How could she have not registered Josie’s terror at the removal of the charm. The girl seemed uncertain, but not horrified. Had she sensed it, she wouldn’t have forced the girl to listen to her; she wouldn’t have convinced her to remove the charm. How had she missed it?

“I trust you Hope. That hasn’t changed. I don’t blame you for my nightmares or my fears. I agreed to it because I wanted to heal. I need to do so without magic. I need to learn to take care of myself, to fight my own battles. Until then, I’ll always be at the mercy of whatever monster decides to pray on me.”

Hope was amazed how attuned to her thoughts Josie seemed to be, but maybe she was more obvious about her discomfort than Josie had been. And as she listened to her words, she realized that Josie was right. She did need to fight this battle on her own. And as much as Hope wanted to help her, the best she could do for her was prepare her to fight her own battles and not fight those battles for her.

“We should head back. If we go now, we might at least get a few hours of sleep in before the sun comes up.” Josie said as she untangled herself from Hope and stood from the floor. “Don’t forget to set an alarm this time. We don’t need a repeat of this morning.”

Fifteen minutes later, they snuck through the school and into Josie’s room. It was pitch black in the room, so Hope walked to the bathroom, turned the light on and cracked the door open.

Josie smiled at her. “Thank you.”

They wordlessly crawled into bed together. Visions of the night before crossed Hope’s mind but she didn’t dwell on it. She had far more things to worry about and to think about than the fact that Josie either didn’t remember the kiss or didn’t want to talk about it. And for that matter, she didn’t want to bring it up either. Because she had no idea what she’d say about it. She hadn’t even let herself think about it, so it became one more thing that she locked away for another day. There was only so much pain and trauma and confusion and fear to deal with in a day, and there were more important things than her stupid teenage hormones.

Josie interrupted her thoughts as she cuddled beside her and got comfortable. Hope waited for Josie to settle in before she wrapped an arm around the brunette and relaxed into the moment. She removed her phone from her pocket and set an alarm for a few hours from now. Then she caught a glimpse of the bracelet Josie made her and smiled.

She put the phone away and listened as Josie’s breaths evened out and sleep (or exhaustion) finally claimed her. Then she ran a hand through the brown hair and kissed the top of Josie’s head.

“Goodnight, Josie.”

She knew there would be no answer. So she allowed her mind to continue to wander. She was so confused about the events in the clubhouse. How Josie seemed to sense her mood---her distress. She
was also aware that her wolf form had once again easily calmed Josie, and Josie seemed to be more open and honest with Hope in that form as well. Just like before. But the things Josie told her. Her nightmares. Her true fear. It terrified Hope. She planned to look into it later. Maybe she could ask her Aunt Rebecca when she came on Friday, or she could call her Aunt Freya. Maybe if she described the nightmare to Freya, the powerful witch could tell if magic was the cause of it.

Hope feared that the Necromancer wasn’t the only magical being that seemed to be able to prey on people’s fears and warp their minds. Maybe it never had been the charm’s power at all, maybe something else supernatural was at work. Hope fell asleep with determination to find the answers as soon as possible. Josie’s very existence depended on it.

xxxxxxx

Hope had been awake for a while now, but she didn’t want to move. She was far too comfortable with Josie sleeping peacefully in her arms for the moment. She knew that her alarm would be going off soon, so she allowed herself just a little more time.

When the alarm did go off, she quickly silenced it. Then she slowly and carefully removed herself from beneath the slumbering brunette. She pressed a quick kiss to Josie’s forehead and turned to leave the room. But her eyes caught Lizzie and she nearly tripped over her own feet. The blonde sat in her own bed, and stared at Hope intensely.

Hope sighed and walked over to the other bed and sat beside Lizzie. Instead of commenting on their shared night again, or even the stolen kiss, Lizzie surprised her with a different question.

“Is she okay?”

Her voice had been soft and laced with concern.

“Honestly, I don’t know.” Hope answered.

Lizzie nodded as if she expected that much.

“Where were you at lunch yesterday? I doubt Josie will ask, because she wants to respect your privacy. But I’m far less tactful.”

Hope smiled softly at that and leaned in to Lizzie to bump her with her shoulder playfully.

“I skipped second period to talk to Emma. Then your dad found out and called me into his office at lunch to check on me.”

Lizzie shook her head ruefully. “I guess that explains the impromptu milkshakes mom and dad withdrew us from fifth period to surprise us with.”

Hope looked down shyly. “Yeah, I might have had a little to do with that.”

“Well, thank you. It was nice to spend time with my family. We don’t always get to a lot with mom running around to try and save the world and dad always so preoccupied around here.”

They sat quietly for another few minutes.

“Can I ask you a question?” Hope wondered. “It’s kind of personal.”
Lizzie simply nodded.

“Do you ever have weird dreams? Like recurring ones?”

The blonde sighed loudly and collapsed on the bed in thought. She turned to face Hope and spoke quietly, almost hypnotically.

“For years I’d get this really scary one. Well, it’s not typically scary, but it terrified me. My family is all together, but I’m not with them. It’s like they are surrounded in a bubble and I can’t reach them. I try. I even shake the bubble, shake them...like a snow globe. And for a minute, they seem to be aware that something is missing...or I hope they do...and they look at me. So I smile and try to talk to them...but they don’t actually seem me. It’s like they see right through me. It’s like I’m not there. Like I never was there at all.”

Hope’s stomach coiled because Lizzie’s dream was eerily similar to Josie’s nightmares. But Lizzie said that she had the dream for years. Maybe Josie did too, but maybe hers is just getting worse now. Maybe because of all the other trauma. Were they sharing nightmares? Or was it a premonition? It could be strong magic. Hope wasn’t sure, but she knew it frightened her to her core. It caused her physical pain to think of a life that didn’t include Josie or Lizzie in it.

“I think that’s why I’m so obnoxious. I think I just wanted to make sure that people know I’m here. I didn’t want that to happen, so I made sure I was loud enough and big enough to be noticed.”

Hope took it all in. She considered what had been said. Lizzie made herself loud and forced others to see her. Josie did the opposite. She let Lizzie be heard. And it was at such a big cost to Josie that Hope felt the need to spell a necklace just to reverse Josie’s invisibility.

Hope turned to better face Lizzie. “Have you had that dream recently?”

Lizzie laughed humorlessly and sat back up. “No. The last few weeks I’ve either dreamt about my sister dying because I wasn’t there to save her when she was buried alive, or I’ve had flashbacks of murdering my bio mom.”

“Right.” Hope replied dully.

“Look, Josie was really quiet during our milkshake date with the parents yesterday. She seemed...worried about you. So whatever was going on with you that made you need to talk to Emma, I hope you told my sister enough to let her know you’re okay.”

“I did. But I will again. Just in case.” Hope solemnly swore.

“Good.” Then she stood up and looked down at Hope. “She also seemed frustrated. Even I notice the way mom and dad look at her lately...like she’s so fragile and broken. But they don’t have to worry as much as they do, she’s stronger than they give her credit for. And honestly, she isn’t any more broken than the rest of us at this school.”

Hope smiled and stood up. “Just because we’re all broken...doesn’t make it better, Lizzie.” She said it light-heartedly and hoped Lizzie understood what she was saying.

“I know.”

Lizzie shoved Hope toward the door. “Now go, I have to get ready and you need a shower.”

“Fine. I’m going. See you at breakfast.”
“And don’t think that just because we didn’t discuss it that I didn’t see you sneakily kiss my sister you creepy creeper.”

Hope stumbled out the door and growled loudly when she heard Lizzie’s parting comment. Lizzie laughed as Hope walked away.

She hurried to shower and dress for the day so that she wouldn’t be late for breakfast again. As she reached the stairs, Rafael called out to her from just behind her. She slowed her pace until he caught up with her.

“Hey.” He greeted kindly.

“Hey.” She did the same.

“So…um…”

His steps slowed down as he tried to find his words. Hope slowed to match cadence with him.

“Just say whatever’s on your mind, I can take it.” Hope told him in earnest.

“It’s just…I couldn’t sleep last night so I was wandering around the school.” He grabbed her arm to stop her from walking as he stopped and looked straight at her. “I saw you and Josie sneak back into the school.”

She frowned. “Okay? You didn’t tell anyone, did you?”

“No, of course not!”

“Then what’s your deal?”

“I just wanted to warn you. Josie is the headmaster’s daughter…”

“I understand that more than anymore.” She was getting irritated by his prodding into her personal life.

“I don’t care what you and Josie do or don’t do outside in the middle of the night… but if you want to continue it, you have to be a little more careful. That’s all I wanted to say.”

She studied him and he seemed to be telling her the truth. Which was refreshing.

“For the record, Josie and I are just friends.”

He didn’t seem to believe her but he nodded anyway. “Like I said, it isn’t my business, but if you don’t want your business to spread all over the school, you’ll be more careful not to get caught next time.”

She relaxed at that. He was just trying to be a good friend and look out for her and she nearly bit his head off for the effort.

“Thank you. And sorry I was rude, I didn’t have the best conversation with Lizzie just now.”

He frowned at her. “I thought you were friends now.”

“We are. Sometimes that’s harder than hating her. Because now I actually care what she has to say.”

His lips turned upward into a small smile. “She does have that effect on people. You don’t know whether you want to strangle her or kiss her.”
“Ummm...no, that is not the effect she has on me. At all. I usually just want to strangle her. But sometimes, I also want to bite her head off.”

He laughed out loud at that. “I can see how that would be frustrating. So many options.”

Hope cracked a smile at that. “Really, she didn’t do anything too bad she just caught me off guard. I...yeah, nevermind.”

“You can talk to me, you know. We are friends.”

“I...how’s Landon? Have you heard from him since I warned you that he may be in danger?” Hope felt bad that she hadn’t asked before.

“I was able to get a message to him. He finally reached out to me by phone a few days ago. He’s trying to make it back this way. I talked to Alaric and I think he sent someone out to retrieve him to make sure he gets here safely. He said that when they do get here, that Landon will have a place to stay if he wants it.”

“That’s great.”

“It will be. I don’t want to get my hopes up until he actually makes it here safely. I know how dangerous it is out in the real world...and I’ve seen how unsafe it can be here as well.”

“Isn’t that the truth.”

Hope turned to start walking again, so Rafael followed her.

“So...are you going to tell me what you and Josie were up to out in the woods last night...if you are just friends and all.”

Hope rolled her eyes and shoved him so hard he almost fell over. His laughter echoed off the walls as he caught himself on the door to the cafeteria and suddenly all eyes were on them.

“Great. We have an audience now.” Hope muttered as she made her way toward the line.

Rafael easily kept pace with her as the smile never left his lips. “Okay, I won’t pry. But the offer still stands, I’m here to listen if you need it.”

She glanced at him, grateful he dropped the subject but also grateful for the offer. Hope knew she could always use more friends. The real kind.

“I appreciate that, Raf. Thank you.”

She rushed through the line as she filled her tray with food and then went to join her friends who were already in an animated conversation as she sat down beside Josie. MG talked a mile a minute as he spoke excitedly with hand gestures.

“What’d I miss?” She asked.

Rafael sat down across from them.

“MG was telling us all about his latest crash and burn...like, literally.” Penelope said with an amused smile. “Apparently, there’s a girl in his chemistry class who tried to talk to him yesterday and he about blew them both up. I think he burnt off her eyebrows, if the girl staring daggers at us is the girl in question.”
They all turned to where Penelope had pointed and saw a redhead staring at them. They quickly turned back in unison and giggled at being caught. Everyone but Josie.

“Come on, guys. That poor girl is going to think we’re laughing at her now.”

“Um...we are.” Lizzie replied.

“No, we were laughing at MG.” Hope corrected.

“Hey!”

“Hope’s right. It’s not her fault you’re a complete spaz with girls.” Penelope replied.

“I’m going to go say ‘hi.’ It’s the least we can do.” Josie told the group before dismissing herself from the table and marching over to the redhead.

Hope and her friends tried to subtly watch Josie’s interaction, but when the redhead smiled at Josie genuinely and offered her a seat at the table, they were confused.

“So...she’s not coming back over here?” Hope wondered aloud.

She hated to admit that she was a bit affronted by Josie’s complete dismissal of her arrival.

“Alright, MG, tell us what you know about this girl. We need to do reconnaissance.” Penelope demanded in a low growl.

Hope was almost impressed.

“Her name is Emily. She’s super smart and actually genuinely nice. She’s a witch. She started at our school just this semester.” He turned toward Lizzie. “Didn’t you and Josie give her the tour?”

Lizzie seemed to recall that small piece of information. “Right. Yeah, we did. She is actually nice. I remember liking her.”

“So not a threat then.” Rafael surmised.

“Speak for yourself...pretty sure she has it out for MG now.” Penelope smirked darkly.

“My wounded pride can only take so much abuse, please give me a break.” He told her dramatically.

“Come on, like you have pride.” Penelope teased again.

“Sometimes, I wonder why we’re friends.” He muttered, but he smirked back.

Penelope shrugged. “Because no one else will have me.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” Lizzie retorted and then stuck her tongue out at the witch.

Penelope flipped her off. The whole table descended into laughter again, and Hope tried to join in because she did enjoy the company of her friends and she was having fun. But she couldn’t help keeping her eyes from drifting back to Josie every so often. She wanted to know what they were saying, but she refused to use her enhanced hearing to eavesdrop. Hope knew better than to open that Pandora’s box.

Toward the end of breakfast, Josie finally made her way back to their table.
“Emily forgives you for almost blowing her up, and hopes you can still be friends, MG.” Josie said with a happy smile. Then she leaned across the table to whisper to the boy. “I think she likes you.”

His eyes lit up. “Really?”

“I think so. Maybe.” Josie sighed. “I’m not really good at this sort of thing. She wanted to know if we were dating, so I assured her that we weren’t.”

Hope and Penelope shared a look.

“Did she ask if MG was single or if you were?” Penelope emphasized.

“Isn’t that the same thing? If I’m single, that means I’m not dating MG.” Josie told them.

Lizzie laughed sharply and Hope glared at her.

“Yeah, that’s not exactly the same thing, sis.” Lizzie replied.

“Oh. Then I guess I’m not actually sure what happened over there. Sorry, MG. I’m not a very good wing woman.”

“No sweat. I’ll talk to her in class today. I can straighten things right up.” He said with a smirk as he winked at Hope.

Lizzie and Penelope chuckled at the statement and MG’s deliberate poke at Hope. Josie seemed altogether clueless to what had just taken place. Hope started to feel uncomfortable about all the blatant teasing, but before she got too agitated by it all, she felt a sudden calm wash over her and realized that Josie had rested her hand atop of Hope’s. The immediate contact soothed her and she expelled a breath of deep seeded relief.

The rest of the breakfast went by quickly. Hope walked Josie to her class again, but just before Josie entered the room, the brunette spoke.

“I decided that I’m going to start counseling sessions with Emma. You seem to think talking to her helps you...so I figured I’d give it a try too. My first appointment is scheduled after last period today. So...is it okay if you come find me later? I’ll text you when I’m done.”

“Sounds good. I’m glad you’re doing this for yourself, Josie. I really think it will help.”

Josie smiled at her. Then she turned and disappeared into the classroom. Hope sprinted to class, but was late today. Luckily, so was the teacher so no one noticed. She made a note to be more careful next time.

After classes ended for the day, Hope went in search of MG. He was still milling around outside one of the classrooms talking to some other vampires. Hope decided to interrupt them.

“Hey...do you have time to talk?” She asked him.

He studied her and noticed her anxiousness. “Yeah, sure.” Then he directed his attention to his friends. “I’ll talk to you guys tomorrow.”

Hope led him away and toward the gym. “I was thinking...we could talk while we punch things. Maybe even spar a little.”

MG grinned at that. “Sounds perfect. Give me five minutes to change my clothes.”
She glanced down at her clothes. “Right. Okay. Meet back here in ten.”

They rushed off and were back in less than ten minutes. The room was empty so they started on the punching bags first, as a warm-up.

“How’d it go with Emily today? Did you set her straight?” Hope asked with a raised eyebrow.

He chuckled. “Turns out she is straight. She was actually asking Josie about me. You and Penelope got all worked up for nothing.”

Hope nodded. She was actually relieved by his admission, but she didn’t want to react too much because she didn’t need to be teased about it any more than she already was.

“She actually asked me out for this weekend.” He continued.

He held the punch bag while she brutalized it. In between punches, she asked. “What about Lizzie?”

“It’s like you said...she knows I’m an option...but I can’t make her like me back.”

She assaulted the bag with more rapid punches. He held it tight as he continued to talk since it was obvious she couldn’t.

“It’s like what they say...if you love something, set it free.”

Hope stopped punching for a minute to catch her breath. She needed to remember to exhale through each punch she threw, otherwise she would become too winded and she’d defeat herself.

When she regained control of her breathing she commented. “So you’re just going to move on then.”

“I think so, yeah. We’re good as friends. Maybe that’s all we were meant to be.”

Hope attacked the bag fiercely again. She was contented to let MG talk.

“I had a lot of time to think lately. And...I...I honestly think I should focus on myself for awhile, and on helping my friends. I did something stupid recently, about as stupid as you and the Necromancer. And I let my personal fears and feelings control me and make me do something that I know I shouldn’t have done. I never want to lose myself like that again. So for now, I told Emily that I’m not ready to date yet. I need to work on me first.”

Hope rested her head against the punching bag, she wasn’t breathing as hard this time. She smiled at him. “I’m proud of you for choosing yourself MG. That’s a big step.”

He smiled back. “It is, isn’t it? I’ve been so worried for so long about getting Lizzie to like me that I forgot all of the reasons why she should in the first place. I tried to be want I thought she would want me to be, and I sort of lost sight of myself. And as it turns out, I think Lizzie likes me better when I’m being myself than she ever did when I was trying to be someone else.”

Hope nodded. “Yeah, she actually isn’t as shallow as people think she is. She’s very intuitive and perceptive. She probably saw right through all your bullshit. Lizzie likes people who are real. So be real. And whenever you’re ready to date, after you found yourself again, you might also get the girl.”

His smile widened. “You really think so?”

“I didn’t before. I thought you were a lost cause.” She smirked at him. “Not that you were the problem...I just always figured Lizzie wouldn’t go for the nice guy. But then she went for Rafael and I realized that she prefers nice guys. But she also wants them real.”
“What were you and Raf laughing about this morning?”

“He was laughing. I was annoyed.”

His eyebrows raised at that admission. “So he caught on to the Hosie thing, too.”

“Hosie? What the hell is that?”

“Hope and Josie? Hosie?”

She groaned. “Please tell me that is not actually a thing people are saying.”

“It’s not?”

She rolled her eyes. “Come on, you know I hate liars.”

“Fine. But it stops right here. It was just a few of us anyway. We’re sort of your cheerleaders.”

“Well stop it.” Then her glare softened and she smirked. “You’d look awful in a skirt anyway.”

“Hey now. I think I have the legs to pull it off.”

She laughed along with him on that.

“Okay, you’re turn.” She stepped away from the bag and let him beat on it for awhile while she voiced her thoughts to the room. “How much do you know about magic?”

Between a flurry of punches, he exhaled his answer. “Not much.”

“So...you wouldn’t know if there’s magic strong enough to control dreams...but not like control them....more like, link them?”

He paused his movements and studied her. “Is this about the twins?”

“Of course. Isn’t everything always about them when it comes to us.”

He smiled and nodded at that. “You think someone’s controlling their dreams? Or controlling them?”

“Neither, I guess. It’s more...I think that they’re seeing something that will or could happen. I think...it’s like they sense something coming and they’re fighting against it, but it’s too strong for them. Maybe whatever monster is coming next. Maybe it’s the apocalypse that I accidentally unleashed. Either way, I think they’re feeling or experiencing something that is supposed to come to pass. And I want to stop it from happening altogether.”

MG listened and seemed to be digesting what she was saying. “I think you should ask your Aunt Freya, she’s the most powerful witch in the world. Or...What about Bonnie Bennett? She was a friend of Caroline’s. If anyone knows about magic, she should.”

“Well, my Aunt Rebecca is coming to visit tomorrow. I can ask her as well. She’s been around for ages, if something like this happened before, she’d remember it.”

“Alright. In the meantime, we should help the twins prepare for whatever it might be.” MG said as he started punching again.

“I already thought about that. I was going to offer to teach them offensive magic and self defense. I guess we could extend the offer to Penelope as well. The more witches able to fight back, the better,
right?

“Yes. I can help with self defense. Raf too. We could have a small class after school each day. Our own little fight club. Which we can’t actually talk about, because it’s fight club.”

“I’m assuming that’s a movie reference.” Hope retorted so MG nodded then ducked his head shyly. She slapped at him playfully to let him know she wasn’t going to tease him about it. “But yeah, that sounds good.”

After switching places and each taking turns on the bag again; they went over to the matts to spar. MG was strong and fast, but he lacked any real training. He could take a hit, for which Hope was grateful. And he didn’t need the rest breaks that Alaric always needed; but as they sparred, Hope realized that when it came to proper training and technique, it would be completely up to her to teach the others.

It had been a great workout, regardless. And she really did enjoy MG’s company. As they walked out of the gym, they continued their conversation.

“I’ll bring it up to Lizzie and Josie tonight, if you want to loop Penelope and Rafael in on our plan.” She told MG. “We can shoot for this weekend to start with the training.”

“Sounds good to me.” He said as they parted ways.

Hope checked her phone and there had been no response from Josie yet, so she ran to her room to shower while she waited.
A family affair

When Hope got to Josie’s room, the twins were sprawled out on Lizzie’s bed doing homework together. Josie had texted her to bring her own stuff to work on, so she walked across the floor and tossed the bag to her ground beside the occupied bed. She then took a seat at the foot of the bed, nearest to Josie.

“You can use my desk.” Lizzie offered.

“Or my bed, go ahead and make yourself comfortable.” Josie suggested.

Hope just shook her head. “I’m fine here.”

And she really was. It was still strange to her that she felt the need to be close to Josie; like she craved her presence or something equally nauseating. She didn’t want to voice her reasoning for choosing the floor because she didn’t want to deal with Lizzie’s endless torment. But she also didn’t want to move away now that she finally had the girl nearby.

“How’d the rest of your day go?” She asked vaguely.

She really wanted to know how Josie’s appointment with Emma went, but she also left room for Josie to choose whether or not she wanted to discuss it.

“Fine.” The brunette shrugged noncommittally.

“Well, mine was just horrible. I completely flaked on a test I had to take today so I’m sure I bombed it.” Lizzie groaned.

“I told you, tell the teacher that you were helping me through some stuff and ask for a re-take. I’m sure she’ll go easy on you.” Josie told her.

“Josie’s right. Teachers eat that shit up. Can you cry on demand? That helps too.” Hope offered.

Lizzie and Josie stared at Hope with mortification etched on their features.

“You...lie to teachers like that?” Josie asked almost offended.

“What? You just suggested Lizzie do it so she could get a retake.” Hope was confused.

“Josie’s right. Teachers eat that shit up. Can you cry on demand? That helps too.” Hope offered.

Lizzie and Josie stared at Hope with mortification etched on their features.

“You...lie to teachers like that?” Josie asked almost offended.

“What? You just suggested Lizzie do it so she could get a retake.” Hope was confused.

“But I thought you didn’t lie.” Josie pouted as if her whole view of the world had suddenly shifted.

“I have never lied to a teacher. Do I exaggerate sometimes, well, yeah. Who doesn’t. But seriously, you know the life I’ve had, when I told them I needed a mental health day...do you really think they’d argue? Or that it’s a lie?” Hope replied.

Josie nodded in acceptance of that explanation. “I guess they wouldn’t...no.”

“It’s not like I needed to use that excuse very often anyway, I’m doing quite well in my classes--thank you very much.”

Hope didn’t know why she needed Josie to remember that she was at the top of her own class. Or that she would never manipulate people for no reason, she wasn’t her dad. She just really needed Josie to see the best in her. To see her.
As if she could read Hope’s thoughts, Josie’s hand fell on her shoulder and squeezed it in comfort. Or perhaps in understanding. Rather than removing her hand after the consolement had ended, she let it rest there. Hope really didn’t mind. It comforted her and she was able to finish the chapter she needed to read for class. She pretended it took longer to read than it did though, because she thought that once she moved to put that book away and grab some more homework; that Josie would stop touching her. And as much as she hated to need anything from anyone, she definitely felt herself needing Josie’s physical touch to ground her lately.

Eventually, Josie must have finished what she was working on, because she adjusted herself on Lizzie’s bed and her hand dropped from Hope’s shoulder. Hope took that opportunity to replace the book she was reading with another textbook.

“Oh! I can’t believe I completely failed to mention that MG and I came up with an awesome plan. I’m so excited!” Hope said as she turned to face the twins.

They tilted their heads in unison and stared at her with interest.

“We were sparring together while I was waiting for you to finish up your appointment and we got to talking...Josie, you know how you said you wanted to be able to fight your own battles rather than relying on someone else to fight for you or wait for them to save you?”

Josie nodded and Lizzie looked at her sister with a crestfallen expression on her face, but she didn’t say anything.

“I’m going to teach you both self defense! Penelope too. Martial arts strikes, but also escaping and eluding, chokeholds, arm bars, wrist locks, you name it! You’ll be the most badass witches out there.”

Both girls grinned excitedly at the thought.

“MG and Rafael are going to help. So you don’t have to worry about hurting any of us, you can do the full move with full power. It’s really the best way to practice. And I’ll also teach you some offensive magic. We’ll start small. I’ll show you not just how to defend yourself but also to fight back. Even some of the defensive spells can be used offensively if you aren’t worried about being too aggressive. Again, I think me and the boys can take it.” She looked hesitant for a moment. “We won’t do full power on magic...because that’s more dangerous. But yeah, at the very least it will make you more confident to face whatever might be coming after all of us next.”

Hope was honestly really grateful that the twins seemed so excited and easily on board with the idea. Sure, she wanted to prepare them for any monster that was out there lurking ready to destroy the school or the world. But she also wanted to give them the tools to be able to fight for themselves not just against monsters...she wanted to protect them from demons of their own making. If they stopped feeling like victims, if they stopped being always on the defensive and started to anticipate and strike first, if they gained confidence in themselves and in all their strengths and virtues...then maybe they could get through their trauma and start to truly heal.

She knew she felt strongest when she hit something. It wasn’t that she was violent or even angry all that much anymore; but who didn’t like to feel powerful? Who didn’t want the opportunity to take their own life back? To take control when all you felt was out of control and powerless. She wanted that for them more than anything.

“Do we get to wear those wrappy things for our hands? The ones boxers use?” Lizzie asked.

“Wraps? Yes. If you want to.” Hope smirked at her. “I think I could even find you some hot pink
“Really?!?!?” Lizzie’s eyes lit up. “Or are you just teasing me?”

“Really.”

“I want blue ones.” Josie demanded. “And Penelope will want black.”

“Like her soul.” Lizzie deadpanned. Then she cracked a smile to assure them that she was kidding. Sort of.

“I promise I’ll have everything you need. I’ll just have my Aunt Rebekah pick them up before she comes tomorrow.”

“Rebekah Mikaelson is coming here?” Lizzie’s eyes widened.

Rebekah was a bit of a legend at the school. She was almost as notorious as Hope’s father was. If Niklaus Mikaelson was the villain in Alaric’s story. Rebekah Mikaelson was the villain in Caroline’s. Although, neither of them held a candle to Katherine Pierce. At least in Hope’s humble opinion.

“She’s coming to visit her niece, Lizzie. It’s a perfectly normal visit.” Josie tried to ease both Lizzie’s and Hope’s suddenly anxious moods.

“Oh, right.” Lizzie looked properly chastised. “Sorry, Hope. I’m sure your aunt is wonderful.”

Hope snorted. That was not the word one usually used to describe her Aunt Rebekah. But Hope loved her more than anything. She was always loving and nurturing and protective with Hope. It had been far easier to forgive and forget Rebekah’s torturous past than it had been for Hope to reconcile with her father’s. But she was getting there. At least she was trying.

“Just out of curiosity though, this whole training thing...have you run it by our dad?” Josie wondered.

Hope bit her lip nervously. Josie raised an eyebrow at her and shook her head ruefully. Lizzie clapped her hands and smirked darkly.

“That is so much better! I feel like Harry Potter starting up Dumbledore’s Army!!!” Lizzie shouted with glee.

Hope rolled her eyes. “You’re a twin, shouldn’t you be one of the Weasleys. Fred or George?”

“Ewww, no.”

Hope laughed loudly. Josie joined in as well.

“So...I guess this makes me Harry Potter?” Hope asked with continued amusement. All three of them were actual, honest to god witches, and they were talking about Harry Potter and it was really rather enjoyable.

“What? No, you’re Luna Lovegood. The crazy, weird loner who nobody ever understands why she’s part of the group--just that she is, and that she actually is very beneficial to them and probably saves their lives more than they ever knew.” Lizzie explained.

Hope stared at Lizzie with her mouth wide open. It wasn’t until Josie chuckled and pushed her sister playfully that Hope decided to respond.
“I don’t know how you were able to so skillfully insult me and compliment me in the same sentence.”

Lizzie shrugged. “It’s a gift.”

“Call it what you want. I’m actually kind of jealous.”

Lizzie smirked again. Then her eyes went wide as saucers again. “We need a super secret meeting place.”

“I was thinking the clubhouse.” Hope replied and smiled when Josie smiled at her softly for using the nickname.

“How do you know about the clubhouse?” Lizzie wondered as she looked between Josie and Hope.

“Come on, Lizzie. Everyone knows about the clubhouse. You threw several parties there.” Josie redirected the conversation. Or at least attempted to.

“But no one knows it’s called the clubhouse.” Lizzie pouted.

“I told Hope. It’s no big deal.” Josie admitted.

“But it is. You know what happened there.” Lizzie whispered.

“I do. And now so does she.” Josie told her sister quietly.

Lizzie’s gaze fell to Hope’s and saddened. “I really am sorry about your dad, Hope. I never told you that before...but I always felt bad for what we had to do.”

“I know. And I never blamed you.”

Lizzie nodded. “It’s just...that place is our entire childhood. It was our Narnia, and our Secret Garden, and the Hundred Acre Wood. It was whatever we needed it to be. And whatever we wanted it to be. It’s sacred.”

Hope reached out to touch Lizzie’s hand in reverence. “I know. I don’t plan to take that away from you...I just...I would like to share it with you. If you’ll let me.”

Lizzie stared at Hope’s hand on hers and smiled sadly. “I wish we would have shared it with you back then...back when we all needed it the most. None of us are as innocent as we used to be, it would have been nice to hang on to that a little longer. Together.”

“Hey...let’s not dwell on what we can’t change. Clean slate, remember. Now instead of all those cool enchanted places...the clubhouse gets to be the Room of Requirement. How badass is that?”

Lizzie and Josie’s both grinned. Then Josie set her hand on top of Hope’s and the three of them shared a moment. It was as if for just a moment, history had been re-written and three young girls were charting their next big adventure. Where they fought imaginary monsters not real ones. Where they got to save a whole enchanted kingdom, or discover a secret place, or have tea with imaginary friends, or whatever their innocent young minds could conjure up. It was as if, for a moment, the outside world couldn’t touch them; because they had each other and that was all that mattered. It was the way it should have been, had they each been brave enough to let each other in rather than scared little girls who hid behind cruel words and sometimes cruel actions. It was a moment that Hope would never admit that she always wanted to experience. It was perfect.
Even after everything, these two were her best friends. They were basically her family. They spent half their lives together. And even though she never liked to think about it, or admit it...a lot of who she was hadn’t come from her hybrid absentee father, or her perfect werewolf mother, or anyone else she shared actual blood with. The best parts of herself were what she learned, here at this school. These girls shaped her; for better or worse.

From them, she learned the importance of friendship. She learned the virtues of forgiveness and quiet bravery. She learned the triumph of healing from past trauma. She learned strength through compassion. She learned the power of perseverance. She learned that silence is loud. And that you don’t need to speak to be heard. She learned about unconditional love. And most importantly, she learned that found family was just as significant, meaningful and necessary as blood family. Sometimes, moreso.

She knew without a doubt, she would kill for these girls. And she would die for these girls. But she realized just as suddenly, that she would much rather live for them. She also knew that she would do everything in her power to make sure that they lived, too. Because to live forever in a world without the twins was a hell all of its own. And despite always thinking herself a soulless being who was too evil for hell to contain her...the actual thought of hell was quite terrifying.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Josie asked kindly.

“I think these thoughts might be worth a little more than that.” Hope replied.

Josie patted Hope’s hand then maneuvered herself so that she sat on the bed and directly faced Hope. “Wanna talk about it?”

“Do you think monsters have souls?”

“Monsters? No.” Josie leaned down toward Hope and kissed her forehead innocently. “It’s lucky for you, none of us are monsters.”

Hope smiled at her and nodded.

“You...you weren’t wondering for yourself were you?” Lizzie asked. “If so, then Josie’s right...you’re not a monster, Hope. At all.”

“Thanks. I know. It’s just sometimes….”

“Sometimes you fall back into those old habits and thinking traps and you feel like your trauma and everything is so raw and...and you know you’re healing and you know that that little voice inside is wrong when it tells you that you aren’t good enough...that you aren’t worth it...but some days are harder than others.” Josie said quietly. “It doesn’t mean that you haven’t made progress. It doesn’t mean that you failed. It just reminds us that healing is a process. And it’s more like a marathon...not a sprint. So we have to pace ourselves to get to the finish line.”

Hope planned to unpack the first part of Josie’s comment later, because she really wanted to understand the other girl’s headspace. But her description of the marathon versus sprint made her smile, because she had heard something similar before.

“So, you really did meet with Emma today.”

Josie blushed. “She had some nice things to say. It was very helpful. I plan to see her every other day for a while. I think that’s best. So does she.”

Lizzie leaned into her sister and kissed her bare knee. Absent-mindedly Hope wished she could do
the same thing. Then she violently shook her head to erase those thoughts from her mind.

“You okay there?” Lizzie wondered as she was still pressed up against her sister.

“I’m fine.”

“I’m glad Emma was able to help you a little.” Hope admitted.

“Yeah, I’m proud of you for taking that step. Self-care is important.” Lizzie told Josie; then she looked at Hope. “I’ve been talking to Emma since the beginning of the school year. I had a lot of baggage even before all the recent stuff happened. I’ll admit, I hadn’t really taken much of her advice to heart before...but I’m seeing things in a new light now. Like people say, you can’t help someone who won’t help themselves. I think I’m actually ready to hear what she’s been trying to tell me.”

“Well, in that case, I’m proud of you, too.” Hope told her honestly.

Lizzie beamed with pride.

They eventually got started on their homework again, and finally finished it around nine.

“I call the shower first.” Lizzie announced after she put her stuff away. “Josie usually takes hers in the morning. So you can go after me if you want, Hope.”

Hope was confused. Lizzie just assumed she was staying overnight again? She had actually worked out a schedule for the three of them as if this was a normal, everyday thing. Okay, she had stayed overnight the last few days, but did that automatically mean it became an expectation? Not that she minded. She just was curious.

“You don’t have to stay.” Josie told her. She must have sensed her hesitation. “You didn’t get the chance to run tonight, so I know you might need to.”

Hope shook her head. “No, I got a good workout in with MG, I’ll be fine tonight.”

Josie nodded. “Then if you do want to stay...you can always borrow some of my pajamas. You must get sick of sleeping in your jeans?”

Hope shrugged. She didn’t usually care what she slept in. But she had to admit that a pair of warm, comfortable pj’s that just happened to belong to Josie did sound quite enticing.

“I’ll stay. And I could use something to sleep in.” She smiled at Josie and then addressed Lizzie. “And I’ll leave early again, like this morning, and shower in my room. But thanks for the offer.”

Lizzie excused herself to shower. Josie dug out some clothes for Hope to wear. Then they looked at each other awkwardly as they realized that Lizzie took the bathroom and now they were left either to stay in their clothes until she was done or change in the same room with each other.

“I guess we can just change together, right?” Hope offered. “It’s no different than when I transform with you around.”

Josie nodded as if that just occurred to her as well. “Right. So...we just...” She made a circle with her finger indicating that they each turn around. So they did.

Hope took her time changing because she didn’t want to beat Josie and then be left listening to the sounds of the brunette changing. She was already far more attuned to what she was doing that she wanted to be.
“I’m done.” Josie said after a few minutes so Hope quickly finished up as well.

“Me too.”

Josie grabbed Hope’s handful of clothes from her and gently folded them before delicately placing them on her desk. While she did so, Hope set her alarm for the morning. She waited for Josie to climb in bed first, then she crawled in after her. It had become sort of a routine for them by now, so they were comfortably cuddled up in no time.

“Before we go to sleep...I just have to say...I wanted to tell you…” Hope found Josie’s hand and held it firmly in her own. “You are enough Josie. You always have been. I told you I’d remind you if you needed to hear it and I always will. But you really are so much better than you know.”

Josie’s sharp intake of breath caused Hope to worry. But then she spoke quietly so Hope listened.

“I appreciate that. Thank you.” Josie looked straight into her eyes. “I also wanted to say that I’m sorry I kissed you.”

Hope frowned. “You don’t need to apologize for that, Josie. You were upset, I know that you didn’t mean it.”

“That’s the thing. I was talking to Emma...and...I need to tell you why...she got me to realize...I kissed Penelope when I was in distress after the whole...incident. And then, when I was having a nightmare and you helped me...I kissed you.”

“Yeah. I said I get it.” Hope frowned. She didn’t need Josie to tell her how little it meant to her.

“But how could you? I didn’t even really understand until today.” Josie situated herself so she was hovering over Hope and looked directly at her.

Hope stopped breathing for a moment.

“Emma and I were discussing my thoughts...the moments that led me right up to it and...” Josie sighed and her expelled breath on Hope’s face caused the tribrid to shiver. “I was absolutely traumatized. I told you what my dreams are about. But...I never actually told you the thoughts I had while I was lying under the ground...buried alive...and I thought I was about to die...”

Hope could tell how upset Josie was getting just talking about it. She brought her hands up to the girl and ran them up and down Josie’s arms. She tried to ground her. To comfort her.

“I was...I actually didn’t feel anything at all. I was terrified at first, but after so long underground...I was so sure that no one would find me. That no one would even notice I was gone until it was too late. And so I guess I just gave up. Until I stopped being scared...until I just felt nothing. I was empty, Hope. Completely and utterly devoid of any emotion. I resolved myself to that shallow grave. I tried to find peace and just let go…”

Hope’s eyes widened at the implication, and then without her control she started to weep. She hated herself in that moment, because Josie was the one who should be crying now. Not her. She was supposed to be the strong one for Josie. But she only just realized how truly close she had come to losing her, and that was before she ever really had her in her life to begin with.

“But then you guys found me. You saved me. And I should have felt relief. Or happiness. Or even residual anger or fear. But still, I felt nothing but empty. And so when I saw Penelope, I still wanted to be mad at her. To hate her. To thank her. To forgive her. I wanted to feel something other than emptiness. So I kissed her.”
Hope’s tears were falling at a steady stream now. She gripped Josie’s arms just to ground herself this time. She gripped them hard enough to remind herself that Josie was real. That she was here. But she was careful enough to not hurt the girl. To give Josie room to move or pull away if she wanted to.

“And I had a nightmare...about disappearing. About once again falling into that vast nothingness. And I wanted more than anything not to feel empty again. And I didn’t, not really. But I was still scared. I never want to feel like that again. So I kissed you. And I’m sorry that I used you. I’m sorry that I may have made you uncomfortable. But it happened. And I did feel better in that moment. So I’m not sorry about that. If that’s okay.”

“It’s okay.” Hope breathed out shakily.

“I can’t promise that I won’t have bad reactions sometimes...or that I won’t be impulsive because I’m really struggling with that lately. But I do want to be mindful of the way that the things I do makes you feel.” Josie told her sincerely and deliberately. “I really do enjoy cuddling with you. In this form and as a wolf. It brings me comfort. And puts me at peace in a way that I don’t understand. But if you ever get uncomfortable or even just sick of it...please let me know. I’d rather find a different way to heal than to do so at your expense.”

Hope finally calmed down enough to answer properly. She took a few steady breaths to fully allow herself to process Josie’s words and how she wanted to respond to them. She tugged on Josie’s arms until she softly collapsed on top of her. Then she squeezed her tightly in a warm hug.

“Truthfully, Josie, I love you for everything you just said. Thank you for thinking about me and for explaining your reasoning and your headspace with me. I appreciate that you trust me enough to confide in me. But also, I will tell you unequivocally that I will never get sick of being around you in any capacity. Human or wolf form. I like cuddling with you as well. It also calms me more than I can understand, or even care to understand. Back when we first started talking, we vowed to work with each other...to help heal each other. You’re healing me just as much as I heal you, Josie. Your presence...it makes my entire day better. So...please never feel bad about needing me. Because I also need you.”

Josie smiled a watery smile as she wiped at her tear-filled eyes. Hope pulled her hand away.

“Let them fall, remember...it’s okay to cry.” She told her. Then kissed the hand that she was holding on to. “Is this okay?” She asked after.

Josie nodded as her smile widened. “It is.”

“You ground me. This right here. I think that’s the word you were searching for earlier. You didn’t just need to feel something other than emptiness...you needed to have something ground you to reality. To remind you that you are alive. That this is what’s real and all the other scary stuff. The bad stuff. The negative self talk. All of that is just your mind playing tricks on you.” She squeezed Josie’s hand. “But this is real. We’re real, Josie.”

Josie settled herself more comfortably against Hope and nuzzled her head under Hope’s chin. They lay in the serene stillness of the room. The lights were still on. The shower had just turned off. Yet they lay there unmoving. Before Lizzie had even finished in the bathroom, Josie had already fallen asleep. Lizzie came out of the room quietly and smiled at them. Hope smiled back. Lizzie moved silently around the room as she finished getting ready for bed.

“You’re really good with her. For her.” The blonde commented as she crawled into her own bed and pulled the blankets up to her chest.
“I try my best.”

“You could try half as hard, and still be twice the person she deserves.”

Hope rolled her eyes. “You’re underestimating her sister.”

“That was supposed to be a compliment you dumbass.”

Hope chuckled. “Well, in that case, thank you.”

Lizzie rolled her eyes this time and smirked at her. “See, that wasn’t so hard.”

“It was.”

Lizzie’s grin turned into a full-fledged smile. “I really am glad we’re friends, Mikaelson.”

“Me too, Saltzman. Me too.”

Lizzie turned over and clicked off the light thrusting the room into total darkness. Hope patiently waited for soft snores to drift from Lizzie’s side of the room, before she carefully dislodged herself from Josie’s grasp and snuck toward the bathroom door. She turned on the light and left the door cracked open. Then she climbed back in bed, tucked herself back into Josie and fell asleep with contentment.

xxxxxxx

Penelope took a seat across from Hope and the twins at breakfast.

“MG told me that you’re going to teach us self defense and offensive magic. I cannot tell you how excited I am right now.” Penelope announced as soon as she sat down. “I could almost kiss you.” Then she smirked at Hope, puckered her lips and blew her a kiss.

Hope blushed at the action and Josie watched the interaction intently before ducking her own head shyly. Lizzie practically guffawed.

“Now isn’t that just perfect. You know what they say, polyamory is for everyone.”

Hope frowned. “I don’t think anyone actually says that.”

“And besides, Hope’s straight.” Josie added helpfully.

This time it was Penelope who laughed out loud. “Oh, please, this girl is about as straight as I am. Or you for that matter.”

Josie studied Hope with confusion and hurt on her face. “Is that true? Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I didn’t say anything because I have no clue what I am and no one else should be able to label me without my consent.” Hope glared at both Lizzie and Penelope before her face softened and she turned to face Josie. “I would never hide something about myself from you. And I know you’d never judge me for it. But what exactly was I supposed to say? Hey, on top of being the only tribrid in existence, I thought I’d make it even harder on myself and suddenly question my sexuality.”
Josie shrugged. “You don’t owe me an explanation, or anyone...I just thought...I mean, if you are questioning, it’s helpful to have someone to talk to about it. It’s not like Penelope and I haven’t both been there. We could listen.” Josie told her thoughtfully and smiled at her sadly. Then her eyes widened. “I certainly probably didn’t make things easier for you by kissing you. Sorry.”

“Wait. What now?” Lizzie gawked at them.

“Huh.” Penelope stared at them with equal amount of interest and surprise.

“Huh, what?” MG asked when he and Rafael sat down.

“Nothing!” All four girls replied in unison.

The boys looked at each other and then shrugged.

“I’m excited about tomorrow. What kind of martial arts do you know? I have a background in boxing and I’ve done some Aikido if any of that’s helpful.” Rafael supplied helpfully.

“That’s actually great. Anything you can bring to the table is helpful.” Hope told him. “I’m really excited about it as well. My aunt can probably show us a few tricks too, while she’s here. She’s definitely had to get out of some pretty sticky situations.”

“Freya? I’m sure she has all kinds of magic she can teach us!” Penelope asked.

“Rebekah, actually.”

Lizzie and MG shifted uncomfortably in their seats while Rafael looked at them with confusion. “Is that bad? Is she bad?”

“It’s not bad. Rebekah is just...a legend. You have to introduce me.” Penelope demanded. “I’m kind of a fan.”

“You would be.” Lizzie groaned.

“Don’t be a hater. I think she was horribly misunderstood. But she was also powerful and vengeful and fashionable and ruthless...like I said, I’m a fan.”

Hope smiled at Penelope with amusement. “I’m sure she’d love to meet someone who admires her rather than despises her.”

“I want to meet her too.” Josie told her. “She’s your family, right. I want to know her.”

Hope’s smile deepened. “Ok. We’ll meet by the staircase after final period. I’ll introduce you when she gets here.”

“Perfect.” Penelope replied with contentment.

“As for our training, tomorrow at noon, right? At the place in the woods.” MG said when a comfortable silence overtook the group. “Raf and I can bring some matts out there before hand, and some focus mitts and stuff.”

“Sounds great.” Hope responded with a grin. “I think I can also borrow some eskrima practice sticks as well. We have some in the gym that no one but me and Alaric use.”

“Stick fighting, hell yeah!” MG high fived Rafael.
“You mean...I get to hit one of these idiots with a stick, sign me up.” Penelope grinned.

“I call training with Hope. I suddenly feel the need to use violence.” Lizzie muttered which caused Josie to frown and Hope’s posture to stiffen.

MG shook his head. “Dude, I will never understand girls.”

“Yeah, well, try dating them.” Penelope replied.

“Oooh burn!” Raf stuck out his hand for a high five.

MG slapped at him, and glared at Penelope. “That wasn’t just an insult against me for not having a girl, you do remember who your last girlfriend was, right?”

The witch’s eyes widened. “That was not meant to be about you at all, Josie.”

Josie forced a smile. “But I wasn’t the best girlfriend, was I?” Then she grabbed her tray and stood up. “Besides, I can take a joke. You don’t all have to always treat me like I’m about to break any second. I’m sick of everyone walking on eggshells with me all the time.”

She walked away and Hope stood up to follow her, but Lizzie stopped her. “Please let me go. I’ll talk to her.”

Hope nodded reluctantly and watched as the blonde ran off after her sister. She startled when she felt a hand on hers and looked up to see Penelope looking at her with compassion.

“Hey...Josie will be okay. She has nightmares and outbursts and that is all to be expected with what she went through. If she didn’t, then I’d be worried. You know?”

Hope smiled softly at her. “You’re right. It’s just…”

“That you want to protect her from ever feeling bad or sad ever again.”

“Something like that.”

Penelope rolled her eyes with mirth. “And to think that she had no clue that you bat for our team.”

Hope pulled her hand away and sighed. “Yeah, well, the way she reacted I really don’t think she feels the same. Which is stupid because I have no idea what the hell I’m feeling anyway, so it shouldn’t matter.”

“Her reaction was one of surprise, not disgust. Do you really think Josie would be capable of hating anyone? I mean...she’s even given me a second chance.”

“How could Josie disapprove of you being bisexual if she already is anyway?” Rafael asked.

“I’d assume it’s more like a...wow, how’d I miss that?” MG offered. “Like aren’t you all supposed to have a secret handshake or head nod or something?”

Penelope slapped him in the back of his head. “Hope doesn’t know the secret handshake yet. She’s still figuring it all out.”

“I...shut up.” Hope defended lamely.

“It’s not like you need to know everything right this minute anyway. So, you like Josie. That’s all that has to matter. Labels can come later.” Rafael told her reassuringly.
"It’s not like...that. I don’t…” She sighed. “How many times do I keep having to tell you all that we’re just friends anyway?”

Penelope shrugged. “Maybe until you actually believe it.”

“I hate you.” Hope growled which only caused the three people at the table to laugh at her.

She stood up. “See you at lunch.”

Lunchtime didn’t come as quickly as Hope wanted it to. She needed to make sure that Josie was okay after her brief outburst at breakfast. Lizzie had texted her during second period to tell her that things were fine. But she still had to see it for herself to believe it.

When they were all sitting together at the table, Josie addressed the group.

“I owe you all an apology. I don’t even know why I was so upset this morning. I just haven’t been feeling myself today and well, I talked to Emma earlier. She said that these things take time, which I know. But she said that it’s important that I feel safe enough to express myself...even when I don’t do it the right way. She said that when I stop hiding my emotions and start to process or analyze them...then eventually I can respond to situations more appropriately. So, I guess...I just want to thank you all for being patient with me and for providing me with a space that I do feel safe in. Or as safe as possible given the circumstances.”

They all hugged her and waved off her apology. But they also made sure to acknowledge that they heard what she had to say and let her know that everything she felt was valid, but they agreed that she did have to work on expressing those feelings in better ways. Because that’s what friends do, Hope learned. They had each other’s back, for all things big and small. And they didn’t judge. And sometimes they fought, but it was always from a place of love.

Hope walked with Josie to class. “Before you say anything...you kissing me did not at all affect my sudden identity crisis. Okay? That’s not on you. And for the record, I think I do like girls. I’m pretty sure of it. So...maybe the kiss helped me to discover that side of myself. If so, I guess I owe you a thank you.”

Josie remained silent during Hope’s admission as they walked leisurely to class. When they got to the classroom, the brunette stopped and faced Hope.

“My reaction this morning was in no way a dismissal of your revelation or even a rejection of that part of you.” She touched Hope’s wrist, the one with the bracelet. “I meant it when I told you that I respect and accept every part of you. This recent self discovery is just another aspect of that.” She kissed Hope’s wrist, then smiled at her. “I adore everything about you, Hope Mikaelson. And I love to learn each new thing and anything you’re willing to share with me. But also...I never want you to feel like you’re obligated to tell me anything. Keeping parts of yourself to yourself...it isn’t lying, Hope. Remember that. We’re both entitled to our own thoughts and feelings, and whether or not we do share them with each other or anyone...they are still valid regardless.”

Hope took a shaky breath as she nodded in agreement. “I know. But I like you knowing things about me.” She frowned. “I like being the one to share them with you though...I didn’t like beingouted without my consent.”

Josie nodded rapidly. “I told Lizzie that. Yelled at her actually. And I plan to have a stern talking with Penelope as well.”

“You don’t have to do that. I appreciate it. And I understand that they didn’t mean any harm. I just...I
wanted to be the one who tells you things about myself...when I’m ready to do so.”

The bell rang while they both stood there staring at each other.

“Shit.” Hope muttered.

“You think you’ll get detention?”

“Honestly, I don’t care.”

“Me either.”

Josie hugged Hope to her chest and whispered in her ear. “I’m proud of you, Hope. And even though it wasn’t how you wanted it to happen, or when...I want to say that you trusting us with this...you’ve come a long way. And yeah, I’m really proud.”

“Thank you.”

They parted ways and Hope didn’t even bother to sprint to her classroom. She walked in with an apology on her lips and received her detention with grace. Detention was a small price to pay for Josie’s acceptance of her.

When Hope finished her last class, she wandered towards the stairs to where she told Josie and Penelope to meet her. As she approached, she saw her Aunt Rebekah and Alaric exit his office. She practically ran to greet her aunt. The blonde smiled fondly when she saw her.

“Hey. I’m happy to see that the two of you didn’t kill each other.” She commented after she hugged her aunt in greeting.

“Yeah, I had to keep Caroline away for the afternoon.” Alaric responded with a grin.

“Ah, that girl is like an elephant. Never forgets, always holds grudges.” Rebekah replied as she thrust a paper bag toward Hope. “I got all your stuff. It was quite the unique shopping list.”

Hope glanced through it with a smile. It seemed to all be there. “Thanks.”

Rebekah raised an eyebrow. “And are you going to tell me why I felt like a deranged Martha Stewart shopping for all that?”

“The wraps are for boxing.”

“I gathered that much. It was the arts and crafts that I had trouble figuring out.”

“I’ll explain later.” Hope told her with a blush. “I actually need to introduce you to a few people who really want to meet you.”

Alaric raised his eyebrows in surprise and Rebekah regarded her skeptically.

“It’ll be fine, I promise.” Hope said as she grabbed her aunt’s hand and led her away before Alaric could ask too many questions.

“I’m not worried about myself. I may have taken the cure and am fully human now...but I still am very capable of taking care of myself.”

“Sure? Then why do you seem more worried than I do?” Hope asked with a raised eyebrow as they neared their destination.
“If they are friends of yours...that’s a really big deal, Hope...and I...I want them to like me.”

Hope softened at that. Penelope had been right in her description before. Her aunt was powerful and ruthless...but she was also so completely understood. Maybe that was the true Mikaelson family trait...the fear of not being truly accepted for who or what you are; the desire to belong, and the longing for someone to simply love and understand you. Rebekah had that down in spades. And as far as Hope could tell, so did her father. Those seemed to be the root feelings behind all their anger and aggression. And if Hope was being honest with herself, she also unequivocally felt the same so deeply.

Josie and Penelope stood at the stairwell chatting amicably with each other.

“Hey guys!” Hope announced when they arrived.

The two brunette’s greeted her with identical smiles, and then their eyes fell on Rebekah and both of their mouths dropped open in shock.

“You’re really pretty.” Josie whispered in awe.

“Like really pretty.” Penelope re-iterated with a firm nod of her head.

Rebekah, for her part, smiled widely and genuinely at them. “Well aren’t you both just lovely.”

Hope cleared her throat awkwardly. “Anyway, this is my Aunt Rebekah, as you know. And Rebekah, these are my friends. Josie and Penelope.”

Both girls wordlessly and awkwardly waived at her.

Rebekah eyed them thoughtfully. “Josie?”

“Yes?”

“You’re one of Caroline’s. You don’t look anything like her.”

“She’s not...I mean...it’s a long story, but Caroline isn’t my biological mom.”

“Oh, well, isn’t that wonderful.” Rebekah replied happily. “I mean, not that it would be a bad thing...it’s just…”

“You and my mom weren’t exactly BFFs. I get it.” Josie admitted with a small smile.

Rebekah actually smiled at the response. “You do know how to sugarcoat something, don’t you? You must not take after your dad either.”

“Not really, no. I’m sort of the black sheep of the family.”

“Which is their loss, I’m sure.” Rebekah told her kindly. “I know a little bit about that. I always had a soft spot for black sheep.”

They stood awkwardly in silence for a moment. Then Rebekah turned her attention toward Penelope. “And you...what’s your story?”

“Not nearly as interesting, I assure you. I’m just a witch. My parents both suck. I’m Josie’s ex. Which I can assure you was entirely my fault and something I regret daily.” Penelope’s eyes widened. “I didn’t mean to say that last part out loud. I’m just so nervous. I’m a huge fan of yours!”
Hope laughed at Penelope’s discomfort, Josie blushed and Rebekah took it all in with amusement.

“I think I would have enjoyed this school...in another lifetime.” She mused with fascination. “Tell me, do you have a cheerleading squad here?”

“Of course we do.” Penelope told her as if she was offended. She probably was.

“Yes, I would have really liked it here.” She turned to Hope. “With such scintillating entertainment...no wonder you refuse to visit me as often as I suggest.”

“Yeah, well, it’s still school and as fun as it would be to travel around Europe with you, I do have obligations here.”

“Obligations.” She glanced at the witches. “If you say so.”

“Ok! Well, I promised an introduction and now that the promise was kept...we’re just going to…” She pointed up the stairs awkwardly and left without a proper goodbye. She did glance behind her to ensure that her aunt was following her though.

When they got up to Hope’s room, Hope slammed the door shut forcefully. “That was mortifying. I hope I still have friends tomorrow.”

“Oh, come on. They loved me.”

Hope sat down on her bed and busied herself with studying the contents of the grocery bag Rebekah brought her.

“Are you ever going to tell me what all that stuff was for?” Rebekah asked as she walked over to Hope and pulled out the box of Valentine’s Day cards she brought. “I mean, seriously? Have you ever actually read these things before? They’re so cheesy. And besides, it’s like weeks away and you have monsters chasing you and you started the apocalypse...do you really have time to ask someone…” She squinted as she read the back of the box. “Yoda one for me….I don’t get it.”

“You got Star Wars cards, it’s just. Nevermind.” Hope pulled the box out of her grip. “It’s not about that. It’s...I’m making up for lost time. And if the world is about to end and all that..I guess, I just want to enjoy it all as much as I can. I thought you of all people would appreciate that. What good is immortality if you have to spend it alone and miserable?”

Rebekah shook her head. “You grew up to be a right cheeky pain in the ass, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, well, it’s inherited on my dad’s side.” Hope smirked at her.

“He’d be proud of you, you know.” Rebekah sighed thoughtfully. “I know I am. It only took you seventeen years to figure out something it took us centuries to learn.”

“Thank you.” Hope told her and then hugged her without hesitation.

“Woah, what was that for?”

“I did really miss you.”

“Even if I embarrassed you in front of your girlfriends?” Rebekah asked as she pulled away.

“You didn’t really. It’s just…” Hope rolled her eyes. “And they’re not my girlfriends.”

“You don’t have to explain things to me right now. We have time.” Rebekah pulled out a few more
things from the bag. “And it seems we have a few crafts to do.”

Hope smiled. “We’re making friendship bracelets.”

“What? Why?”

“I thought I didn’t have to explain everything to you right now.” Hope replied with a grin and a wink.

“Cheeky bastard.” Rebekah responded with an eyeroll. “Just as arrogant and obnoxious as Niklaus.”

Hope blushed at that. Maybe it wasn’t meant as a compliment, but she took it as one. She knew how much Rebekah adored her brother, so any comparison to him must have been intended with at least some bit of fondness.

They spent time youtubing how to make bracelets and cursed to themselves when it was actually harder than it seemed. Hope toyed with her own bracelet thoughtfully as she took a break out of frustration.

“So...can we talk about stuff now? Like who your bracelet is from? And why you actually have to make one in return when we could go on an actually fun shopping trip and buy her a gold one. Or silver if she prefers. Or both, because it’s better than spending hours on this ridiculously stupid gesture.”

Hope glanced at her aunt. “I know you talked to Aunt Freya...you had to, otherwise why would you be here?”

“I resent that.”

“I know she told you about Josie and the whole charm and then the astral projection thing. So instead of beating around the bush, why don’t you just ask me what you actually want to ask me?”

Rebekah softened at that. Then she set her mangled attempt at a bracelet down on the desk and walked over to Hope. She sat on the bed beside her.

“I just came to check on you. To check in. Freya mentioned Josie, yes. And...I wanted to see for myself that she was good enough for my favorite niece.”

“Your only niece.”

“Yeah. But really, she seems nice. Freya filled me in on recent events and that sucks, I’m sorry. It has to be rough on her. But if you like her...why go through all the trouble of making a bracelet and buying stupid, cheesy cards? Why not just tell her?”

“We’re just friends. That’s what we both really need right now. Everything else can be sorted out later. The bracelets are...I was making them for her and Lizzie. I planned on finding a protection spell...and after getting their permission...I just...” She fidgeted with her almost finished attempt. “Something is happening to both of them and I’m hoping these would protect them. With the spell and the magic attached to it...they would have access to the use of magic whenever they needed it. That on top of teaching them self defense and offensive magic...it should give them the best chance.”

Rebekah’s eyebrows furrowed in thought. “They’re in danger. From what?”

“I don’t know.”
“Why do witches need access to magic?”

“They are siphons. They don’t have their own magic per say but…”

The blonde nodded. “It could work, I suppose.”

They were silent for a moment. “And the Valentine’s cards? Why a whole box?”

“The box is for all of my friends. The rest of the art supplies you brought is for a homemade one I plan to make for Josie. She’s the only one who ever gave me a card. She has every single year. And I never gave her, or anyone, one in return. I have friends now. I just…it’s about time I start to act like I actually care about them.”

Rebekah nodded. “Sorry I gave you a hard time.”

“It’s okay. I’m used to it. Lizzie and Penelope are the worst.”

“Is Penelope going to be a problem? I could handle her if you need it.”

Hope chuckled. “Penelope’s fine. We’re friends. And so are she and Josie.”

“Are she and Josie just friends like you and Josie are?”

“Shut up!”

They silently went back to work on the bracelets again. This time Rebekah took more care and deliberation with her attempt now that she knew how truly important it was to her niece.

“These aren’t just for their protection, are they?” She asked after a few minutes. “It’s you admitting to them that you really care. That you care enough. That you claim them as your friends.”

“Something like that.”

“Should we make one for Penelope as well? Since she’s your friend, too?”

Hope nodded at the thought. “If we can ever get these two right, yeah, we’ll make her one.”

“And can I have one, too? I never had someone make me something like this before. It’s really thoughtful.” Rebekah asked in such a shy way that it was hard to believe she was ever capable of being the vile monster many still feared her to be.

“Yes, I’ll make you one.” Hope smiled. “When Josie gave me mine...I was so touched that she took the time to make it. But had I known how difficult it would be, I think I would have been even more impressed.”

The blonde laughed.

“She...she made it for me and gave me this charm to go with it.” She reached over to better show her aunt. “It’s just my initial...but, she told me that she accepted every part of me. That I was not a monster to her. That I would always just be Hope, and that that would always be enough.”

Rebekah glanced at the bracelet and then looked directly into Hope’s eyes. “Okay, I have decided that I wholeheartedly approve. She’s a keeper.”

“I appreciate that. But like I said, friends first.”
“I get that. But also...don’t waste too much time fighting your nature, Hope. Eventually, you have to let yourself be happy. Don’t let fear or excuses keep you from what you really want. I almost lost everything making that mistake. I don’t want that for you.”

“Thank you.”

They finally finished their bracelets with satisfaction, then Rebekah took Hope out to the Mystic Grill for a late dinner. They had burgers and milkshakes and talked about things far less dramatic and sad. They talked about places Rebekah had recently traveled to. She filled them in on what Davina and Kol were up to. Hope showed her aunt the most recent pictures she took of her little cousin the previous weekend.

“Oh, he’s so cute!” Rebekah cooed. “I’m planning to drop in to visit them when I leave here. It’s been too long, I miss my family.”

“Then why don’t you come back home?”

“Where’s home, Hope? New Orleans...or your school?”

Hope shrugged. “I don’t know anymore. I feel at home in both places. And as much as you’re going to pick on me for it... lately, I feel most at home with Josie.”

Rebekah raised an eyebrow, but said nothing in response.

“At first I thought that the charm I put on her talisman had been exaggerating or manipulating our emotions. But with the charm removed, I can’t blame it on that any more.”

“Maybe a different magic is at play. You did say you were worried about the twins.”

“Yeah.” Hope took a sip of her milkshake. Her favorite, just the way she liked it. “It’s just...when I’m in wolf form it seems so natural to be around her. To have her pet me and hold me. I feel calmer than I’ve ever been.”

“Wolf form? She’s seen you as a wolf.”

“Well, yeah.”

“And...you’re calm? You didn’t harm her or feel the urge to harm her?”

“Not even a little.”

Rebekah set her napkin on her empty plate and studied her niece. “What possessed you to even try? That’s quite the risk.”

“It wasn’t like it was intentional. I was out for a run and Josie...I smelled her in the woods. So I went to check on her. She was having a breakdown. She was sitting by the grave….her grave.” She waited for that fact to register with Rebekah and knew it had when the blonde mouthed an ‘Oh’. “So anyway, I wanted to comfort her. I wanted to protect her. So I went to her. And she wasn’t scared of me. Instead...it made it easier. Like she could talk and not be interrupted or judged. She could just be herself and she could just cry. So I let her hold me. And soon, I was calm, too.”

“Huh.”

“Yeah.”

Silence befell them. The waiter came to clear their dishes away. They thanked him and asked for the
check. Then they waited for him to leave.

“Have you mentioned this to Freya?” Rebekah asked eventually.

“Are you kidding? And have her torment me endlessly about it. She already embarrassed me last weekend. I wasn’t looking forward to more of that.”

“But if it is something magical. Something supernatural affecting you. Or both of you.”

“The protection charm would cover all of that, yeah?”

“But don’t you want answers?”

“The only answer I need right now is whether or not whatever is affecting Lizzie and Josie is dangerous. I need to know how worried we have to be about it.”

“Beyond that?”

“One thing at a time right. I mean, after the twins thing...there is still the apocalypse thing. And if we survive both of those...then we can deal with the rest.”

Rebekah sighed. “And you don’t worry that it’s all connected? That the answer to one might be linked to the others.”

Hope hadn’t thought about it. “It certainly may make things easier if they are all connected.”

“Easier, that’s not the way I’d look at it.”

“Easier to figure out. Not easier to fix.”

“Right.”

“How much do you know about magic?” Hope asked. “Like if I told you what was going on with the twins...would you be able to help?”

“Magic isn’t my forte, I’d definitely go to Freya with any concerns. But I’m willing to listen, if you want to talk about it. It seems to really be bothering you.”

“We can talk about it later. We have all weekend. We should be getting back to the school before curfew.”

Hope and Rebekah got back to the school, put all the art supplies away and were lounging on Hope’s bed watching a stupid movie when Hope paused it and sat up suddenly.

“What is it?” Her aunt asked her with obvious concern.

“I think Josie’s in trouble.”
“You can hear her from here?”

Hope shook her head. “More like feel her.”

Rebekah’s eyes went wide. “Really?”

Hope was already off the bed, she quickly put her shoes on. “I’m just going to check on her. I’ll be right back.”

Hope rushed out the door and down the hallway. She approached the twins’ room and used magic to fling it open. She performed a quick spell to illuminate the room in light. Lizzie was hugging her sister as Josie struggled in her arms.

“It’s just a dream. I promise. I’m right here. You’re safe.” The blonde kept chanting reassuringly but it did nothing to ease the girl’s distress.

Hope rushed to them and wrapped her arms around Josie. She was sopping wet with sweat, so she wiped at her forehead gently.

“Josie....” She whispered. “Wake up.”

“She is awake. She’s just not snapping out of it.” Lizzie told her with worry.

“What happened?”

Lizzie stood up and started to pace. “She just woke up screaming. Like gasping for air. She was basically dry heaving. I hurried over to her, tried to calm her down. She’s just so terrified. Panicked. No...it feels more like...she’s in pain.”

Hope stared at her. “You can still feel her?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Do you remember...were you having a dream before she woke you up?”

Lizzie stopped pacing and stared at her. “How’d you know? I dreamed that it had been me buried alive. I thought...I thought I was going to die right before...but then she screamed and I woke up.”

Hope surveyed the room. “The lights were off.”

“Yeah, we were sleeping.”

“She doesn’t like it pitch dark in here. It scares her.”

Lizzie’s eyes widened. “I didn’t know.”

“It’s not your fault, Lizzie.” Hope told her gently. Then she pressed a kiss to Josie’s forehead. She was burning up. “Lizzie...go wake up Penelope and bring her to my room.”

Hope stood up and carried Josie out of the room and swiftly to her own. Rebekah was waiting for them and had the door open and Hope’s bed prepared. Hope lay the brunette on the bed and paced the room frantically.

“What happened?”

“It’s getting worse. Their link...they had the same dream or...Lizzie dreamt she was buried alive and
Josie woke up feeling like she had been. Or something...I really don’t know. Call Freya.”

Rebekah did as she was told.

Minutes later, Lizzie rushed in with Penelope. The brunette took one look at Josie’s appearance and her face turned ashen.

“What do you need me to do?”

“I’m not sure yet. I’m hoping that whatever it is my Aunt Freya can talk us through the magic parts...if it’s magic that’s causing this.”

“And if it’s not.” Penelope asked with worry.

“Let’s hope it is.”

“Should I get my parents?” Lizzie asked.

“Not right now. If Josie does come out of it...if it’s just an episode...the fewer people in the room the better.”

“Alright...should I put her on speaker phone...or do you want her to project herself here?” Rebekah asked with her hand over the microphone on her cell.

“Astral projection. I think she needs to see to walk us through it.”

Rebekah spoke quickly into her phone, and muttered a goodbye. “She said give her five minutes.”

“Lizzie go wet a washcloth with cold water, and fill up a glass of water while you’re at it.” Hope said as she slipped off her shoes and climbed in bed beside Josie.

She wrapped the girl in her arms and rocked them back and forth as she hummed softly in the girl’s ear.

Penelope grabbed the washcloth from Lizzy and placed it delicately on Josie’s forehead. “She’s burning up.”

“I know.”

Penelope stood beside Lizzie and took her hand in comfort. “She’s going to be okay. We’ll fix this. We won’t let anything happen to her.”

“But...what if…” Lizzie eyed Hope warily. “You think I caused this, don’t you?”

Hope shook her head. “I think your dreams are linked. But it’s not your fault. And we’ll figure out what’s causing it.”

Freya made everyone in the room jump when she appeared out of thin air. “Sorry.”

She walked over to the trembling brunette, and studied her closely.

“Do you feel magic coming off of her?” Rebekah asked suddenly. “If she doesn’t inherently have magic...then you should be able to feel it if it’s there.”

Hope realized what Rebekah was referring to. If she was able to feel Josie’s distress from down the hall, she certainly should be able to smell or sense if she was different than usual. Hope inhaled
deeply. Nothing. She rubbed her hands up and down Josie’s arms, to calm her but also to better sense her.

“She feels the same as always.”

“So what’s affecting her right now might not be magical.” Freya surmised.

“Bullshit.” She pointed to Lizzie. “She dreamt she was suffocating and Josie woke up not being able to breath. That has to be magic.”

Freya stared at Lizzie. Then she turned back to the other twin. “It might have been caused by something not from this world…but her distress right now is entirely human.”

“How can you be sure?” Penelope wondered.

“I can’t be, not really. Not without actually being there to see for myself.” Freya sighed. “But she’s calming down. I can see it. Can’t you feel it?”

And Hope did feel it. Josie’s breathing had slowed to a more natural rate, her heart was beating with in a normal rhythm. She was still on fire, and she was still unresponsive. But her vital signs were well within normal ranges now.

“She is easing out of it.” Hope admitted.

Freya redirected her attention at Lizzie. “Do your dreams usually affect each other so badly?”

The blonde shook her head. “I don’t…no, they don’t. But…she doesn’t sleep much, not these days. And if she is sleeping…it's usually a nap when I’m awake. We don’t typically fall asleep at the same time.”

Freya nodded. “Caroline’s a vampire, I thought. So do witches run on Alaric’s side of the family?”

“No. My biological mom, she was the witch. A powerful one. It ran in her family. She was a twin too.”

Freya didn’t say a word but glanced at Rebekah in a way that foretold the need for an adult only conversation in the very near future. Hope didn’t like that look.

“I think I’m going to do some research and touch base with you soon.” She said. Then she looked thoughtful again. “I can give you a quick calming spell for right now…to get her through the night.”

Lizzie and Penelope nodded at the offer. When Freya told them, Penelope performed it on the brunette and suddenly Josie was sleeping peacefully.

Freya excused herself and disappeared from the room.

“I wish I wasn’t in so much distress to fully appreciate what just happened. That was Freya Mikaelson.” Penelope said in subdued awe. “And she just used astral projection.”

“Let me guess, you’re a fan of hers as well.” Rebekah wondered.

“She’s pretty much a Mikaelson groupie.” Lizzie huffed before sitting on the bed next to her sister.

Rebekah smirked at the response, then she sighed regretfully. “I’m sorry we don’t know what happened…but we will figure it out. We won’t let anything happen to you or your sister.”
Lizzie looked at her gratefully. Then her head dropped as she stared at her sister with complete anguish. “I don’t want to leave her side for the night...but I’m scared of causing her to have another attack. I hate that I may be what’s wrong with her.”

Hope wished she had the proper words to comfort Lizzie, but she was at a loss. She was terrified for both of them.

“I could stay with you tonight, if you don’t want to be alone.” Penelope offered. “Hope can make sure Josie is safe, and I can keep you company. I doubt I’ll be able to sleep well anyway. After what just happened.”

Hope’s heart warmed at Penelope’s thoughtfulness. She really was trying to be a better friend. A better person. She idly was grateful that she had decided to make the witch a friendship bracelet after all. Which reminded her.

“Rebekah...could you grab the bracelets out of that bag over there?”

Her aunt’s eyes lit up at the suggestion and she hurried to get them proudly. She reverently grabbed two bracelets out of the bag and handed one to each of the girls. “We spent all afternoon trying to make these things.”

Lizzie’s eyes widened and Penelope stared in shock.

“You made us friendship bracelets, Mikaelson?” The blonde asked.

“I got the idea from Josie.” She raised her wrist to show them. “I actually...I thought about asking if it would be okay to put a protection spell on them. And after tonight...I think it would be a good idea.”

“That would be perfect.” Penelope replied.

“It would also give you magic to draw on Lizzie...if you ever need it.”

Lizzie smiled gratefully. “Thank you. This...I hope it helps.”

Rebekah went back to the bag wordlessly and grabbed the one meant for Josie. “I think...under the circumstances...she should be wearing hers as well.”

Hope nodded as she took the offered bracelet and placed it on Josie’s delicate wrist.

“Penelope...do you happen to know a protection spell off hand? A strong one?”

“I do.” She nodded.

Then she performed a quick enchantment on both her bracelet and Lizzie’s. She walked over to the bed and took Josie’s hand in her own, then she whispered the words with reverence. And, for good measure, she did the same with Hope’s.

“There, now that you all are guaranteed to be protected, we can officially call it a night. Yeah?” Rebekah said with a soft yawn.

“Sucks being human sometimes, huh?” Hope teased.

“Still beats the alternative.”

“What’s the alternative?” Penelope wondered.
“An immortal life of loneliness.”

Penelope nodded awkwardly. “That sounds miserable.”

“I didn’t have what Hope does.” The blonde told them seriously. “She’s got all of you. I just had my family, and they tried to kill me often.”

The young girls all shared a small, sad smile. They felt back for Rebekah. But they understood they had something special in their little group. It was their own version of a pack. And it ended up being pretty amazing.

They sat in a comfortable silence for a few more minutes before Lizzie was contented in knowing that her sister would be okay. Then she gave Josie a kiss on the forehead and hugged Hope as well. The tribrid tried to hide her surprise as she awkwardly hugged her back. Penelope also kissed Josie’s forehead, with a smirk on her face as she watched Hope watch her. Then, too quickly for Hope to react, she pecked Hope on the cheek. Then both witches were gone.

Rebekah laughed out loud as soon as the door closed behind them. “Oh, yes, that girl is definitely trouble.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“So tell me more about the twins. Do you know what coven they hail from?” Rebekah asked out of nowhere.

“No. How would I know that?”

The blonde raised an eyebrow in response.

“Okay...but I don’t know.” Hope replied defeatedly.

“I think that your little self defense class may be more important than ever.” Rebekah made up the extra bed and then crawled in and made herself comfortable. “I’ll talk some things through with Freya in the morning. See what she learned on her end.”

“Don’t you dare keep me out of the loop.” Hope growled.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

They left the light on as they both attempted to sleep for what was left of the night. Hope was too worried about what was to come to sleep much. But when the sun started to rise, and she knew Josie was safe for the night, she fell asleep out of pure exhaustion.

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Hope heard hushed conversation when she finally stirred awake. The first thing she registered was that she was alone in bed, and that the fact actually disappointed her. The second, was that there were far too many voices for her to try to follow the conversation with her eyes closed.

She groaned as she stretched out in her bed.
“Someone’s not a morning person.” Penelope stated with amusement.

Hope frowned. She had been sure that Penelope left with Lizzie last night. The tribrid finally opened her eyes to see Lizzie, Josie and Penelope sitting in a circle on the floor between the two beds with her Aunt Rebekah lounging on the bed across from her. She glanced at her phone for the time. It was one o’clock in the afternoon. Her eyes widened.

“Why’d you let me sleep so long?” She asked as she wiped at her still tired eyes and sat up in her bed.

“Figured today was bound to be another long day, so you could use the rest.” Rebekah told her. “Freya and Keelin are on their way.”

“What? Why?” Hope likely knew why. But if Freya found something helpful or important, why not just tell them? Why drive all the way? “And who’s watching baby Elijah?”

“Vincent is looking after him. But Marcel, Kol and Davina hopped on a plane this morning. They are all due to arrive in New Orleans later tonight.”

“So, we’re making this a whole family affair then.” Hope groaned at the thought. At least they were staying in New Orleans, that meant that they were coming as reinforcements, if needed, but that it wasn’t quite to that point just yet. That was somewhat comforting.

Hope climbed off the bed and sat on the floor beside Josie. Penelope scooted over a bit to let her in.

“How are you doing?” Hope asked Josie as she toyed with the bracelet on the other girl’s wrist. Then she glanced up at Lizzie to let the blonde know that the question had been directed at her as well.

“I think I’m doing better than Lizzie. I have no memory of last night. Rebekah filled me in when I woke up this morning. I was more than confused when I woke up in your bed.”

“I only let her stay confused for a little while.” Rebekah smirked at her niece. “Eventually, I took pity of the poor girl.”

“How kind of you.” Hope muttered with a glare.

“Rebekah was very helpful. She asked me about the dreams I’ve been having and we had a nice talk.”

“I’m sure you did.”

“It turns out we have a lot in common. I used to have tons of nightmares about being buried alive as well. Hazard of having vengeful siblings hellbent on murder.” Rebekah commented wistfully.

“You never did tell me how you dealt with it. Does it ever get better?” Josie wondered hopefully.

The older blonde shook her head. “I never found a cure for stopping the nightmares. The only silver lining I had was that I couldn’t actually die. That eventually I’d wake up.”

Both Lizzie and Josie frowned sadly at that.

“Did you end up getting any sleep?” Hope asked Lizzie directly this time.

“Not really. I’ve been running all possible scenarios in my head and can’t figure it out. Penelope and I even raided the library last night. We researched every monster that affects dreams or has the power
to control our dreams. There’s a dream demon that feeds on fears....but that didn’t explain how my
dreams linked to Josie’s. And the demon...he can trap you there...in that dream....that fear...and…”
She shivered violently. “I don’t think I ever want to sleep again.”

“The calming spell worked on Josie last night though...if your aunt is coming here, she could
probably help us all at least be able to sleep safely. And we have that protection spell now.”
Penelope added with forced optimism.

Hope glanced at Rebekah and noticed the anguished look that passed the blonde’s face. She knew
far more than she was saying, and Hope needed to know what it was.

“Well, we’re late for meeting the boys for training. Why don’t you three head on down there while I
get ready and I want to talk to Rebekah a minute before Aunt Freya gets here.”

Josie looked at her strangely. “Are you sure? We could just train tomorrow. I think we should further
discuss everything that is going on.”

Hope’s stomach coiled. She didn’t want to worry Josie until she knew what they were up against.
But she also refused to lie to her. She didn’t know what to do.

“I think that training is something that’s just as important as figuring it all out. You need to learn to
defend yourself against whatever is out there; it may take time to figure out who it is and why it’s
happening. So preparation is key.” Rebekah saved Hope from having to say anything further.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” Josie replied.

“The boys are already at the clubhouse with the matts. They’ve been sparring with each other for the
last hour.” Lizzie stated.

“We could run down to the gym and grab those stick things you said we could use.” Penelope
offered.

“Perfect.” Hope forced a smile. Then she stood up and grabbed the bag of supplies she had Rebekah
bring for her. She dug around in it until she pulled out what she was searching for. “You’ll also need
these.”

She tossed each of the girls the wraps she bought them. Lizzie had hot pink, Josie had blue, and
Penelope’s were black.

“Thanks!” Lizzie smiled happily.

She and Penelope walked toward the door, but Josie hovered slowly behind.

“I just wanted to….thank you for last night. I don’t know how you knew I needed help, I’m just glad
that you did.” Josie said shyly, then held up her wrist with a smile. “Also, thanks for the bracelet. I
didn’t know you were crafty.”

“She’s not. It took us half the day.” Rebekah retorted with snark.

“Well, I appreciate the time you spent on it. It means a lot.” Josie smiled at both of them.

Hope kicked at the floor with her foot nervously. She barely could keep eye contact with Josie. “I’m
sorry I performed another charm on you...on something I gave you...without your permission.”
Josie rolled her eyes. “Come on, you saved my life...again. I’m never going to be mad at you for
This time, when Hope looked Josie in the eyes, she held her gaze. She smiled at her with fondness.

“I’ll meet you at the clubhouse in a few.” Hope told her.

Josie nodded and followed her sister and Penelope out the door.

“You are a goner for that girl.” Rebekah mused.

Hope spun on her heels and addressed her aunt. “Why is Freya coming? What is really going on? I know you already know something.”

“The twins are part of the Gemini Coven.” Rebekah told her. “Freya suspected it, but I confirmed it with Alaric.”

“Yeah? And what does that mean?”

“The coven had a curse put on them. You see, twins are cursed to...merge.”

“Merge?”

“Whichever is the more dominant of the two will basically win...take over. And the other will...”

Hope went pale. “Cease to exist. They’ll just vanish?”

“Basically. From what I understand. Alaric and Caroline have been working on finding a way to stop it.”

Her eyes widened at that and flashed gold. “They knew. For how long?”

“Their whole lives. It’s the family curse...it’s what happens when twins turn twenty-two.”

Hope frowned. “That’s years away...why is this all happening now?”

“That’s why Freya’s coming here. Because something sped up the process. It will happen, and soon. If we don’t stop it.”

Hope couldn’t breath. She grabbed at the bed to steady herself as she sat down.

“We will stop it, somehow we will.” Rebekah tried to reassure her. “That’s why they’re coming, we’re going to strategize about it.”

“What? Without the twins knowing? Did Alaric ever plan to tell them?”

She was beyond horrified, but she was also angrier than she had ever been. And right now, Alaric Saltzman was about to receive the brunt of that anger. Someone had to be to blame here. Someone who wasn’t herself.

She took shallow, shaky breaths and felt her aunt rub her back in an effort to calm her down.

“Just tell me...you said something sped up the process...please tell me that it wasn’t me. That it wasn’t the charm. If it brought hidden truths to light...if it emphasized emotions that were latent...”

Rebekah shook her head rapidly. “Freya said she thinks that your charm may be the only thing that helped slow the merge...it gave Josie a fighting chance.”
Hope leaned forward and dry heaved. Josie could have...should have...

“They are more equal now...there is no dominant one anymore.” Rebekah didn’t realize that she wasn’t making things better with her words.

“So what then? If one can’t win...do both of them die?”

The blonde had no response to that. No real answer.

“Fuck.” Hope breathed out.

Yes. Someone deserved to face her wrath right now. And since the real culprit was yet to be found, then she knew exactly who would do.

Without word, she stormed out of the room and down the stairs. She used magic to blow the door of Alaric’s office off its hinges. A very startled Alaric and Caroline stood in the middle of the room.

“Hope!” Caroline screamed frantically.

Hope narrowed her eyes at her. “How could you not tell them that one of them had an expiration date?”

Alaric walked toward her, but she held up her hand and cast a spell to hold him in place.

“We’ve been doing everything we could to protect them.” He told her. “We didn’t want them to worry for nothing...because we will find a solution.”

“That’s bullshit. Lizzie’s been having nightmares about disappearing for years...it’s why she is the way she is. And because she is that way...Josie shrunk to make room for her. You basically hand-delivered Josie to her death.”

Caroline’s eyes widened and she looked so completely devastated.

“Last night...we had to use a calming spell on Josie because Lizzie dreamt she was suffocating and Josie almost really did.” Hope added with slightly less bile and fury in her tone.

Alaric stopped struggling against Hope’s magic that held him in place.

“We were supposed to have another six years. Caroline’s been all over the world trying to find a way to stop it.” He pleaded. Not with Hope...but against the universe. “We were supposed to have more time!”

“Well, you don’t. And certainly neither do they. So don’t you think it’s about time to bring them in on the truth?” Rebekah asked harshly. “Freya and Keelin will be here soon. I say that we round up anyone who could help us figure this out and stop keeping the kids out of the loop. They are far more resilient than you think...and more powerful. And it’s only fair that the twins have a say in what we plan to do to save them.”

Caroline and Alaric nodded.

“Of course, we’ll tell them.” Caroline said, then looked at Hope and Rebekah pleadingly. “Do you have any idea what’s doing this? Do you think Freya can stop it? We can’t let this happen to them.”

Hope brought her hand to her side and released her hold on Alaric. He took a threatening step toward her, but Caroline held her hand up to stop him.
“Ric, don’t. Hope’s just as scared as we are. She’s just trying to get the same answers.”

“And she’s also pissed as hell that she has no actual enemy to take all of her anger out on.” Freya said from the open doorway. “Hey, guys. What’s we miss?” She added dryly.

Hope glanced at her aunt. “I’m going to tell the girls about this.”

“What? No, don’t you think it should come from us?” Alaric asked.

“I won’t be able to keep this from them. I don’t want to.” She told him with a glare. “And you had your chance...you had sixteen years to tell them.”

He swallowed thickly, Caroline looked down in shame.

“I’m going to the clubhouse...all my friends are there because we started our own training class. I will be teaching them physical self-defense and offensive magic. They won’t be helpless against whatever is coming...not if I can help it.”

The way she said it, it brokered no room for argument. But the adults in the room seemed to have no intention to argue.

“That’s actually a really great idea.” Caroline declared with a proud smile.

“Alright...so give me a half an hour. I’ll tell them what’s happening to them and why. Then you guys are free to come so that together we will all fix this.”

Hope told them sternly and then left the room without another word. The walk through the woods and to the clubhouse was the hardest thing she ever had to do. And that included saying goodbye to her dad and losing her mom. Because, if they didn’t fix this...that’s essentially what she was doing with both Josie and Lizzie. Saying goodbye and losing them all at once. She wasn’t sure he could handle losing Lizzie. She knew without a doubt, she wouldn’t survive losing Josie.

She stood silently in the open doorway as she watched her friends laugh and spar together. Rafael was currently demonstrating a move on Penelope as Lizzie tried to copy that move on MG. Josie watched intently, until she shook her head and glanced over at the doorway. Her eyes locked with Hope’s.

Hope took a deep, reassuring breath and then walked toward the group.

“Hey! We thought we’d get started while we were waiting. No rest for the wicked, right?” Rafael greeted with a smile.

Hope couldn’t find it within herself to smile back.

“Hope, what’s wrong? What happened?” Josie asked with a mixture of anxiousness and concern.

“I just talked with my aunts and your parents and I...we know what’s wrong with you guys.” The words hurt to say. But she forced them anyway. “You might want to sit down. I know I had to.”

“We’ll stand.” Lizzie said as she took hold of Josie’s hand.

Penelope rested a hand on Josie’s shoulder in comfort. Rafael did the same to Lizzie. But MG walked over to Hope and he took her hand in his. “Whatever you have to say, we’ve got this. We’ll get through it together.”

“What do you know about the Gemini Coven?” Hope asked. She would love to not have to explain
everything to them.

“Not much. Should we?” Lizzie asked.

Josie eyes widened. “You’re saying....that’s the coven we’re from, isn’t it? And we’re twins…”

Lizzie looked at Josie with confusion, but Penelope seemed to catch on quicker.

“There’s a curse on your coven...that twins born to it will merge on their twenty-second birthday.”

Penelope told them with absolute dread.

“Merge...like we’ll become one?” Lizzie was so close to grasping it all.

“One of us will just...disappear. The other will take their place.” Josie sounded so defeated.

Lizzie’s eyes widened in shock and tears pooled in them. “My dreams...all along...it was a
warning...it was…” She shook her head. “I...I didn’t want to disappear...so I ensured that Josie
would, didn’t I?”

She was absolutely inconsolable. Rafael led her safely to the ground and held her as she cried
hysterically. Her muttered apologies echoed off the walls as the room descended into silence.

Josie furrowed her brows in concentration...in confusion. “That doesn’t make sense. If it wasn’t
supposed to happen until we turn twenty-two...why is it happening now?”

“Someone or something sped it up. Or is trying to. I think you’re fighting it. Both of you. And you
didn’t even realize it.” Hope told them as she walked closer to Josie. She needed to touch her, she
desperately needed the lifeline. And she could assume that Josie did as well.

Hope hugged the brunette as Penelope stepped away and started to pace. “We assumed that the
monsters kept attacking to steal the knife...but what if that wasn’t their only target.”

“What do you mean?” MG wondered.

“The Gargoyle almost killed Lizzie. The Necromancer attempted to kill Josie. What if they were
trying to eliminate you...and when that didn’t work...they are forcing the merge…” Penelope
explained. “What if whatever is happening needs both of you to stop it, and the only way to ensure
that you don’t is to eliminate one of you...or both of you.”

That was actually a really good theory. Not at all helpful in finding out who was after them or how to
stop the jump started merge...but at least it helped to explain why the merge was forced to begin
with.

“Then we have to make sure that doesn’t happen.” Alaric said as he entered the room.

Caroline, Freya, Rebekah, Keelin and Emma flanked him.

“This isn’t what it looks like.” MG declared awkwardly as he tried to spread out a bit and cover up
the practice matts.

“It looks like a bunch of teenagers came up with a better theory than the rest of us in a lot less time.”
Rebekah smiled.

Penelope bristled at that as she turned her own rage on the twins’ parents. “I can’t believe you’d
keep this a secret from them for all these years. What kind of people are you?”
Alaric and Caroline attempted to step forward to comfort their obviously distraught daughters, but Penelope, Hope and MG stepped protectively in front of them. Hope even bared her teeth with a snarl and allowed her eyes to grow gold in warning.

Freya and Keelin shared a heated look at that, but it was Emma who tried to diffuse the situation.

“Placing blame won’t fix this problem. And we don’t have as much time as we thought we would...so why don’t we hear whatever other theories you might have. So far, what you said Miss Park has been helpful.”

“Well, we know that one seal...the knife...has been used to basically unlock the gates of hell or whatever the most recent apocalypse is. And with the knife out of the school and no other monster attacking...I think that Penelope was right. That rather than another direct attack, whoever is behind all of this is using the merge to either jumpstart something or stop it. If the monsters attacking weren’t about the knife...then they were always about the twins.” Hope said as she tried to work it out in her own mind.

“But they still need the other three seals. The veil won’t completely open without them.” Alaric stated. Then his eyes widened. “This could be a distraction, to keep us from searching out the other three seals.”

Hope growled. Killing off the twins would never be just a distraction, not to her. “Aside from being part of the powerful Gemini Coven...what if it takes two Gemini witches to reseal the torn veil. If they eliminated one...then they can’t close the veil once it’s open. It will remain open forever.”

“Okay. But if that’s the case...and we do end up stopping the merge...whoever wants it to remain open will come at them more directly.” Caroline frowned. “Either way, they won’t be out of danger until we seal the veil, and eliminate the threat completely.”

“But first we have to find it.” Freya added. “Even if we stop them from finding all the other seals...we still have to find where the veil is opened so that it can be resealed for good.”

“We don’t have to look for all the seals, we just have to find one and keep it away from them again...to buy enough time to do the rest of the stuff, right?” MG wondered.

“I guess, yeah. But they have a big head start, and it would take a lot of time and research to even guess at what ancient artifacts could be a seal or not.” Emma explained. “And it would be a wasted effort since we should be focusing our time on finding where the veil is torn and preventing the twins’ merge.”

Josie shook her head. “We don’t have to exhaust our resources...just focus them. Instead of looking at all old artifacts and poring over ancient texts, just map out where there are suspicious supernatural spikes. Like you said, they have a jumpstart on us. So we just follow the monsters to wherever they’re going. We only need to secure one of the seals.”

Freya pointed to Josie. “See, this is why kids should be clued in on what’s going on. They could have been helping this entire time rather than hiding away in this school.”

Alaric looked properly chastised. “I already got the third degree from two Mikaelson’s today, I know I was wrong. I get it. And I’m sorry.”

“So we have a gameplan for the search.” Caroline directed the conversation back to the task at hand. “You think you could train a strike team fast enough so that we can send them out into the field and retrieve whatever seal we find?”
The question was directed at both Alaric and Hope.

“I think Rafael, MG and I are already capable. Just point us where we need to be, I really feel like murdering something.” Hope told her.

The boys nodded their heads in agreement.

“Great. I’ll send that team with Rebekah and Emma then. They can narrow down the search radius.” Caroline declared.

“And I’ll stay here to work on the merge issue.” Freya offered. “And I can keep casting protection spells and those three…” She pointed to Lizzie, Josie and Penelope. “Can help me strengthen the spells protecting the school.”

“Then that leaves me, Keelin and Alaric to keep looking for a cure to the merge.” Caroline suggested.

“The merge will happen as long as they are both still only human.” Keelin chimed in. “We all know the best way to prevent it.”

Alaric and Caroline opened their mouths to argue. Rebekah frowned deeply. But Lizzie was the one spoke.

“I’ll do it. If it saves Josie...I’ll drink Hope’s blood or whatever.”

Alaric looked sad, Caroline looked almost proud.

“It’s forever, Lizzie. Being a vampire…” Hope started to say then glanced at her Aunt Rebekah. “Is there any of the cure left?”

Regrettably, Rebekah shook her head. “Not that I’m aware of.”

“How can we even know for sure it will stop the merge? What if she does this and it still doesn’t stop it.” Alaric questioned.

“Then we both do it. That way if the merge still attempts to kill one of us...it can’t. We could have Hope’s blood in our system and when death comes...we’ll come back.” Josie stated with a certainty that Hope didn’t like.

“We’re not going to just let you sit around and wait to see if it works. Last night was so bad, Josie...we won’t make you go through it all again. There has to be another way.” Hope pleaded with her.

“I wasn’t just referring to your blood Hope. I think there may be another solution...I don’t think either of them have to be vampires.” Keelin explained.

Everyone in the room looked confused, until Freya’s eyes lit up in realization. “I hadn’t considered it because I didn’t think they existed.”

“They aren’t supposed to. But neither are tribrids.” Keelin said as she looked between Josie and Hope. “But you’ve seen it Freya. And so have you Rebekah. I know you feel it Hope, even if you don’t understand what it means.”

“What the hell is everyone talking about?” Penelope asked bitterly.

“It’s only a working theory because so little is actually known about Hope’s heritage and what being
a tribrid means. But I think that it makes so much we once thought impossible, possible.” Keelin said.

“Yeah, I’m still confused over here.” MG raised his hand.

Hope’s mind was racing trying to figure it out. She thought she had just as Josie spoke.

“Keelin thinks that your bite could turn someone into a werewolf. Like...maybe if you’re in wolf form...then…” Josie trailed off as she glanced to Keelin for reassurance that that had been what she meant.

Keelin nodded with encouragement.

“What? Why would that be possible?”

“That wasn’t the only thing Keelin was referring too. But Josie’s right. I think that it might be possible.” Freya pointed around the room. “She already has her own pack.”

“Yeah, she could be an Alpha if she ever wanted to. She just never wanted to.” Alaric stated. “I don’t see what that has to do with anything.”

“She wasn’t talking about Hope. She was talking about Josie.” Caroline realized. “Josie has her own pack. Look at them.”

“But Josie isn’t a werewolf. She doesn’t have the gene. The lineage.” Alaric argued.

“But if she were bitten...by her mate...she would become one.” Keelin suggested.
“Well, shit.” Penelope breathed out as she looked from Josie to Hope.

“I don’t understand, how is that possible?” MG wondered.

For their parts, Hope and Josie were speechless. Hope’s mind was reeling though, putting all the pieces together into a picture that she thought was beautiful and finally made sense to her. It wasn’t like she felt that she had imprinted on Josie or any stupid Twilight bullshit like that. She didn’t believe in fate or something other worldly. Well, she believed in the supernatural because she did exist after all. And she had eyes, she saw what the world was really like. But this seemed next level, and as much as she wanted to argue about it just on principle alone, it felt...right.

What didn’t feel right was that she couldn’t seem to figure out where Josie’s emotions were taking her. There were so many of them and they were all so intense. She understood the fear, confusion and the utter sense of helplessness. Those were the strongest, and those were expected. What Hope wanted to know is if Josie felt what she felt. If she was even a little delighted by the revelation. She didn’t want Josie’s helplessness to be attributed to their whole situation. Because even if Josie was her mate, which she truly felt she was, she would never force Josie into something she didn’t want. She didn’t want Josie to feel like she was trapped.

“Say something.” She begged. It had been a recurring thought in her own overwhelmed mind, she hadn’t even realized that she said the words out loud until she saw the way Josie stared at her. It was the most pained expression she had ever seen. It made her stomach turn violently. She had to force herself not to look away.

“I just…” Josie sat down beside her sister. “So much is happening right now. I can’t process half of it. Any of it. Not really.”

Lizzie hugged her sister, so Rafael stood up and addressed the group.

“So really, we have no other options to save the twins right now besides either turning them into vampires or werewolves. I don’t even want to touch the mate thing...I just...but...even if that works...like you all said before, we stop the merge and that just guarantees that whoever wants them dead will come at them personally. They’ll come here. Then we’re not just talking about one monster at a time...we’re talking, what...an army. That’s what I’d do. I would want to guarantee that the job is finished...so I’d do it myself.” He glanced at the girls and winced. “Sorry.”

“Yeah, so not helping right now.” Penelope spat out. She sat beside the girls and looked at the group of adults. “But...he’s right, you know. Even this…” She waved her hands between Josie and Hope. “It’s not a real solution. Just another quick fix.”

“Are we even certain the whole bite thing would work anyway?” Caroline wondered.

Hope sighed. “It won’t work. Because I’m not doing it.”

Everyone’s eyes turned on her. “Look, I couldn’t do it even if I wanted to. I would never be able to hurt Josie...even if wolf form...even to save her life.”

Josie studied her. “Really?”
Hope’s eyes widened and she felt offended by Josie’s question. “You really think I could hurt you? After everything?”

Josie shook her head. “I didn’t mean...like that. I just...even to save my life...”

Hope suddenly felt unsure. “I...I don’t think I could.”

Josie nodded. “If it comes down to it, and the only way to save me and Lizzie is by turning...we’ll turn.” She turned to face Lizzie. “Right? We’ll change together.”

“She’s Sisters for life.” Lizzie held Josie tighter. “Vampires for life?”

No one in the room seemed too confident with that plan, nor did they seem to like it. Hope most of all. The idea of Josie choosing to be a vampire rather than a werewolf somehow ripped her heart to shreds. And she didn’t quite understand why. She was a tribrid, sure, but it somehow felt like Josie was choosing one part of her over the other. And she had chosen the wrong part. But what else did they really have at this point? They had very limited options.

“You’re siphoners...couldn’t you just...I don’t know...siphon what you needed from Hope?” Penelope wondered. “I mean if they’re mates...wouldn’t it be better...more…” She looked to Hope for help, or at her in sympathy perhaps. “Wouldn’t being a wolf be the better option?”

Hope smiled at her gratefully.

“So what, Josie doesn’t get a choice in the matter? She just told you want she preferred.” MG argued.

“No, I didn’t. I don’t...I don’t know what’s happening. I just...” She ran her hands through her hair. “I don’t know what’s happening.”

Emma sighed. “Why don’t we call it a day. We’ll pick this up tomorrow.”

She offered them a break. An out for now. But there was still a sense of urgency to her voice since everyone knew they didn’t have a lot of time.

“I’ll work on the protection spells for the school. We should also set up some guards at the perimeter. Every upperclassmen you can spare, pair them with a teacher who has experience. I’ll recast the protection spells on the kids and each of their rooms, but you should consider staying up in shifts. I don’t think a calming spell will work as effectively as keeping the twins awake. It seems like the brunt of the merge problems happen when they’re sleeping.” Freya spat out orders and everyone else nodded in response.

“I’ll reach out to Dorian again, he should’ve checked in by now. We could really use his expertise in the research department.” Emma declared. She already started typing on her phone as she walked out of the room.

“I’ll get in touch with the others in New Orleans. We can have them working their own angle on research and we could always use the extra manpower.” Rebekah offered.

“Alaric and I can coordinate with the teachers and some of the students about setting up a night watch.” Caroline told them. She gave an anguished look at her daughters as she drug Alaric away. Freya and Keelin stood in the middle of the room, the only adults left in the circle.

“I know we threw a lot at you. And most of it is just conjecture anyway. But if you have questions
later...or when you’re ready to just...talk. We’re here. We’re not going anywhere until we know you’re all safe.” Keelin stated.

“I appreciate that.” Hope told her honestly.

“We’ll go do what we need to do, but wanna meet back in Hope’s room later?” Freya asked the twins. “I think I can cast a stronger spell if you remain in a closer proximity.”

The girls barely nodded, but Freya understood that they would be there. Like it or not.

“I’m saying this now. Where they go, I go.” Penelope declared forcefully.

“That’s fine.” Hope said.

Freya nodded, and when it looked like MG was about to make the same declaration, she raised an eyebrow at him. “I know you want to, but I promise...we’ll keep them safe.”

He nodded dejectedly.

Keelin hugged Hope, and Freya did the same. Then Keelin took her wife’s hand and they walked out of the room together.

“And then there were six.” MG groaned as he plopped on the floor beside Lizzie. She patted his knee thoughtfully.

Rafael and Hope eventually took a seat as well. Hope, as much as it pained her to do so, sat at the open space across from Josie rather than directly by her side.

“Talk to me. Please? What’s going on in that head of yours?” She pleaded for the second time that day.

Josie was quiet for a long time as she apparently tried to process what was on her mind, or put in to words what she was going to say. Either way, it had Hope rightfully freaking out. This time, it was Penelope’s touch who calmed her. She glanced at her and smiled as she squeezed the hand that had taken hers, then redirected her attention back to Josie.

“I think...it’s actually a relief to know what’s happening to me. All of it. I may not understand it all. I may be absolutely confused and terrified. But...at least I’m not actually going crazy. This is all real. And somehow, that knowledge helps.” Josie admitted quietly.

Lizzie nodded her head. “I agree. I just...I like knowing that it was beyond my control...that I didn’t do this or cause this...that...that all my life...all those dreams...” She rested her head on Josie’s shoulder. “It’s like Josie said, it feels good to know what we’re up against. Because now we can work on a way to stop it.”

Hope sighed sadly. It was a relief that they seemed to be processing things well; under the circumstances. But it also made her sad to hear that this horrible, tragic reality was somehow a comfort to them. She couldn’t imagine what they had been experiencing, what they had been feeling, for this to comfort them.

“I also feel as if I’m being ripped in two.” Josie’s voice dropped to below a whisper now. “Which feels like an oxymoron with this whole merge thing happening...but my only viable solutions so far...they are placing me at odds with myself. They are...making me choose. Between Hope and Lizzie. And I don’t want to. If I’m a vampire...I...I can tell that you don’t want that Hope. I felt it. But...if I’m not. I could lose Lizzie altogether. I don’t know what you want me to do. I don’t know
what I want. I just don’t know.”

She was on the verge of crying and Hope couldn’t stay away any more. She crawled over to her and wrapped her in her arms, basically pulling Josie into her lap and holding her as tightly to her as she could.

“I want you to live. I don’t care how we do that, okay? And hey…” She wiped at her eyes. “If you’re a vampire...then...you’ll just have to put up with both me and Lizzie forever. How does that sound?”

Josie let out a watery laugh as she rested her head against Hope’s collarbone. Her light breath made Hope shudder, so she held her tighter as a countermeasure.

“Hey! Don’t forget about me! BFFs for eternity, right?” MG said excitedly.

Penelope pouted and looked at Rafael. “Suddenly, I feel so left out.”

He smiled at her and pulled her into him. She smiled at the gesture. Hope looked around the room. These were her friends. They were her pack. Her family. But Keelin had been right. They were Josie’s first. Hope only really connected with most of them through Josie.

The group stayed together in relative silence until the sun started to go down. Hope began to feel restless. After today’s events. After last night’s events. All she needed was a good long run. She needed to find clarity.

“Do you mind...before we all go back, I’d like to go for a run.” Hope suggested.

Josie climbed off Hope’s lap and gave her space to move.

“I’ll be back when I’m not so...all over the place.” Hope told them as she walked out of the clubhouse and to the side of the building to strip her clothes off. Then she took off in a dead sprint. She ran until her lungs got sore. Until her feet grew tired. And until her mind was no longer riddled with warring emotions. If she wanted to help Josie get through this alive, she had to put the other girl first in every way. Even at the cost of her own beating heart.

Emma had once called it “holding space.” To allow the natural process to unfold. It was about acceptance without judgment. To allow someone to not only exist as they are, and honor them as they are--it was about witnessing them as they grow, without interference or having a motive in the outcome. Holding space was being fully present. And yes, Emma had also told her that she had to learn to hold space for herself first. To exist, validate, and accept herself and her own growth...no matter how much time it took.

But Emma would understand that time was not a luxury at the moment. And Josie’s life would always come before her own. Because if anything were to happen to the brunette, it might as well happen to Hope too. They weren’t just mates. They were connected. As far as Hope saw it, they were the same person. Josie was a part of her. The very best part. And she planned to protect it at all costs.

Hope lost track of time while she ran, but when a familiar scent drifted to her nose...she stopped running and turned around to face the intruder. She didn’t need to growl, she knew who it was.

Keelin was standing there, in wolf form. She stared Hope down, then gestured back toward the clubhouse. Hope understood that Keelin wasn’t there to warn her that something bad was coming or had happened. She was simply there out of concern. Because it had gotten late, and she was still out running. Which likely meant, that her friends were still in the clubhouse waiting for her. Which also
meant that all the other adults were most likely pretty pissed right now.

She followed Keelin back to the clubhouse dutifully. They changed together outside. And spoke as they got dressed.

“We sent the others in hours ago. It took a whole lot of prompting and pleading to get Josie to come. But they’re all safely in their rooms. The girls are all in yours. Freya cast the spells. I think she’s going to have the twins sleep in shifts...to see if that stops the nightmares...rather than forcing the poor girls not to sleep at all. Lizzie’s already asleep. Josie and Penelope are still awake.”

Hope nodded. “There’s so much to take in. It makes sense. And I really agree with you. I think it explains everything I’ve been feeling. I just…” She sighed and looked at her aunt shyly. “This whole mate thing...I really want Josie. Like really. But...is it like, I’m imprinted on her and she isn’t necessarily on the same page? Because as much as that would absolutely suck...I still want her to feel like she has a say on this.”

Keelin studied her. “Don’t you want a say in this?”

“I’m pretty sure I’ve loved Josie since I was nine. It’s not something I want to fight anymore.” She started walking back toward the school for something to do. “I don’t feel like my choice as been taken from me. I don’t feel like it was this great destined thing that we’re helpless against...it feels natural to me. Like...like I chose her. I chose her so completely and with all of my being...that the wolf side of me...that maybe when I finally activated it...maybe…” She shook her head. “It seems stupid if I say it out loud. It seems cheesy and…”

“Tell me.”

“My dad. He wanted a family so badly...an heir...he wanted to not be alone so bad...that he found a way...against all odds to not only sire a child when it should have been impossible...but he also found a way to create more hybrids like himself. He tempted fate. He flew so close to the sun and it didn’t even burn him. He did it.”

Keelin was quiet for a very long time. “You think, what? That you can create tribrids.”

Hope’s eyes widened. “That...wasn’t where I was going with that...but, do you think it’s possible? Like...you think I can make werewolves...so if I make them into werewolves first...then I share my blood.”

“Them? Not just Josie...you’re talking the whole group. You’re talking about creating a whole pack of tribrids.”

“Think about it. Really think about it. We don’t know what I’m capable of. But I know what you are capable of. The crescent wolves...my mom and Jackson and the unification ceremony. I grew up hearing all about it. We don’t even really need a shaman to link us. My pack...you, Freya, Rebekah...you all are already seamlessly linking with Josie’s pack. We’ve basically already integrated and that makes us all so much stronger than we would have been separately. They aren’t wolves...not yet, but if they were...can you imagine how strong our unified pack would be? And we would be endlessly loyal, and unstoppable.”

Keelin considered what Hope was telling her. “You want this? Because, a pack is forever, Hope. You change them...and the rest of the supernatural world....they will never forgive you. They will fear you. They will hunt you down. They will not accept you.”

“But how do you know? My mom...she...she was a hybrid and she was loved and revered by all
three sides. Witches, werewolves and vampires. I’m not my father. I’m not setting out to conquer the world. I don’t want to eliminate any of the races. I just want to protect my pack. Because they are mine.”

Keelin didn’t answer. They reached the end of the treeline and the school was in sight. The older woman glanced at Hope. “If that wasn’t your original thought...what were you talking about earlier?”

“Well, now it will just sound stupid.”

“I doubt it.”

“I was just thinking. Dad basically outwitted his own destiny. He manufactured the life he wanted. What if I did that with Josie? Like I wanted her so badly, that I chose her as my mate. I made it happen. I don’t believe this was something done to me...I think it was something I didn’t realize I always wanted...not until the charm. Not until my wolf side met her. Because if she could still love me as a monster...she saw me that very first day. Through it all, she saw me. And I think that’s why I chose her. And that’s what worries me. Because just because I’m hers. Always and forever. What if she doesn’t want to be mine?”

Hope felt more vulnerable than she ever had as she uttered those words. That had been her fear all along. The Mikaelson curse again. Destined to love someone who didn’t love you back. So desperate for love that you created your own fucking soulmate. She never in her life felt more like her father’s daughter.

“First things first, little wolf. First let’s save her life. Then we can worry about what she decides to do with it.” Keelin told her in a horrid attempt at comfort.

They walk the remainder of the way to the school in silence. They separate when Hope turned to go up the stairs and to her room.

“You go get some sleep...or relieve the others if you’re not tired yet. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” Keelin told her and walked down the hall toward Alaric’s office. His door hadn’t been fixed yet, so she could hear the hushed, angry voices inside. She listened for a minute or two and realized that they were just continuing the strategy session. No one wanted to call it a night and no one was willing to lose this war. Or any battle in it.

Hope slowly walked up the stairs and stopped when she got to her room. She heard Josie’s voice coming from inside of it.

“It’s just...my whole life has basically been stuff I can’t control. What we did to Klaus Mikaelson, and then what we had to do to Jo. I’m getting sick of it all. And now this. It’s a good thing I’m meeting with Emma these days...I need so much therapy to get through all of this.”

Hope’s heart ached at the admission. She hated how helpless Josie felt. And it completely wrecked her that Josie felt that this thing between them was just another thing she lacked control in within her own life. That wasn’t how Hope had seen it at all. She thought it was inevitable. Almost poetic in its justice. Hope saw Josie being her mate as a gift the universe finally bestowed upon her for all the shit she had been through her entire life. And unfortunately for her, Josie saw it completely differently.

“But that’s healing, right?” Penelope’s soft voice filtered through the door. “Whereas trauma and all your baggage is shit that happened to you that you had no control over---it changed you in ways you didn’t get to choose. But healing...that’s about taking the control back. It changes you in ways that you do chose.”
“You’re right. And I’ll get through this. We all will. It’s just all so overwhelming sometimes.”

“It is. And that’s okay.”

They were quiet for a few minutes, until Josie’s voice was heard again. “You’re tired. Go ahead and lay down, Hope will be back soon. I’ll be fine on my own until then.”

“Are you sure? After tonight…I…”

“I’m fine.” Josie sighed. “Well, I’m not. But you know what I mean.”

“I do.”

“See, you’re yawning again. Just go lay down, you can take Hope’s bed, I’m sure she won’t mind.”

Hope heard some ruffling around, and then silence again. She made herself count to twenty before she quietly opened the door and stepped inside.

Josie smiled when she saw her. “Did you have a good run? I’m sure after everything it felt good to be...free.”

“It did.” Hope admitted as she sat beside Josie at her own desk. She looked at Lizzie asleep on the spare bed. She looked peaceful. Then she glanced to Penelope and saw the slow rise and fall of her body. She must have been exhausted if she was already asleep.

“So...today was a day.” Hope sighed as she redirected her attention on Josie.

The brunette placed her hand on Hope’s and its warmth gave Hope peace.

Josie smiled at her. “Your aunts are awesome. All of them. Freya is so kind and nurturing…but I’m also somewhat terrified of her.”

Hope laughed genuinely.

“I really like Rebekah. She...she’s been helpful. We had a few really nice talks already. She really adores you. I think...if she had ever had a family...one of her own. She’d want her daughter to be just like you.”

Hope was touched by the sentiment of Josie’s words, but also by the importance of them. “Rebekah helped raise me. For awhile. In a way, I am her daughter. As much as I ever could be.”

“Keelin’s nice too. Wise. Good.” Josie turned their hands over and laced her fingers through Hope’s. “She and Freya...I watched them together a bit tonight. They came in here so Freya could perform some protection spells...on the room...and on us specifically. They are perfect together. It’s like...they make me believe in love.”

Hope raised an eyebrow. “You didn’t believe in love before?”

“I did.” She nodded. “It’s just...I didn’t believe in the happily ever after part. Both my mom and dad lost the loves of their lives. Pretty much just as they were meant to start the rest of their lives together. It never really gave me a whole lot of hope for the longevity of things.”

“But you and Penelope....”

Josie smiled sadly. “Just because I was scared about having my heart broken in the end...it didn’t mean that I wasn’t going to try. Love is worth the risk, right? All the best things in life are.”
Hope smiled at that. “Besides the play by play about your adoration for every woman in my family…” Her smile turned into a smirk when Josie blushed. “Which reminds me to never introduce you to Davina.”

“Hey. I resent that. I am an equal opportunity lust…er.”

“Not sure that’s an actual word.”

“But it does remind me that I had an interesting conversation with Rebekah. I educated her about what it meant to be pansexual and came out to her as such. I’m not sure if you or the guys actually knew that about me. I never really…anyway…And then we got on a tangent about the Ace spectrum and even what non-binary means. I feel she is properly educated about our entire community now. She was an eager student. She’s a fantastic ally. I mean, in case you haven’t actually came out to her or your family yet…you do know that they love you regardless and wholeheartedly and without condition, right?”

“I know that. And I doubt I’ll have to come out to any of them officially. With the revelation tonight, I’m pretty sure we’re all on the same page.”

“And about that revelation…” Josie wondered as she trailed off.

Right. Here it comes. The TALK. Hope was not at all looking forward to it. Not after what she had overheard earlier.

“It’s speculation and conjecture at this point. No one could ever truly know for sure.”

“So you don’t believe in it?”

Hope didn’t know how to answer that.

“You’re existence is proof of the impossible.” Josie told her fondly.

Hope’s eyebrows raised in surprise. “So…you believe in it?”

Josie sighed and leaned into Hope. Hope released her hand from Josie’s and instead, wrapped it around the other girl to hold her in place. Then she rested her free hand on Josie’s empty one.

“I believe in you, Hope Mikaelson.”

Hope relaxed against Josie and smiled into her hair.

“I don’t know how it happened or why or what it all means. I just know that it feels like we share something special. And I think you feel it, too.” Josie whispered quietly.

“I do.”

It took a few more minutes of prolonged silence before Hope realized that Josie had fallen asleep. She allowed herself a half an hour to indulge in their closeness before she carried the girl to her bed and lay her down next to Penelope. She knew that if Josie was sleeping, she needed someone to hold her to feel safe and she figured that if it couldn’t be her, then she wanted it to be Penelope Park.

Hope hated to have to wake Lizzie, but if they were going to try to keep the girls’ shared dreams from affecting them in reality…then they couldn’t be trusted to sleep at the same time anymore.

She shook the blonde softly. Lizzie jumped awake with a start and looked around the room. When her eyes fell on her sister sleeping peacefully and safely, her entire demeanor relaxed.
“I hate this. I want to be able to sleep on a normal schedule again.” She groaned as she stretched and yawned loudly. “I don’t think under four hours of sleep a night is healthy for prolonged periods of time.”

“Probably not. Hopefully we find a solution soon.”

Lizzie sat up with a frown. “I thought we did.”

“It’s not set in stone.” Hope remembered the conversation she had with her Aunt Keelin. “What if...instead of vampires...I turned you into tribrids?”

Lizzie’s eyes widened. “Is that even possible?”

Hope shrugged. “I have no idea. But...would you consider it? If it were an option?”

The blonde bit her lip as she deliberated over the answer. “How would that work? Like...would the werewolf inside of us remain innate until we kill someone and activate it? Or would it be automatic? As evolved werewolves...would we retain the ability to choose whether or not we change like the rest of the crescent wolf pack? Which of the genes would be more dominant within us? The vampire bit or the werewolf? And if we had access to that supernatural power within us...would it enhance our power as witches? Like...we could siphon the magic from ourselves and no longer be reliant on someone or something else?”

Hope listened to her questions. All valid and all very interesting. What would happen? Hypothetically.

“You are a vampire...genetically, but I don’t think I ever realized which traits you carry. Are you really immortal? Because you have aged. And you obviously don’t have the craving or need for blood...so what fuels you? What strengthens or weakens you? Why did we never talk about any of that before?” Lizzie continued with her litany of questions.

Once again Hope was mostly at a loss. “We never talked about it because up until recently we never really talked at all. And up until two years ago, I wasn’t open about being a tribrid. And as the only one in existence, I don’t actually know many of those answers at all. I never tried to you know...die...so I don’t know how mortal or immortal I am. Or if dying is what triggers the vampire gene in me. I would assume that would be the case. And I never tried blood before...so I don’t know if the craving would be there if I did. I didn’t activate my own wolf gene until I...you know...”

Lizzie nodded hesitantly.

“Anyway, those are all really good questions. I wish I knew.”

“And the mate thing. With Josie. That’s a new thing too, I’m guessing. So you won’t have the answers to any of the questions I might have about that.”

“I could try.”

“I believe it. You know. I’m not blind or stupid. I can see that something is happening between the two of you. And it happened faster than most people may be ready for. But I don’t think it’s completely out of left field.”

“What do you mean?”

Lizzie rolled her eyes at her. “Like you don’t know.”
Hope frowned. She had absolutely no idea. Lizzie studied her for a while and then her eyes widened. “You’re in love with her. Like completely, and you still somehow don’t think she loves you back.”

“I’m scared that even if she does or thinks she does...that it’s tainted now. Because we are supposedly mates and I don’t want Josie to feel like another choice was taken away from her. I don’t want her to feel trapped thinking she has to be with me.”

Lizzie scooted closer to Hope and rested her hand on the tribrid’s shoulder. “Josie is not at all subtle about the way she feels for you. The way she always has. But unfortunately for her...you’re even more oblivious than she is.”

Hope rolled her eyes this time and shoved Lizzie’s hand off her shoulder. “Thanks for the pep talk.”

Lizzie chuckled softly. “Look...do you actually need me to spell it out for you?”

Hope looked at her pleadingly. Because, yes, she did.

Lizzie sighed loudly as if this whole thing was a big burden. “When Josie came out to me…I wasn’t surprised she had a girlfriend...I was surprised that the girlfriend wasn’t you. And maybe I didn’t treat Penelope the way I should have...that’s on me. Anyway, Josie always used to talk about you. Hope this, Hope that. It was part of the reason I wanted to hate you so badly. She didn’t get Valentine’s cards for everyone Hope. These past few years, she only ever gave them to you. Her favorite book...and this is almost embarrassing to admit. But it’s a supernatural romance about a lesbian werewolf who falls in love with a human. I actually read the first book, because yes, it is a series and she has read all four books multiple times, but it’s actually pretty good.”

Hope blushed at Lizzie’s words while the girl continued to rattle on.

“She was actually jealous a little, okay a lot...when Landon first arrived because she thought you liked him. She bought you a souvenir while we were away...she didn’t even buy dad or MG anything. You were the person she talked to when she didn’t talk to anyone. And you are who makes her feel safe, the only reason she was able to sleep at night...until you know, everything went even more sideways.”

“But...I overheard her talking with Penelope earlier. She hates that so much is out of her control.”

“Yeah, things are out of control for her right now. For me. For all of us. Even if they weren’t...love, no matter where or how you find it...it’s all about losing control, isn’t it? Love is love and we can’t control who we fall in love with, even if we wanted to.”

“Falling in love is a different thing, Lizzie. If you are falling for someone...you allow yourself to give up that control. You choose to either go in with guns ablazing or walk away. But this mate thing...it might change things. Because...it might feel like it isn’t a choice.”

Lizzie studied her. “You don’t feel that way though.”

“Not at all. It’s a relief for me. Because it finally makes things feel like they make sense. Like it all finally fell into place.”

“Then tell her that. You won’t know how she feels about it all unless you ask her directly.”

“But what if I’m scared to know the answer?”

“Then you’re a coward. And I used to call you a lot of things, Mikaelson, but I never pegged you as
a coward.”

Hope forced a smile at the blonde. Then she climbed off Lizzie’s bed. Lizzie followed her to the desk and glanced at Hope’s bed in the process.

“What I don’t understand is how, if you’re mates, you don’t feel...like jealous, about the fact that Penelope is sharing a bed with Josie right now.” Lizzie wondered thoughtfully.

“I’m protective, yes. But...possessive...I don’t want to be that. I…” She looked at the two of them. “I actually don’t feel that when it comes to Penelope. I guess I don’t view her as a threat.”

“Huh…” Lizzie breathed out.

“Nope. You don’t get to do that.” Hope turned toward her. “You don’t get to sound like you just thought of something important and not share with the class.”

“It’s nothing, I swear. It’s just...when you told me that Josie had a crush on Rafael...there was a hint of jealousy in your voice. I noticed it then but didn’t comment because, well, I already knew you were crushing on my sister so I didn’t feel the need to point it out more than I already had. But my point is...Josie only had a crush on him, and you didn’t like it. Josie had sex with Penelope. They were in love. They have a history. And I know that can’t be easy for you. Not knowing what I know now.”

“I used to get so mad. I threatened Penelope after I found out she cheated on Josie...in case you didn’t know that...I didn’t like them together at all. And I always thought Josie deserved so much better than Penelope Park.” Hope watched the two girls sleep, Penelope holding Josie as if it was her instinct to protect her. “But I was wrong about her. She’s changed. And like I said, I don’t feel threatened by them. I like how protective she is of Josie. I know that if I can’t be there for Josie, that Penelope will be. So instead of jealousy, I think I feel...I don’t know...it’s like I’m grateful for her.”

“Maybe it’s because Josie’s your mate. And you said the pieces fell into place. So you know she’s yours...so you don’t need to worry about anyone else.”

Hope shook her head. “No, you’ve got that wrong. She isn’t mine. I’m hers. Regardless of how she feels about me or if we ever are actually together in that way, I’m devoted to her. It’s like all my life I craved having someone love me. But now...I love Josie and it’s all I need. It hurts thinking she may not love me back. But it doesn’t hurt the way I thought it would. I mostly just want her to feel like she has the right to choose. And as long as she’s happy, then I know I will be.”

“Well, it’s like I said. Talk to her. Because my sister is hopelessly in love with you. So you don’t have to worry about that.”

Hope sighed and it turned into a yawn.

“Go wake Penelope up. She’s had some time to sleep, right? You go lay down and get some rest.”

They looked outside and the sun was rising. Hope wouldn’t get much sleep, but an hour or two would feel lovely.

She walked over toward the bed and sat down beside Penelope, and shook her awake just as she had Lizzie.

Penelope moaned in her sleep and cuddled closer to Josie which caused Hope to blush and Lizzie to laugh out loud.
“Better wake her up now before you really find out what she’s dreaming about.” Lizzie cackled.

Hope rolled her eyes at the blonde and then shook Penelope with more force. The brunette in question groaned at the intrusion and then suddenly Hope jumped back because she was shocked.

“What happened?” Lizzie asked with concern.

“The little bitch electrocuted me.” Hope frowned.

Penelope shot up and her eyes went wide. Then she stared at Hope with worry. “I think I just…did I…”

“You shocked me.” Hope groaned at her as she rubbed her offended hand against her shirt. “It hurt.”

“Sorry. I thought someone was attacking me so I reacted without thinking.” Penelope apologized. Then she noticed she was in bed with Josie. “I swear this is not what it looks like. I was in bed alone. I promise.”

Hope smiled at that. “I know. I was just waking you up hoping you’d stay with Lizzie while I grab an hour or so before we go full on war games with the elders.”

Penelope nodded and crawled off the bed. Hope climbed in the vacated spot and immediately curled into Josie. She was passed out in minutes.

When Hope woke up three hours later, Josie was nowhere to be found. She glanced around and saw Lizzie and Penelope sitting at the desk and chatting happily.

“Mornin’…” She yawned as she sat up.

“Good morning.” Lizzie greeted. “Josie’s in the shower. We figured you wouldn’t mind her using yours. I’m about to go to our room to do the same.”

Hope nodded and stood up. Then she walked over to them and leaned over them to see what they had been busying themselves with.

“We were bored. So we snooped.” Penelope told her without any remorse. “We found your bag of Valentine’s cards and arts supplies so we made a few cards of our own.”

“I…okay. Did you leave some supplies for me though?” She wondered.

“Yeah. There’s still a ton left. Looks like someone bought out a Michael’s.”

“Aunt Rebekah. I gave her a list. Guess she was thorough.”

“Anway, can we give you our cards now or do you want us to wait for Valentine’s Day?” Penelope asked excitedly.

“Wait…you made cards for me?” Hope asked with sincere astonishment.

“Well, duh.” Lizzie said as she handed Hope a homemade heart so Hope read it out loud.

“I love everything about you. For the most part. Some Days.” Hope laughed.

“Oh, read mine!” Penelope smiled as she handed hers to Hope.

“You suck less than most people.” Hope grinned at that as well.
“You should read the one Penelope made for me.” Lizzie deadpanned. Then she handed the card to Hope for her to read.

“Murdering you is the last thing I want to do anymore. But it’s still on my list.”

Hope shook her head with a wide smile as she gave the card back to Lizzie. “Penelope, you’re so sweet and thoughtful. Has anyone ever told you that?”

“If they did, I’d know they were lying.” The brunette smirked. “Anyway, we should go get ready. We are expected to commence our strategic training at eleven.”

Hope nodded and watched them walk out the door. She then scampered to her bed and reached under it to pull out a shoebox. It was filled with all her best mementos. All the things she always wanted to cherish. Half of the contents were Valentine’s cards from Josie over the years. She kept them all. She reverently placed the two from Lizzie and Penelope inside as well. Then she grabbed the one she always liked to look at. It was the very first card Josie had ever given her. It had been a Star Wars one. It featured R2D2 and C3PO and it read, “You’re the droid I’m looking for.”

Even now it brought a smile to Hope’s face. She may never admit it to anyone, even Josie. But she told Rebekah to buy Star Wars cards because she hoped she could find one similar to the one she had been given. She planned to regift it to Josie. The crafts had been a backup in case she couldn’t find the correct card. Then she’d have to resort in re-creating it.

She had been lost in thought and didn’t realize Josie had exited the bathroom.

“What’re you looking at?” The brunette asked as she approached her.

Hope quickly put the card away and shut the box. “I’m just reminiscing.”

Josie got distracted when she reached the desk and saw the mess the other girls had made of it. “Oh! Valentine’s cards, you’re going to make them this year?” Then she looked at the bag on the ground. “Star Wars! Hope, I am so excited for this!”

Hope couldn’t even be upset that Josie basically spoiled her own surprise. “Yeah, I caved.”

“Well, I’m really glad. And you picked the best kind too...although, I’m biased. I kind of have a thing for Star Wars.” Josie admitted shyly as a deep blush dusted her cheeks and neck.

Hope grinned. “Oh, I didn’t notice. It’s not like you didn’t wear that goofy Yoda hat with big ears...for like five years straight.”

“I liked that hat.” Josie frowned. “I only stopped wearing it because I lost it. But I really just think Lizzie threw it away.”

“It was cute. I liked it.” Hope admitted. “But I prefer your Christmas sweater, the one with Darth Vader.”

“The one that says “Merry Sithmas!” Josie replied happily. “I also have a pair of pajama bottoms that have storm troopers wearing santa hats.”

Hope’s eyes lit up with pure joy. “You have to wear those to bed tonight. I have to see them.”

“I will.”

Josie finally started walking again and sat down on the bed beside Hope. “We made it through
another night. I think if we don’t sleep at the same time...our dreams won’t affect each other anymore. But I agree with what was said last night...if whoever is trying to merge us realizes we slowed the process, then they will come here to finish the job.”

“Okay. We’re right back into the heavy stuff, huh?” Hope asked with a slight grin, trying her best to lighten the mood.

“I don’t try to be all doom and gloom. But I’d feel better about things if I knew we had an actual game plan other than wait and see.”

“I understand the need to feel like you’re doing something, but I think you should slow down and at least take time to process everything. Your entire life change in pretty much a single day.”

“It didn’t really though. It was inevitable...ever since the day we were born. And my parents kept that from us. Lizzie and I are in the position we’re in because they knew and said nothing. I feel so...betrayed...angry...hurt...and just so...arghh!”

Hope scooted closer to her and rested a hand on Josie’s thigh. “Helpless? Out of control?” She offered.

Josie nodded. “So much is so out of my control. I hate all of it.”

“I...last night...I overheard you talking with Penelope. I know this whole mate thing isn’t making it easier on you.”

Josie frowned. “What?” She shook her head. “I didn’t say that.”

Hope’s brows creased. “Yeah. You said that so much was beyond your control and everything from last night just added to your feelings...the loss of control. The helplessness.”

Josie bit her lip and seemed to be thinking back to the previous night’s conversation. Then her eyes widened. “Hope...I was talking about learning about my impending death. How I feel helpless to stop it and how it was something that had been a curse to our bloodline since before we were born. I was talking about my parents and their lies. And how I was so over it all. Everything that happened before our time is still somehow controlling and ruining my life. I wasn’t talking about you. Or anything like that.”

Hope’s heart beat more rapidly at that confession. She felt lighter. It was a relief to know that she and her existence and whatever baggage came with that hadn’t been a burden to Josie.

Josie took hold of Hope’s hand, the one that had rested on her thigh, and brought it to her mouth. Then she kissed the palm of Hope’s hand and let her lips linger there. Afterwards, she linked their hands together and let them fall safely between them.

“I think that in all of this crazy mixed up mess of a life, you are my silver lining. I thought you understood that.”

She was beginning to.

They sat together like that for another ten minutes before Hope had to force herself to get ready for the upcoming day. She excused herself to go shower, so Josie went back to her room to grab anything that she may need for the day.

The kids all met up again for a late breakfast. They had arrived just in time before they stopped serving, so they were some of the few left in the cafeteria. Midway through Hope’s bowl of cereal,
Kaleb sat down at the table.

“So...will you all tell me what is really going on around here?” He wondered. “I had to stay up all night and pull guard duty on the school.”

“Sorry man. That sucks.” MG commented. “Someone’s been...well, basically...they’re trying to kill the twins.”

Kaleb’s eyes widened. “What? Really? Dude, I won’t complain about night shift again. What else can I do to help?”

“Wanna train with us? I’m assembling a strike team. And we could always use some extra muscle.” Hope offered.

“Seriously?! Hell yeah. Now this is what I’ve been waiting for.”

“We’ve got to meet with my parents and Hope’s aunts at eleven. But we planned to start training around one. MG will tell you where.” Lizzie informed him.

“Is it okay if I spread the word? If some of the guys knew what was going on, I’m sure they’d be up for a fight. Just point us in the direction of the monsters and we’re good to go.” He told them as he stood back up. “See you at one.”

“I guess we could always use the manpower. If a direct attack does happen at the school.” Penelope stated as he walked away.

“Dumbledore’s Army.” Lizzie smiled.

Hope smiled too.

As a group, they wandered off to the clubhouse to await the adults. It was barely nine thirty, but they had nothing better to do.

“So...are you going to tell the others about what you suggested this morning?” Lizzie asked as she addressed Hope.

“I was thinking out loud. It wasn’t an actual suggestion.” Hope argued.

“I think it’s better than most of the options we have.” Lizzie retorted.

“Then will one of you fill us in.” Penelope said, exasperated with the beating around the bush.

“If we are to believe that Hope could theoretically create werewolf hybrids and we know she can make vampire hybrids...what if she were able to replicate both and create tribrids just like her?” Lizzie pondered.

The group fell silent in contemplation.

“Well...she couldn’t create witches...so Raf and MG would be simple hybrids...but the three of us...we could be like her.” Penelope considered it. “I...I can buy turning Josie because of their bond...but do you really think she could change someone into a werewolf? That is unheard of.”

Hope started to pace as she worked through it. “If I can turn Josie based on a bond alone...I...I feel strongly attached to the two of you as well. Not like...”

“Mates.” Lizzie concluded.
“But if a strong bond is all it would take...there’s no reason that it wouldn’t work for the two of you also. In fact...it may be better to test it on one of you before Josie. Because if tradition tells me anything...and she really is your Alpha...if you are part of her pack...then when we change Josie... if we do...it would be...as my mate....I’d think it may be similar to a unification ceremony and then our packs would unite and you would basically receive all of her traits as well as some of mine...we would be so strong.”

Silence ensued. Hope was just spit-balling. She couldn’t be sure any of her theories or assumptions were correct.

“If you need someone to try it out on first...use me. That way if it doesn’t work...Josie’s still safe. If all of our theories are correct and we need the twins to save the world...then I’m the one who’s expandable.” Penelope declared with certainty.

Hope’s eyes widened and Josie stepped forward toward Penelope with her mouth hanging open.

“I’m serious. We are literally talking about the end of the world here. We’re talking about saving Josie’s life.” Penelope plead with Hope. “I happen to think it will work, so don’t you dare look at me as if I’m crazy or about to die.”

Hope glanced at Josie.

“Penelope...we don’t know what it means. We know she can’t create vampires that are sired to her, but being a werewolf...submitting to her as your Alpha...or me later...is that really what you want for your life?” Josie explained.

Penelope raised an eyebrow. “Submitting to the two of you. Are you asking because you think I’d actually have a problem with that?”

Hope and Josie both blushed deeply at Penelope’s smirk.

“Don’t you think this is something we wait and ask the adults about?” Rafael wondered with worry in his voice.

“I don’t know. Is it better to ask for permission or beg for forgiveness?” Hope countered.

“I don’t beg.” Penelope stated. Then smirked again. “Unless my Alpha demands it.”

“Ok, you have to start taking this seriously, Penelope.” Hope growled.

Penelope cowered a bit, but forced herself to stand tall again in defiance immediately afterward. “I may be teasing, but I know how serious this is and I assure you I’m not taking it lightly. I want to save the twins. I want to have the power to kill whatever bastard it is that’s threatening them. And I will do whatever it takes to get the job done. I’m in it for the long haul.”

“Do you even know what you’re doing?” MG asked Hope as an afterthought.

“Not at all. Do I bite her...or is it...do we try the whole siphoning thing?” Hope looked unsure.

“Great. So you have no problem biting me.” Penelope mumbled.

Hope rolled her eyes. “Not at the moment. You’re annoying the shit out of me.”

“We could try siphoning...but...if we’re trying to keep this from my parents, then perhaps using powerful and traceable magic isn’t our first option.” Josie replied. Then she studied Penelope.
“You’re really sure about this? Because, if we take a little time...we’ll probably come up with a better solution. One that keeps you safe, too. And keeps you human. Or mostly so.”

“I’m sure.” She stepped closer to Josie and rested both of her hands on Josie’s shoulders. “I’m doing this for you. Let me do this for you.”

Josie bristled at that. “I don’t want you to die for me. I don’t want anyone to die for me.”

“I’ll be fine. Look, you trust Hope, right?”

Josie nodded. “With my life.”

Penelope smiled. “Then trust her with mine.”

Josie exhaled steadily and looked Hope in the eye.

“I promise, I won’t let anything happen to her. I know what she means to you.” Hope told her.

“Alright, if we’re going to do this...we gotta do it now. We have less than an hour before we’re sure to be found out.” MG said as he clapped his hands together.

Hope took a deep breath. Then she released it with measured precision. She could do this. She could bite and not maul. She could draw blood but not truly injure.

“I’m going outside to change. Josie...will you bring Penelope out in five minutes?”

She transformed instantly the second she was naked. Her wolf was anxious. It smelled Josie nearby. It felt her growing anxiety. She paced around until suddenly both Josie and Penelope were in front of her.

“She’s beautiful.” Penelope breathed out.

“Isn’t she.” Josie said with a smile.

Hope trotted over to Josie and the brunette knelt down to hug her and ruffle her fur. Hope nuzzled into Josie contentedly.

“Well, if I hadn’t already believed it...I absolutely see it now. The wolf claimed you, Josie. She’s yours.” Penelope commented with amusement.

Hope pulled out of Josie’s embrace and circled Penelope taking in her now familiar scent. She slowly approached the her. Penelope glanced toward Josie and received a nod. So Penelope knelt down on both knees and slowly but surely, she reached out her hand and waited for Hope to close the distance. Hope sniffed her curiously. Then she moved closer and allowed Penelope to touch her. To pet her. It felt strange, but not uncomfortably so.

“I trust you, Hope.” Penelope whispered. Then she looked at Josie again. “She does understand us, right?”

“Yes, I believe she does. I talked to her enough in this form that it’d be embarrassing if she didn’t.”

Penelope smiled at that and then leaned in toward Hope a little further and smirked. “So...are we gonna do this or what?”

Hope hesitated. She still was unsure of her own control. Or if she was really going to be capable of hurting Penelope, even if it was only for a moment. And if it was what the other girl wanted.
“I’m assuming you have to break skin, so please have the balls to do it right the first time.” Penelope told her which caused Hope to growl and bare her teeth.

“Keep it up and you’ll piss her off enough to actually do it.” Josie smirked.

Hope looked at Josie and then stepped closer to Penelope.

“I trust you.” Penelope repeated.

Hope opened her mouth and then bit down harshly on Penelope’s outstretched palm.

“Ow. Shit.” Penelope winced and then shut her eyes in response, but she kept her hand in place.

Hope bit down slightly harder for good measure.

“There’s blood, Hope, you’re good.” Josie said as she rushed to their sides. She patted Hope’s head with reverence. “You did good.”

Hope backed away and licked her lips, she tasted Penelope’s blood and it was enough to be addicting. She didn’t need to know that blood tasted good, she didn’t need to have that problem on top of everything. As Josie pulled off her hoodie and wrapped Penelope’s hand with it, Hope left to shift back and dressed quickly.

Penelope and Josie were still outside when Hope approached them again, in human form.

“Are you okay? I didn’t hurt you that bad, did I?” Hope asked with concern.

She lifted up the garment covering Penelope’s hand and saw the blood that it was hiding.

“It’s deeper than I meant to go, I’m really sorry.” She told her with remorseful eyes.

“Hey...it’s fine. I’m still here. You didn’t go all savage and blood thirsty and kill me. We’re good. I’d call it a win.”

“How do we know if it worked?” Josie wondered.

“I don’t know.” Hope admitted.

“Wait until a full moon?” Penelope offered. “What’s that, like three days?”

“Or you could always kill someone...see if it triggers the curse faster.” Hope teased.

“I do have a list.” Penelope smirked back.

The three of them walked back inside.

“So what happened?!?!?! Did it work?” MG asked first but the other two were just as eager.

“We don’t know.” Hope admitted almost dejectedly.

She wasn’t sure what she expected to happen. Or what she wanted to happen. But right now, she just felt guilty about biting her friend, and they had nothing to show for it.

“Well, that was anti-climatic.” Lizzie frowned.

The next eight minutes were spent staring at Penelope as if she’d suddenly morph or die or anything but nothing happened.
“Well, I guess we’ll have to settle for being hybrids.” MG mused. “Or well, I can’t actually be anything other than a vampire, it turns out. But Raf you could be a hybrid. And Lizzie and Josie...we could still try that with you as a last resort.”

Lizzie yawned. “I hope we figure something out. I need actual, real sleep.”

“Me too. Maybe if we figure it out...the rest of my sleep problems will go away.” Josie said.

Hope didn’t have the heart to tell her that her PTSD stuff would still be there after the merge issue was resolved. You can’t just magically get over getting buried alive and having to kill your bio mom, even if you were a witch.

“Hey guys.” Freya greeted as she entered the room, followed by the rest of the adults.

“I hope you were able to at least get some sleep, we have another long day ahead of us.” Alaric announced. “Hope you’ll begin the self-defense training today. Train your whole group, but make sure that your strike team will be ready to go when we get our first possible target.”

“Rebekah and I were able to map out a few possible locations in the area...we’re limiting our searches to the state, for now. We can’t have you too far away in case we need you back here quickly.” Emma stated. “Speaking of, there may be attacks sooner than we anticipated. I reached out to Dorian, he and Landon finally reached Virginia. But they’ve been holed up a few towns over because of some problems. They got attacked by something on the way, and were able to escape it. But the monsters seem to be closing in. And if they are, then it’s only a matter of time before they reach us. So stay vigilant.”

“We already had night guards posted last night...but we may need to expand that into shifts. Which means whoever is willing and able to lend a hand when not working on another task that we’ve specifically assigned you...please come find us and we’ll put you somewhere we need you.” Caroline added.

“And we plan to have twenty-four hour surveillance on the twins until we eliminate the problem and stop the merge.” Rebekah told them. “Obviously, since we’re assuming that the two of you are the intended targets for any direct or indirect attack, then neither of you will be on any guard duty. You will be either training in self-defense with Hope or you will be honing your craft with Freya. And since we’re not sure how long it will all take...we’re assigning shifts....Lizzie you sleep at night. Josie, you’ll sleep during the afternoon. Trainings will occur in the morning and the evening.”

The kids listened intently to all that was being thrown at them, and then nodded in unison. Then suddenly, Penelope doubled over in pain and screamed out loudly.

“What’s wrong?” Caroline asked as she rushed to her side.

“Well, fuck.” Hope breathed out in absolute horror.

“Hope...what did you do?!?” Alaric yelled at her.

“Can we explain...after we get her down to the basement changing cells?” She told him as she picked Penelope up and threw her over her shoulder.

“You bit her? And...it’s working, isn’t it?” Keelin asked with amazement.

“Not sure I’d call that working.” MG replied as he helped Hope and the two of them walked off carrying Penelope.
Everyone else rushed to follow them. Alaric cussed up a storm the whole way to the basement as they gently placed Penelope in one of the cells and Hope closed and locked the door behind her.

“I’m staying in here with her to make sure she gets through this. The rest of you can help us come up with more solutions now that I answered at least one of our questions. Yes...I can create werewolves.”

“I can’t believe you did that without talking to us about it.” Alaric was still upset.

“We talked about it last night. With Josie. Penelope wanted to keep Josie safe in case we really do need the twins to seal the veil. This way, we tested a theory and have more options.” Hope told him.

“More options?” Freya asked and then looked at Keelin for confirmation. “You really do intend to build a pack of tribrids.”

“Now that we know it’s possible. Yeah.”

“I don’t think you thought this through.” Caroline argued. “What if she doesn’t survive the transformation?”

“She will.”

“Then what? You really intend to turn the rest of them?” Caroline asked with disbelief.

“I’m giving us the best chance at all of us surviving this. Penelope offered. The rest of them are in agreement. We don’t want to sit and wait and continue to feel helpless, we’re ready to fight back.”

“But...let’s say we beat this threat. We save the twins. We close the veil. There are other threats, Hope. You’re mom was a victim to purists who will hunt you all down. They want to exterminate you.” Freya told her.

“Let them try. I’m ready for them this time. And they will not take anymore people I love.”

“You’re really okay with all of this?” Alaric asked his daughters.

“Now you’re giving us the choice? Now you want our opinion? You lied to us our entire lives...we’re here because of you.” Josie told her dad angrily. “Yes, I want this! I want to take my life back. I want to be strong. I am sick of being weak. Of being a victim. Hope’s right. I’m tired of people I love dying and feeling responsible for it. I’m sick of almost dying! I want to live. I want to fight.”

Lizzie held her sister’s hand. “I’m with Josie. We’re doing this, Dad. With or without your blessing.”

Penelope groaned loudly. “That’s all well and good...but I...I’m...” She growled and lunged toward Hope. “I can’t...I’m trying...”

Hope, instead of dodging the attack, grabbed Penelope and pushed her forcibly into the wall. “I need to chain you up….but as for the change...don’t fight it. It hurts less if you do.”

“Hurts? You didn’t say...” She winced again and dropped to the ground in pain. “I didn’t sign up for that.”

Hope smiled sadly at her. “I’m sorry...” She secured one arm, then the other. “Not about changing you...but about this....” She gestured toward the chains. “You may hate me.”

Penelope growled lowly and struggled against the chains. “Get out of here, Hope. I don’t want to hurt you.”
Hope shook her head. “I won’t let you go through this alone.”

“Hope’s right. We’ll be right here with you.” Josie told Penelope as she walked toward the cage and rested her head between the bars.

“Please go...I don’t want you to see me like this.” Penelope pleaded, but she already sounded less human and more animalistic. She yanked at the chains in an attempt to free herself.

“Nothing’s going to change how I feel about you, okay? You’re not a monster, Penelope. You’re perfect. And you’ll get through this.” Josie told her. “Besides, when it’s me...are you really just going to leave me?”

“No, never.” The last word was basically a growl.

“We’ve all got your back. Remember. We’re the Super Squad.” MG said as he approached the cell door and stood beside Josie.

“We don’t just turn our backs on our friends. We’ve got you.” Rafael stood beside MG.

“You’re stuck with us...forever.” Lizzie added as she stood on the other side of Josie.

“See...they’re a pack. And they really will be okay. It will be okay, Alaric.” Keelin said.

“I blame you for encouraging this.” He told her.

“Don’t blame me...it was their decision. And they have to live with it.”

“Yeah...that’s what I’m afraid of.” He said as he walked out of the basement.

“I think that we might as well make ourselves useful since the kids are doing all the work.” Rebecca said. “I’m going to go find Landon and Dorian. They got this far, I’ll get them here safely.”

“I’ll come with you.” Caroline told her. “Emma, you should come too. I think Freya can handle protecting the school and our kids for the next few hours.”

“Yeah, I have this.” Freya said. But unlike the other adults, she didn’t leave the room.

She and Keelin stayed.

“Will she survive the transformation?” Freya asked Keelin in a whisper.

Keelin bit her lip as she watched the girl in question struggle.

“I really don’t know. If it was Josie in there...I wouldn’t doubt it...but my assumption of Hope’s powers was that it could work on a mate because they shared a connection...a link. This was not at all what I had in mind.”

Lizzie turned toward her. “They may not be mates like she and Josie...but like you said, we’re a pack...werewolf or not. We have a bond. And...the connection is still there...it should work as well on any of us as it would on Josie.”

“What if...we siphoned some of it?” Josie questioned. “It’s a form of magic...we could siphon it and lessen her pain.” She paused. “And...if we took enough...maybe it could work to change us as well. If we hurry and take it as she’s changing…”

Keelin and Freya stared at each other.
“It could work.” Keelin said admitted with wide eyes.

“Your dad will kill us for even considering it.” Freya replied.

“Then pretend you weren’t here to see it happen.” Josie said as she unlocked and opened the cage then stepped inside.

“No! Get back. I’m not safe.” Penelope told her, but then doubled over again. She was now on all fours and she looked to be in so much pain.

“Josie...” Hope warned; worried.

“Hey...this way, you won’t have to bite me.” Josie forced a smile.

“God...maybe if this is the alternative I would.”

This time Josie’s smile turned genuine. “Let’s discuss that a different day.”

Hope laughed. She felt movement beside her and saw Lizzie walk into the cell.

“We don’t have a lot of time...she’s already starting to change.” Lizzie looked at Hope. “Get out of here now, and lock the gate.”

The noise of Penelope wrestling against the chains and alternating between growling and screaming in agony was deafening.

Hope spared a glance at Penelope, then Lizzie. Then she turned to face Josie directly. She met Josie’s eyes with her own, and pulled her in for a quick hug. Then she kissed her soundly on the lips before she stepped away.

“Be safe.” She grinned as Josie stood there in stunned silence.

Hope walked out of the cell, then she closed and locked the door behind her. “All of you, be safe. Please.”

Her plea set Josie back into motion as she rushed to the opposite side of Penelope that Lizzie had taken purchase at. The twins shared a nod before they reached out and touched the chains attached to a squirming and thrashing Penelope. The entire room lit up with a burst of light as they siphoned the magic from a near fully transitioned Penelope. Instantly, they both released an ear shattering scream of pain as they doubled over in anguish as well. When the light vanquished and the room quieted, Hope stood mesmerized as she took in the sight of three fully transitioned werewolves.

“It worked.” Keelin breathed out in awe.

The werewolves were not thrashing around or growling or doing anything. Instead, they lay unconscious on the ground, so Hope quickly unlocked the gate. Before she could thrust it open and hurry inside, Freya’s hand rested on her shoulder.

“Wait a minute...they may be dangerous.”

“They’re unconscious...I need to make sure they’re okay.”

She could feel that Josie was alive, but it wasn’t enough for her to just know it. She needed to see it. She opened the gate and walked inside the cage carefully. Their bodies were moving up and down keeping pace with their very shallow breaths. But Hope felt relief at seeing the movement. She crouched down to Josie and ran her fingers through the brown coat.
“You’re beautiful.” Hope whispered reverently.

Josie’s fur was soft and her body was warm. She felt the final puzzle piece lock into place. She felt whole. And for the first time in her entire life, she actually felt truly at peace.

“Are they okay?” MG asked from outside of the cage.

Hope nodded, then turned slightly toward them. “I think the twins are passed out because of the power they exerted or absorbed or whatever. And Penelope…” Hope ran her hands through Penelope’s thick black coat as well. “I think she passed out do to pain.”

She stood up and walked back toward the others. “I don’t know what it’ll be like when they wake up. How well they will be able to control themselves. I think we should put them in separate cages so they don’t hurt each other accidentally.”

She stepped aside while MG and Rafael walked through and each grabbed one the the twins. They set them in separate cells all near Penelope’s. Then as they each locked the doors to the cells, Hope unchained Penelope.

“Why are you doing that?” Raf asked. “You just said they might be dangerous.”

“I didn’t want them hurting each other. But I don’t think they’re going to be a danger to anyone else as long as we keep them caged. The chains were a precaution…the change already took place…let’s see how they handle it.”

“If they have the traits of the crescent pack…they will be able to better control themselves. We should at least keep them in here through the next full moon though…at least that’s only a few days.” Keelin declared.

“Yeah…we’ll still have to monitor the twins anyway to see if this stopped the merge. Tonight will be the big test.” Freya said.

“I’m not going anywhere anyway.” She looked at MG. “Looks like our fight club with have to be delayed a few days.”

He shrugged. “Kaleb, Raf and I can still train. And when the girls are out of the woods and no longer a threat…we can really get to training. Think of all the stuff they’ll be able to do now.”

Hope nodded absent-mindedly as she sat just outside Josie’s cell, as close to the brown wolf as she could be. If she tried she could almost touch her. And she did try.

“I’m going to grab you a pillow and some blankets. If you’re staying down here for the night, you might as well be comfortable.” Rafael commented eventually, then left the basement.

“I’m not sure how Alaric and Caroline are going to take this...I think I’ll wait to tell him.” Freya commented with worry in her voice.

“I’ll talk to him. Hopefully, I can help him understand.” Keelin said as she took Freya’s hand in her own. “We’ll check on you in a few hours. Bring you some dinner. We’ve got work of our own to do in the meantime.”

The two women walked out after both casting a concerned glance at their niece. MG sat beside Hope.
“Want company until they wake up?”

“I could use some.”

“What the twins just did...did you know that was possible?” He asked with ample admiration.

“Theoretically. It was mentioned as a way to turn Josie without biting her. But...what we saw...I...I think that their powers are getting stronger the more attuned they are together. And with them literally being in a pack together now...that kind of link...I think we’ve only begun to see what they’re capable of.”

“And they are hybrids now. You did it...you actually are capable of creating werewolves.”

“I am.”

“So...tribrids...those three...to be like you...they still have to all die with your blood in their system. Do you think with the connection strengthen the way it must be now...do you think you could allow that?”

“I honestly don’t know. Until today...I didn’t know what I was capable of.”

“I know this isn’t the time for this...but...as a founding member of our Super Squad...I’m beginning to feel irrelevant. I’ll likely be the only one in the group to be just one thing. Raf can still become a hybrid...but me, I’ll always just be a vampire.”

Hope looked at the forlorn expression on his face.

“Don’t get me wrong...I’m not like a purist or anything. I just, I don’t want to feel useless. I want to still be needed. To matter.”

She touched his face and smiled at him sadly. “You’ll always matter. And we all need you. Maybe not for just your brute strength anymore...they won’t need you to save them, and that’s a good thing. But we need you, MG. You are just as much part of this pack as anyone. We are stronger together. We need your compassion, and empathy. Your intelligence. Your sense of humor. Your friendship. We need you.”

He smiled at that and leaned in to her touch.

“Besides, Aunt Rebekah is just human now. And so is Landon. And Alaric. That doesn’t mean they are any less important to us or less useful in helping us stop what is coming.”

“Speaking of Alaric...he’s going to murder you in your sleep for this.”

Hope smirked. “If Josie is half as protective of me as I am of her...she won’t let that happen.”

He smiled at that. “So, mates, huh? How do you feel about that?”

She sighed. Then she rested her head against the bars on the cell and studied him. “You really are a good friend, aren’t you? I was happy and relieved to know that what I had been feeling had a name...a reason...something tangible. But also...I’ve been terrified that the word alone will somehow put pressure on Josie. That it will make her see or feel things that she may not feel or understand yet. I was willing to wait for her. To just let it all progress naturally. I wanted to be a friend to her first...to help her through all the trauma and shit she’s been through...with no expectations. Without her thinking I had a motive.”
“She won’t think that of you.”

“That’s what Lizzie keeps trying to tell me. She also swears that Josie already loved me without the charm or the mate thing or any other interference. She’s insistent that Josie won’t see it as pressure or expectation. And that I should just talk to her.”

“Lizzie’s right.” He smiled.

She rolled her eyes. “You’re just saying that because you still have a crush on her.”

“Doesn’t mean she isn’t right. Talk to Josie. She’ll be trapped in a cell for a few days...now’s the best time to have her undivided attention.”

Hope nodded and then looked at the still sleeping wolf. “Maybe I’ll tell her everything while she’s in wolf form so she can’t interrupt me.”

“Come on, you’re really that scared?”

“I’m completely horrified.” Hope admitted.

They sat silently for a few minutes before realization dawned on Hope. “I don’t think that we realized what it means...that they can siphon a werewolves powers. If I bite you, it will kill you. But if they...siphon the power and transfer it into you...you could likely become a tribrid, too.”

He stared at her in awe. “That’s true. But on the flip side...does this mean they could siphon power out of people. Like could they actually cure vampirism or the werewolf curse? Like you said, they’re linked now and their power is only getting stronger. We don’t actually know what they may be capable of.”

Hope thought about that. “I think that’s something for Freya and Keelin to address. I don’t even want to imagine how many people on all sides...human and supernatural...would want to know that answer.”

Rafael came down the stairs a few minutes later carrying pillows and blankets and a book bag.

“I brought you some supplies. I also raided the kitchen and got you some snacks. I even grabbed you a phone charger…” He frowned. “I guess I didn’t realize there isn’t really a place to plug it in.”

“That’s okay. I appreciate it.” Hope told him. “Oh, MG, could you go to the twins’ room and grab them a change of clothes, Penelope too. And our homework. Oh, and grab a few regular books. Lizzie said that Josie’s favorite is about a werewolf.”

He raised an eyebrow at that. “Really? It figures.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “Anyway, see if you can find it. Maybe by her night stand or something.”

“Will do.” He stood up and then took off to retrieve the items.

“I think I’m going to get some rest for a bit, but will check on you again later. And I’ll let you know when Landon gets back. It’ll be nice to have some good news for awhile.” Raf said as he dismissed himself again.

She was only alone with her own thoughts for another twenty-minutes until MG came back to drop off the supplies. He left again shortly after. Hope grabbed a pillow and blanket and brought it to each of the girls and left it in their cell with the change of clothes that MG brought down. She put the
items right by the wolves so they would have access to them as soon as they transitioned back and needed it.

She hovered in Josie’s cell a little longer than the rest as she sat beside the sleeping wolf and ran her fingers through the soft fur.

“I hope you’re okay in there.” She spoke quietly to it. “I have no idea what to expect when you wake up, but we’ll all get through this together. I promise.”

She sat by her in silence, and rested her hand on Josie’s neck.

After awhile, she spoke again. “I hope you wake up soon. I know this is probably the most peaceful rest you’ve gotten in weeks and I feel selfish for saying it. But I miss you.”

She bent down and placed a soft kiss on Josie’s snout. Then she stood up and dusted herself off. She closed and locked the door, then returned to her spot outside the cage.

Hope started on some of her homework that she had put off. Time escaped her as she worked and kept an eye on her friends. Eventually, Freya brought her down dinner and checked in on all of them. Then later that evening, Rafael and MG sat with her and worked on their own homework while Hope looked after the wolves.

Eventually MG and Rafael left and Keelin came down to join her.

“Still no change?” She asked.

Hope shook her head. “Still sleeping. Still wolves.”

“Maybe that’s a good thing. Maybe their bodies are just adjusting.”

Hope didn’t respond to that. So Keelin sat with her in silence for awhile.

“Did you get the chance to talk to Alaric?” Hope wondered as she grew tired of the quiet.

“I did. He’s...adjusting himself. It may take time...I don’t know if he’s ready to see them like this yet.”

Hope nodded at that.

“We also got in touch with Caroline...who took it surprisingly well, under the circumstances. She also said that they just found Landon and Dorian and they’re all on their way back. They did have a bit of trouble along the way, but everyone’s safe. They should be here within the next few hours.”

Keelin dismissed herself without fanfare at midnight and around two in the morning, Caroline came running down the stairs. She slid to a stop when she reached the room and took in the sight of her girls.

“They’re safe?” She asked. She crouched next to Josie’s cell first, because it was the closest to her.

“They are.”

“And the whole dream...merge thing...that can’t affect them in this form...can it?”

“It doesn’t seem to be. I was just thinking how Josie probably hasn’t slept so peacefully in weeks.”

Caroline hummed. “That’s good, I guess.” Then she walked over to Lizzie’s cage. She took in the
sight of the large golden wolf laying there. “You know, even without you camped out beside Josie’s cell...it’s comforting to notice that I’d still be able to tell which one is which.”

Hope smiled softly at that. “They are all different. Even Penelope. They are beautiful, aren’t they?”

Caroline nodded. “Freya filled me in on what happened...what they did.” She sat down on the floor and rested her back against the cage as she faced Hope so they could talk. “My girls siphoned the power from a werewolf and changed themselves...I just...I want to be mad at them...but it’s hard to not be impressed by it.”

Hope chuckled at that.

“And...the reason they did it. The selflessness of it. They took some of the suffering from Penelope onto themselves. Honestly, I can’t actually be mad at all because I’m so damn proud of them. They have grown up to be the very best people I’ve ever met, and I’m not even being biased because I’m their mom and I raised them. They’re so much better than I ever was at their age. They are good and kind and thoughtful and strong and so, so smart.”

“Well, they had to get that from you. Because it ain’t from Alaric.”

Caroline grinned. “Be nice. He’s trying. He’ll always be protective. He feels that way about you as well. He just doesn’t want to see anyone he cares about hurting, not if he can prevent it.”

“Will he ever forgive me?”

“The way I see it, there’s nothing to forgive, Hope. You likely saved our girls.”

“Well, that’s still up for debate.”

“They’re lucky to have you. I’ve seen how much they’ve come to rely on you...to care about you. I know that this whole werewolf thing will be challenging and it’s new for all of us to know that you can create them. And I don’t even know how to process what that will mean for the rest of the supernatural community. Freya had been right...there are people who want you dead. Who will want my daughters dead, just because of who they are now. But I refuse to live in fear anymore. I won’t let it control me anymore. I know they’re mad at us for not telling them about the Gemini curse...and I know that we were wrong in keeping it from them. But we’ll get through that, and the homicidal purists, and the whole Malivore thing and whatever else life throws at us. I know we will.”

“Since we’re being honest, I should also tell you that I’m in love with your daughter.” Hope declared after a brief moment of consideration.

“Yeah, I figured that was all covered with the whole mate thing.” Caroline deadpanned.

“I’ve basically been in love with her my whole life. I kept every single Valentine’s Day card she ever gave me. I remember how sad she always got when either you or Alaric went away. I remember the first time I ever heard her sing during one of our stupid talent shows...she’s the only one in the whole damn school with any actual talent. I loved the old Yoda hat she used to wear, even if it wasn’t cold enough to actually need it. And when she came out publicly by dating Penelope...even if I wasn’t sure why...it made me happy to know she liked girls...but pissed off that she chose her. I never bought a present for anyone before...not even my own family, but I felt compelled to buy Josie a birthday gift this year. And I obsessed over what to give her and how to do it and I got so anxious about it all...Caroline...I know that I’m probably not your first choice for Josie...or anyone. And I don’t even know for certain how she feels about me. But whether she wants me back or not...I’m hers. Always and forever.”
Caroline crawled across the floor and threw her arms around Hope.

“You’re wrong, Hope. I couldn’t choose someone more deserving of my daughter than you.” She whispered in Hope’s ear. Then she pulled away to look in her eyes. “But you’re right about it being her choice. And I honestly don’t think you have anything to worry about.” She winked. “Call in maternal instinct.”

Hope released a watery chuckle as she breathed in a sigh of relief. “Think you could put in a good word for me with Alaric, then?”

Caroline laughed at that. “He adores you, Hope. Which is why he’s so hard on you. He only wants what’s best for you. It’s just that sometimes, he’s wrong about what that is.”

They sat in silence together, holding each other. Until both of them fell asleep.

“What the actual fuck?!?!?” Penelope’s voice filtered through the room and echoed off the walls.

Hope’s eyes shot open and she took in the scene around her. Caroline was gone. And Penelope was scrambling to cover herself with the blanket.

“You’re awake.” Hope smiled then glanced beside her to see a very naked, very human Josie.

She snapped her eyes shut out of respect.

“Yeah, I’m awake. And wondering why I’m human and those two are naked and in cages.” Penelope said as she put on her clothes with a rush.

Hope kept her eyes closed as she spoke. “You must not remember...but when you were turning yesterday...you were in so much pain and...the twins siphoned it from you as well as some of the magic...and they changed too.”

“Really? Well, shit.” Penelope breathed out. “Okay, I’m dressed. You can open your eyes now.”

Hope did so. “Should I? Do you think I should cover them up?”

“Yes please. I don’t want them to wake up the way I did.”

Hope did so quickly and in silence. When she was finished she walked over to Penelope’s cage. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine. Normal even.” Penelope said after she examined herself. “So you can go ahead and let me out now.”

Hope frowned with regret. “I can’t actually. Not until after the full moon. Not until after we know you can control it.”

“Fuck my life.” Penelope groaned. “How long is that again? Two days.”

Hope nodded. “Tomorrow night.”

“So...the twins are werewolves, too.”

“Yup.”

“And last night...no weird, freaky Freddy Krueger dream stuff?”
“No, they’ve both been out since it happened. And not so much as a whimper from either of them.”

“So...do you think we did it? Did we stop the merge?”

“I sure as hell hope so. But we won’t be sure. Not really.”

“Until they fall asleep together in human form?”

Hope nodded. “Most likely. Or whenever what was trying to merge them attacks the school directly.”

Hope checked her phone to see what time it was. It was barely eight in the morning. Caroline must have left for breakfast, or in the middle of the night.

“Want me to go grab you some breakfast quick, that or I’ve got a bag of snacks.” She offered.

“I’m starving. I’ll eat anything.” Penelope told her.

Hope decided on snacks rather than braving the cafeteria. She didn’t want to see or talk to anyone more than she had to today. If they wanted to talk to her, they could come to her. She dug through the bag that Raf brought down and grabbed a bottle of water, a protein bar and a can of fruit for Penelope.

“I’ll text the boys to drop off a real breakfast...after the girls wake up and get dressed.” Hope said with a smile.

“Yeah, good call.” Penelope smiled back as she took the proffered snacks and sat down in the middle of her cell to eat them.

Shortly after, both Josie and Lizzie started to stir awake.

“Please tell me you got these clothes and that you didn’t send one of the boys to rifle through my dresser.” Lizzie groaned as she fully woke up and eyed the clothes beside her.

“Why, something you don’t want them to find?” Penelope smirked.

“Would you want just anyone snooping through your delicates?” Lizzie asked with a raised eyebrow.

Penelope shrugged. “Depends on who it is and why.”

“If it’s the boys they’d be happy to find your stash of porn and box of condoms.” Lizzie spat out.

“Don’t you dare slut shame me, Lizzie Saltzman.” Penelope replied with indignation. “Sex is enjoyable. And safe sex is a necessity.”

“Can we please not talk about sex this early in the morning.” Josie groaned. “And I don’t care who brought the clothes...I’m just happy that they did.”

Hope faced the stairs while Lizzie and Josie changed, but was dying to properly greet the brunette as soon as she was able.

“Okay. Done.” Josie said after another minute or two.

“Me too.” Lizzie added.
Hope turned around and faced Josie with a bright smile. “Hey you.”

Josie returned it in kind. “Hey.”

Hope reached through the bars to hold Josie’s hand. The brunette stepped closer to the cage and took the hand in hers.

“I’m guessing that we’re not getting out of here any time soon.” Josie commented.

“Sorry.”

“I still can’t believe that worked.” Lizzie said from her side of the room. “We’re pretty freaking awesome.”

“You are.” Hope admitted.

“We’re werewolves.”

“Hybrids.” Hope amended. It was an important distinction for her.

“I’m hungry.” Lizzie said after a few minutes of comfortable silence. “And bored. I’m already bored.”

“I have a book I can read to you all.” Hope offered after she sent a quick text to the boys asking them to bring down some real food.

“What is it?” Lizzie wondered.

Hope grabbed it out from the bag of stuff MG brought downstairs and held it up for everyone to see. Lizzie groaned at the sight of it. Josie blushed profusely. Penelope narrowed her eyes as she read the title on the cover.

“In Spirit and Truth?” She frowned. “Never heard of it.”

“Well then, it’s settled. I’ll read it to you.” She smiled. Then she unlocked Josie’s cage and stepped inside before locking them both in.

“What are you doing?” Josie asked cautiously. “What if I change again...I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I trust you.” Hope said as she stared at Josie intently. And she found that Josie’s uncertainty waned away.

She sat down in the corner and waited for Josie to sit beside her and cuddle into her. Then she opened the book and starting to read out loud to the girls.

Chapter End Notes

Today is my birthday, and I’ve giving you all the gift of Hosie!!! Enjoy!
Also, there really is a wonderful book by Zoe Reed called In Spirit and Truth about werewolves and supernatural girls who love girls...so if you want to, go check it out!
And if you ever want to continue to scream to me about Hosie or anything femslash...I’m on twitter @2BeEnough
Come and say hi!
MG brought the girls all some breakfast, with the help of Rafael and Landon. They were happy to see the girls awake and in human form. Hope greeted Landon with a hug.

“Glad you’re alive.” She told him with a smile.

“Yeah, it was mostly thanks to you. Your special alert bracelet thing probably saved my life.” He told her as he pulled out of the hug.

Hope watched as Rafael brought Lizzie and Penelope their food and MG sat and chatted with Josie while she ate. Then her eyes wandered back toward Landon.

“Why? What happened? We heard there were complications, but we missed the details.” Hope talked over her shoulder as she walked back into the cage and sat beside Josie.

Landon followed her inside. She felt Josie stiffen beside her, so she took one of her hands in her own and held it while Josie ate contentedly with the other.

“We kept getting attacked by monsters. You name it, and they actually exist...I swear to god. Giants. A cyclops. A crazy humanoid lizard thing. That one was scary.”

“And they’re all heading this way?” Josie asked after she finished chewing her bite of waffle.

“They were...we were able to kill most of them.” He looked at Hope and then Josie. “Dude...the chicks in your family are hardcore. You should have seen Rebekah and Caroline in action.”

The girls smiled at that. And as if she were conjured up by his words, Caroline walked into the basement.

Josie’s eyes widened. “Mom….we can explain.”

Caroline waved her off. “I heard all I needed to to know that I’m so proud of both of you.”

Lizzie stood up and walked to the cage door, so she was closer to the conversation. “Really? You’re really proud of us?”

“Of course I am, honey.” Caroline smiled at her and walked over to hold her the best she could through the bars.

“And dad...how mad is he?” Lizzie wondered as she worried her bottom lip between her teeth.

“You’re dad is coming around. He’ll be down here shortly. As will Freya and Keelin. We don’t want to postpone training just because of your current predicament. We thought of a way that might still be beneficial to all of you.”

“And what’s that?” Rafael wondered.

“Hope’s going to train the girls down here. Keelin wants to see where their strength and control are at the moment. And Freya intends to test the limits of your magic. Raf, MG and Landon---you can train with me and Emma, as well as the other students we put on guard duty. Alaric will be up to help us when he’s finished down here. And Rebekah is helping Dorian fortify our school as well as continuing with research. We don’t think we have to keep mapping out possible locations of the seals since we’re sure the monsters are heading this way. So the seals and veil will have to wait; but they
are trying to figure out who might be behind it all. What monster has the power to jumpstart your merge, or mess with your dreams, or basically control an unlimited supply of monsters.”

The kids nodded in understanding. They knew they had their work cut out for them. Hope was happy to be kept busy so she didn’t have to worry about Josie and if the merge problem was solved and if she could ultimately control her change. Her mind began to wander until Freya, Keelin and Alaric walked into the room.

Alaric’s eyes scanned the room and settled on each of his daughters briefly. The look of relief in them was visible even from a distance.

“How’re my girls?” He asked as he more fully entered the room.

Caroline was still by Lizzie, so he made his way toward Josie.

“We’re good, Dad.” Josie told him honestly. “A bit restless. Still starving. And somehow, even after a really good night’s sleep, still exhausted.”

“I think that’s normal for a new wolf.” Keelin commented from behind him. “Your whole body chemistry is changing. You will need to eat more. Sleep more…and run more. At first, you should try to run often. And we have to be careful because the restlessness could turn into aggression.”

Hope’s ears perked up at that thought of running. She couldn’t wait to run with Josie. To be together in that way…the freedom of it all. And just for her wolf to experience Josie’s for the first time. To smell her. To see her. It was everything she hadn’t realized she needed until it presented itself to her. She had thought she was content with Josie. Even just as friends. Even at the possibility of more. Of actually being mates. But to know that they were not only to be mates…but could be such in all that that word implied. In all the ways possible. In both human and wolf form…Hope was no longer simply contented. She was ecstatic. She was hopeful. She was excited and nervous and happy and so many things she didn’t even understand.

“Speaking of the restlessness though…I think that today’s training will help somewhat. At least it will allow you to expend some of your pent-up energy.” Keelin added.

“We really should get to it as soon as possible then.” Freya stated.

“Boys…why don’t you go on upstairs and go find Emma. Caroline and I will be up shortly.” Alaric told them.

MG stood up to do so, then he paused and looked around the room. “You know…I’ve been thinking and something isn’t making sense to me.”

“What is it?” Caroline asked.

“It’s just…I don’t think that the monsters were actually on their way here…I think they were specifically trying to stop something or some one from getting here.” His eyes briefly cut to Landon.

Hope’s eyes widened. “You mean Landon, why?”

MG continued. “Think about it. No one knows who his parents are. We know he isn’t completely human, but have no clue what he actually is.”

“Hey…I am right here, man.” Landon frowned.

MG looked at him apologetically. “Sorry…but I think you’re actually one of the seals. Or maybe a
“key to finding the veil or something like that. Either way, that’s why you were drawn to the knife...that’s why the monsters started to attack the school. Because not only were there maybe two seals in the same place, but the twins are here as well...it was too big of a signal for them to miss. It was basically a glowing arrow pointing every single monster this way.”

Alaric nodded. “It’s probably what triggered the tear in the veil in the first place. It might have even been what jump started the merge.”

“That’s a really great theory, MG. I think you may be right.” Hope told him with pride.

“If we do have access to a seal or better yet, a key to the veil, and we skirted the merge issue...our next big step should be identifying the veil so we can seal it. Why wait for the monsters to attack? Let’s find a way to close the damn thing now!” Freya stated forcefully, then she turned to the twins.

“We’ll keep up with your training, we need you ready to do your magic when we find the veil. But Rebekah and Dorian can’t possibly cover all the research on their own. I’ll reach out to our people in New Orleans. Marcel and Vincent may be able to catch what we’ve missed.”

Alaric nodded and then frowned a bit before his face turned resolute. “I’ll get in touch with the old guard. Matt, Elena, Damon, Bonnie and Jeremy. They’ve seen a lot in their lifetimes; they might know something or have heard something over the years. We need all hands on deck here.”

Even as he said it, Hope could sense the pain in his voice. She understood it. They had gone through their own personal hell. They lost people. They barely survived it. And he was being forced to ask them to walk right back into the flames. Because they would. Everyone in the room knew they would. And that is why it pained him to have to ask.

“Maybe, hold off on asking them. If we need them, they’ll be here. But let’s make sure we don’t need them.” Hope told him determinedly.

He smiled genuinely at her, if she had to guess--he almost seemed proud. She was used to getting the disappointed dad look from him, so this was a pleasant surprise. And she understood, in that moment, she had said the right thing.

“It would be a mistake to underestimate the daughter of Klaus Mikaelson.” He glanced at Josie. “And I’ve already made the mistake of underestimating both of mine.”

Hope spared a side glance at Josie and saw the beaming smile on her face. She smiled to herself and shook her head. Josie would always be so quick to forgive. To love. To believe in second or third or twelfth chances. So Hope decided, then and there, that she would make sure that Alaric earned his second chance. That he worked for his forgiveness and his redemption. She wouldn’t let him off nearly as easily as she knew that Josie and Lizzie were bound to. And when her eyes met his, she realized that he could see what she had been thinking and he nodded his head as if he was willing to embrace it. He seemed determined to prove her wrong. Or perhaps, just to prove his daughters’ faith in him right. And that, Hope figured, was a really good start.

“Alright!” Caroline clapped her hands together as if she were still a cheerleader. “Boys, you get upstairs.”

They dutifully listened. Hope smiled when MG thoughtfully grabbed the empty plates and took them with him. Caroline followed them upstairs. But Alaric stayed back awkwardly. He rubbed the back of his neck. “Could I have a minute alone with my daughters?”

Freya and Keelin nodded and walked away.
Penelope stared at him. “I would love to give you the room, Ric. If you let me out of this thing.”

He sighed and smiled at her with exasperation. “Sorry, you have to stay.”

She frowned. “You do realize that whatever training Hope’s aunts have planned for us...it will require us to be cage-free?” She sighed. “Fine. I want to hear what you have to say anyway. That way I can see whether or not you deserve their forgiveness.”

Hope smirked at that. Leave it to Penelope to say exactly what she had planned to say to him. Because there was no way in hell she was leaving.

His eyes caught Hope’s and he shook his head. “It’s not even worth asking you to leave, is it?”

She smiled at him genuinely. “Why don’t you just say what you came down here to say?”

He looked torn. His daughters were in two separate cages across from each other. He couldn’t talk to both properly at the same time.

“We know the disappointed dad speech well, you don’t really have to say it. We get it.” Josie told him.

His eyes widened. “What? No! I came down to apologize for my behavior last night. You could never disappoint me. You showed so much bravery and strength last night...but also so much compassion and empathy. I have never been so proud to be your dad. I just...I hurt you both so much by trying to keep all of this away from you. By sheltering you. By being absent for no apparent reason...when really, the reason had always been that I was searching for a way to save you. I should have just told you, instead of letting you think that you had done something, or were someone...that I wasn’t proud of. You have always been such amazing people.”

He walked over to Lizzie. “Remember when you…” He glanced at Hope, then back to his daughter. “Remember after the thing with Klaus…” Lizzie nodded. “Remember what you asked me when I found you crying in the clubhouse the next morning?”

Lizzie blinked back the tears in her eyes. And then she swallowed thickly as she nodded hesitantly.

“You asked me if I thought of you any differently. If I was scared of what you were capable of...because of what we made you do.” He wiped a tear from his own eye as he unlocked the gate and opened the door. He held out his arms so Lizzie could collapse into them. “That was the first time I ever felt heartbroken for you. I didn’t...I...we asked so much of you back then and you were so young...I didn’t sleep for weeks. And I’m so sorry that I didn’t check in more because, I realize now that even though you both appeared to have bounced back from that so much easier than your mom had...than I had...you held that pain with you...that question with you all these years.”

Hope listened, captivated, until she felt Josie sob silently beside her, so she wrapped the brunette in her arms and kissed her temple.

“Do you remember what I said to you back then?” Alaric asked.

“You told me that you could never be scared of someone you loved so completely. That you didn’t see what I did as something to fear...because we saved Hope. And that is what should matter. That as long as we do things with good intentions...that we can’t be bad people. Maybe we can be wrong sometimes, but never bad.” Lizzie spoke through broken breaths. “You told me that you would love me even more when I made mistakes...because that was when I needed to be loved the most. In the hard times, in the sad times...because it’s easy to love someone when they are always good. But no one is always perfect.” Lizzie pulled away. “You reminded me that it was okay to not have to be
perfect all the time. To not be so hard on myself.” She wiped at her own eyes. “I...sometimes, it’s hard to remember that love is supposed to be unconditional...so I still always tried so hard. I still do.”

“And that’s on your mom and me. We took a lot for granted because you were such good girls that we didn’t think you needed to be reminded of how much we have always...and will always love you.” He took a deep breath. “That’s something I plan to work on. I won’t take you for granted anymore. Neither of you.”

He gave Lizzie a final hug before he exited the cell and locked the door behind him. Then he walked toward Josie and Hope. Hope stood up and unlocked the door from the inside and let him through.

He smiled at her, and wrapped her and Josie in a hug. “Baby girl, do you remember when you came out to us?”

Hope felt Josie nod against them.

“You had a whole speech prepared and about two words into it, I realized what you were about to tell us. I think I always knew. But...it was your moment, and you planned it and you deserved that time to come out the way you wanted to. To be heard and seen. So we let you. I had to eventually hug you halfway through because I couldn’t take it anymore...because you still looked terrified. Determined and confident in yourself, but terrified about our reactions. About how it would change things between all of us. You even asked...when you were finished...you asked us if we could still love you. If we would still love you even if you weren’t who we may have thought you were.”

Josie was sobbing again.

“And your mom, bless her heart...remember...she said...but you are who we always thought you were. You’re still you, except now...we get to see the you that you thought you had to keep hidden. And she said she was so excited to see that hidden part...because she was sure it was the very best part...the most authentic part.”

Josie took a ragged breath and spoke against his chest. “And you hugged me, and you said that you were proud of me for being brave enough to share that part with you...for trusting you with the best part of me. And that you would work every day to be worthy of that trust...to make sure that I understand and knew without a doubt how much you truly saw me and loved me for it.”

“And I’m still working at it. I still want to be worthy.” He hugged her tighter. “But I let you down. I let you both down. You see, you were brave and honest and vulnerable with me. And I wasn’t the same for you, and for that, I’m sorry. You will never disappoint me or make me love you less or see you as anything other than the beautiful young women you’ve grown into. And last night...or even first thing this morning...I should have told you how proud I was that you came up with a way to save yourselves. That you saved your friend. But I just couldn’t help feeling guilty that I put you in that position in the first place. And that I couldn’t save you. And again...that’s on me. Not you. So...you’re werewolves now. And you’re very strong witches in your own right. You have no idea how proud that makes me. I am so in awe of both of you. Of all of you.”

He looked at Hope and smiled sadly at her. “Yet again...you found a way to help my daughters and instead of thanking you...I scolded you. I yelled at you. And I made you all feel ashamed when that’s the last thing any of you should ever feel.”

Alaric backed away. “I know that I should have said a lot of this last night. And most of it years ago. I’m sorry that I failed each of you. But if you give me another chance...I won’t let you down again.”

Josie practically threw herself into him. “I love you dad. And I forgive you.”
“I forgive you too, dad.” Lizzie added from across the room. “And I love you. Always.”

“Yeah...you’re alright...Mr. Saltzman.” Penelope said in a tone far less full of bile and wrath than usual. “Besides...it’s not like I haven’t needed a second chance before. I’d hate to be judged by the thing I already regret most in my life.”

Hope shared a smile with Penelope when their eyes met. She felt bad that she had judged Penelope on that one mistake. Especially, now that she truly knows how much Penelope hates herself for it. Even though Josie had long since forgiven her, and it seems like Lizzie had as well. And even Hope had. Penelope may never forgive herself. And Hope couldn’t help feeling sad about that.

“Same here. I have my own mistakes that I’d hate to be held accountable for. I feel like we’ve all paid our dues...and someone I happen to really admire, recently said that we all deserved a clean slate. Bygones and all that jazz.”

Alaric raised his eyebrows in absolute astonishment. He hadn’t expected for Hope to be as forgiving. She raised an eyebrow at him in return. Simply to remind him that forgiveness and forgetting are not the same thing. He still had to work for it.

He eventually took his leave and the room descended into silence. Not an awkward or uncomfortable kind, more like the heavy and emotional kind. The kind that further linked the girls in their loyalty and their devotion to each other.

“Just throwing this out there...but even though I want to be pissed at the guy...it’s hard to be when my parents haven’t spoken to me in years. It was bad enough I was a witch, but when I told them I wasn’t straight…” Penelope sat down in the cell and hugged herself as if hoping that would be enough comfort for her. “Even occasional absentee parents who make mistakes are better than no parents at all. I mean, at least he’s here and he’s trying. And he always did treat me well, while I was dating Josie.”

Hope wished she could hug her. From the way that Josie’s body collapsed into Hope’s, it seemed like Josie wanted to as well.

Lizzie scooted over toward the edge of her cage and reached her hand through the bars of Penelope’s cell. Penelope smiled at her and moved close enough so she could grab hold of the lifeline that was offered to her.

It was in that moment that Keelin and Freya walked back into the room. They looked at the girls and took in the hushed ambiance of the room.

“If he upset you girls again...I’ll kill him with my bare hands, no magic needed.” Freya spat out. The words only made Penelope burst into tears. Freya look pleadingly at her niece for an answer.

“You’re basically the kind of family Penelope wishes she had.” Hope told her. “I didn’t realize how lucky I’ve been...and I don’t plan on taking it for granted anymore.”

Freya smiled at her sadly.

“Alright...I think it’s time to punch something...what do you say?” Keelin addressed the room.
Keelin was in the center of the room calling out orders. Josie and Hope were locked in Josie’s cell, while both Lizzie and Penelope were locked in the blonde’s cell.

Hope threw a punch at Josie that the brunette was able to dodge easily due to her new enhanced speed. Hope smiled in pride as she pivoted and swung around with a backfist right into an unsuspecting Josie’s solar plexus.

Hope’s eyes widened and she felt miserable when she heard Josie cough loudly and then growl at her. Josie’s eyes glowed yellow.

“Sorry.” Hope mumbled.

“Don’t take it easy on her...her enemy won’t.” Keelin said roughly. “Besides, we’ve been going at this for hours and you can’t keep feeling guilty every time you land a hit. She needs to learn to defend herself. And as often as you’ve caught her with a punch or a kick...she’s shown tremendous control in not losing her anger and changing. You’re doing her a favor, Hope. You’re making her stronger.”

Hope nodded.

She lunged forward in an attack to catch Josie off guard but the girl ducked and wrapped her arms around Hope’s waist and then tackled her into the ground. Affectively pinning her. Hope tried to wrestle away, but Josie gained leverage by straddling her and pinning her hands to the ground. Josie was heaving above her out of exertion; her chest rising and falling with each labored breath. And Hope stared; mesmerized.

“Hope! Stop staring and start fighting!” Keelin yelled at her again.

She growled when she heard Lizzie’s and Penelope’s laughter.

Hope struggled underneath Josie, trying to gain an edge. Then she used her years of training and expertise to buck her hips with force and flip Josie over her. She quickly scrambled to her knees and climbed atop Josie to pin her instead. Hope situated herself she that she had the best leverage, she knew Josie wouldn’t break free.

“Pinned you.” She smirked,

Josie swallowed harshly as she slammed her eyes closed. When she opened them again, they were yellow once more.

“Control it. You can do it.” Hope leaned down and whispered to her. “You need to work on not changing when you’re angry or frustrated. So that next, we can work on you changing when you want to. It’s all about control.”

“You better not be making out over there...we’re supposed to be training.” Penelope teased between her own labored breaths. Then she must have looked over at them, because she added, “Ooh...kinky.”

“You focus on your own training, Penelope. Lizzie landed a good hook a minute ago and you should have been able to counter it.” Freya told her. “Okay. I want you to switch who goes on attack now. Lizzie...you cannot strike...only defend. Same with Hope.”
Hope climbed off Josie and reached down to help her up. Josie smiled in thanks. Then she wasted no time; she attacked Hope with a flurry of punches. Hope had no trouble dodging or blocking the first few but Josie’s assault on her gave no room for recovery, especially if Hope couldn’t strike back. So she did eventually land a really good blow to Hope’s stomach. Josie followed that up with a quick headlock and soon, Josie had Hope on the ground again.

She smirked at Hope. “Pinned you again.”

Hope’s eyes darkened. Not out of anger or being out of control...hers were pure lust; and the way that Josie’s grip instantly loosened, Hope was sure Josie caught on to it.

Hope took the split second slip up to recover, and got out of the headlock and immediately had Josie in a wrist lock. She twisted the arm behind Josie’s back and pushed the girl carefully, but with some force, into the steel bars of the cell. Then she leaned up and pushed her weight into the brunette.

At that exact moment, Penelope landed a hard hit on Lizzie’s nose and drew blood.

The contact pissed Lizzie off and her eyes glowed bright gold as she growled and bared her teeth. Josie’s response had been automatic, Lizzie was in trouble so she reacted. Hope was on her ass on the floor in seconds. Josie struggled against the bars of the cage and when she failed to open them...she rested both hands on the bars and recited a spell that Hope couldn’t hear.

The entire room lit up with a bright spark of magic that noticeably traveled from Josie, through the floor and into Lizzie and together they caused the bars of the cells to shake so rapidly and violently that they burst the locks and the cage doors flew off their hinges.

“What the hell just happened?” Keelin asked as she stepped back a bit.

“I...I don’t know.” Josie said as she stared at her hands in wonder.

“It’s your connection...as a pack and from the curse...you…” Freya shook her head in awe. “You’re stronger than you were yesterday...you...I can’t even fathom what the two of you might be capable of when you are able to fully control your power and learn how to really use it.”


“I felt Josie...when she was shoved into the cage...she was emitting such a strong feeling that I felt it and it caught me off guard...I didn’t even register that Penelope was swinging at me.” Lizzie said with furrowed brows.

Josie blushed which caused Hope to do the same. Penelope laughed out loud.

“Strong feeling, huh? Hundred bucks says I can guess what the feeling was.”

“Shut up.” Hope growled.

“And Josie...you felt your sister’s pain...didn’t you?” Freya asked.

“As if it happened to me.” She admitted. “But that’s not what upset me...I was enraged because she was hurt.”

Freya nodded slowly, and Keelin’s eyes widened at the revelation.

“A true Alpha...Josie, she…” The older werewolf breathed out.

“So you were pissed...and what? What was that lightning bolt thing...?” Penelope wondered.
“I was giving her my power...I was helping her. Or...I wanted to.” Josie explained the best she could, but she was still so confused as to how it happened herself.

“The small amount of residual magic from your bracelets couldn’t have provided you the magic you needed to do that,” Freya told them. “Hope...did she draw power from you? You were touching her at the time.”

Hope wasn’t sure...she was...preoccupied by the position she was in to know if she had been siphoned from. But maybe she had?

“How about the fact that there are three witches in close proximity, to draw from. Maybe they expanded their power and can draw on things without needing contact?” Penelope offered. “Maybe that’s why Hope didn’t notice...because she wasn’t only drawing from her. You said as a pack...that we would start to inherit our Alpha’s traits...what if, because she’s a siphon...she could inherit ours?”

“Now that is interesting...and completely remarkable. Let’s test that theory.” Freya said. “Hope, come over here. Penelope, too.”

Hope did as her aunt told her told, so did the other witch.

“Okay, the three of us concentrate...let’s just do a simple spell together.”

As Freya was talking, Hope felt a burning sensation in her body. It was like she could feel the power being drawn from her and although it felt warm and burning...it didn’t feel like fire. It felt like how fire makes her feel. It’s full of warm memories and laughter and maybe a bonfire she had once but...no, it was not only a happy feeling...it was a sad one. They had a bonfire the night they said goodbye to her mom. It was a comfort then...to be with family. But it was also an aching...a loss. That’s what it felt like...it felt like loss. But not a deep and depressing kind of loss. More like a bittersweet kind. She was giving up some power for something...for Josie. That’s what it was...she felt it now. And it no longer felt sad. It just felt right.

Then suddenly, Lizzie and Josie raised their hands and reached out toward Hope and the others. And a giant flame burst out into the room before extinguishing in front of the other three witches.

“Hope did it.” Penelope declared as she pointed at her. “She was thinking about fire. And so then...I started to think about fire.”

“And they created it? With your help...or from you? I’m not sure I understand what’s happening.” Freya looked confused. “The mind reading thing...is that a pack thing?”

“Not typically...I…”

“I don’t think they are reading minds...I think they’re attuned to feelings.” Hope admitted. “I felt the power being siphoned...and if felt warm and familiar...like fire.”

Penelope nodded slowly. “I felt that...the pull from my power. But I felt you, too, Hope. The...fire...I felt that thought...or, that feeling.”

“But I didn’t. So, they are able to siphon from their pack...but...do you feel weakened by it?” Freya wondered.

Hope shook her head. “I thought so at first....that it was like a loss...but when I realized what was happening...when I realized that Josie was asking for it...I gave it to her.”

“This is amazing.” Freya commented in fascination. “I’m wondering...you can siphon from them
without touch...and you can still siphon from me *through* touch...there’s so much potential for so much power at your disposal.”

They sat in silence as they still tried to process what happened.

“I think that you really could siphon powers away...I think that if you learned to control and harness it...you could really be the actual link...the cure to both werewolves and vampires. You’d still have to touch them...but both of you together...I’m certain we could teach you to do it.”

Josie looked uncertain. “I don’t think we’d be able to stop...we’d take until there was nothing left to take.” She glanced around before her eyes settled on Hope. “I felt you fight us, I knew the exact minute you gave in. It we had to try harder...if it was someone less powerful...if it wasn’t you...I’m not sure we would have it in us to stop.”

Lizzie nodded. “We reached in...we felt so much power...not just from Hope and Penelope...there’s power here...in this school...and in you, Freya...we felt it. But you didn’t give in...you didn’t surrender.”

Freya frowned. “You felt my power?”

The twins nodded in unison.

“It was unlike anything I’ve ever felt before...I wanted it.” Josie bit her lip at the whispered utterance.

“Why didn’t you take it?” Freya wondered as she shuddered violently. “I didn’t even feel you and you could have….”

“Because you didn’t offer it...because that would have been wrong.” Lizzie answered. “It felt like a violation.”

Freya drew her mouth into a fine line as she contemplated that thought. “So you can take from anyone...even at a distance...even if they aren’t from your pack...or linked to you.”

They shrugged. “Probably.”

Josie’s eyes widened in fear. “Don’t make us do it again.”

She said it in such a plea, that Hope and Freya immediately understood where her mind had gone. To Klaus. To *that* night. The twins had always been powerful. They just didn’t choose to use that power or showcase it after that night. And now, with the added power, pack connection, and unlimited magic at their disposal, Hope could scarcely imagine how terrified they might be right now. Because once their power is discovered...it could be used in a way that would hurt them again. They could be forced or asked to use it in a way that they never want to. Not ever again.

Hope was at their side in seconds and Penelope was quick to follow. They sheltered the twins protectively, as they turned on Freya with a growl. Penelope’s eyes were glowing to match Hope’s.

Freya raised her hands in surrender and a bit of fear. “Hey, I would never force you to do that...not again. And I am beyond sorry for the part I played in it back then. Even to save Hope’s life...we should never have asked that of you. We were the adults...we should have found a way. A *better* way.”

Keelin stepped forward. “You have our word...we’ll protect you with our lives. We know that we’ve already asked so much of you, and we’re expecting you to close the veil...but we won’t make you kill...we won’t force you to take a life...especially an innocent one.”
“And no one will ever hear it from us...no one has to know exactly what you’re capable of. We owe you that much. We’ll protect you in that small way.” Freya added.

Hope dropped her guard and her eyes went back to normal as she wrapped an arm around Josie. Penelope did the same for Lizzie.

“I think we’ve learned quite a lot today, and you’ve practiced enough. Why don’t we call it a day and you can get some rest. It’s nearly dinner time. You’ve shown enough progress for us to believe that you can control yourselves well enough to not be the danger we thought you were. But…” Freya still looked pained to admit it. “We have to keep you down here still...at least through tomorrow night’s full moon. And with your newfound powers and connection...it’s probably a good idea to keep you down here anyway until we know for sure that the dreams won’t affect you in human form.”

Keelin looked around the room. “Might as well move you into a different cage though...I think you can all sleep in the same one. I don’t think you pose a threat to each other at all.”

Hope at least liked that much of the mandatory jail sentence.

“Why don’t you move everything to the isolation cell...it has the most secure door. I’ll run upstairs and get you each another change of clothes and some proper pj’s.” Hope told them as she kissed Josie on the cheek absentmindedly and walked upstairs to grab some more supplies.

She grabbed clothes out of the twins’ room, as well as Penelope’s. She got some for herself as well. And a few extra pillows from each of their rooms. Hope also grabbed the art supplies and Valentine’s cards to hopefully keep them occupied. And just in case they needed it, she searched Josie’s room and found the second book in the series she had started to read out loud to them. She had to admit she was already addicted to the story.

Hope had started her trek down the stairs when she saw Alaric approaching her.

“Hey, how’d training go today?” He asked her.

“It went well. They’re eager to learn and catching on quite well.”

“I don’t doubt that at all.” He said with a smile.

She stopped walking and faced him. “Look, about what you said earlier...I wanted to say that I forgive you. For keeping it from them...I understand why you did. You’re their dad, you were just trying to protect them.”

He sighed. “I owe you an apology as well, Hope. I...I wrote some pretty terrible things about your dad.”

“They were true.” Hope admitted.

“But you didn’t need to hear that. He was your dad. And he may not be my favorite person at all, but I could see without a doubt that he loved you. So much Hope. And he made mistakes when it came to you as well...leaving you here, abandoning you before completely vanishing...but it wasn’t because he didn’t love you. It was because he loved you too much...he thought he was protecting you, by staying away. Not just from the black magic spell...but from himself. He was always his worst critic. He never thought he changed enough or that he could at all...and I didn’t want to admit it, but even I saw it...toward the end. He tried so hard to be good enough for you and he wanted so much to be worthy of how much you idolized him...in the end, I think he was. He was everything he always wanted to be. And he didn’t die with regrets Hope...he died at peace. And if the
Necromancer told you any differently, then fuck him. He’s wrong. Or he was lying to you. Because if your dad is watching over you at all, which I’m sure he is...if he sees what I see...then he doesn’t need you to be any more than you already are. He doesn’t need you to find peace. If he loves you half as much as I love my little girls...knowing that they are alive and well; that’s all any good father could ever want for their child. And Klaus may have been a lot of things...but he was a really great father. I’m not too stubborn to admit that, or at least, I’m not anymore.”

Hope didn’t even bother to try and stop the tears from falling. She didn’t know what to say in response to that. So she dropped everything she was carrying on the ground and threw her arms around Alaric. She sighed happily when he hugged her back.

“And for the record...this whole mate thing…” He whispered.

She stiffened in his embrace.

“No, none of that. I’m not about to yell at you. I just wanted to say that Josie is pretty damn lucky to not only have someone who loves her as much as you obviously do.”

She blushed at the statement.

“She’s also lucky to have someone like you...you’re a wonderful and amazing person, Hope Mikaelson. And as much as you still doubt whether or not you deserve her...know that she’s struggling with those same thoughts. Of deserving you. So...just be good to each other. You both deserve it.”

Hope nodded against his chest. “I will. I promise.”

When they pulled away, he bent down and picked up the stuff that she dropped. He handed them to her reverently. “Tell them I love them and that me and their mom will come by and check on them in the morning.”

“I will.”

Hope made it back to the basement and saw the girls happily eating and chatting amongst themselves. She placed the stuff on the floor in the corner of the room and then sat down beside her friends. Josie handed her the untouched plate of food meant for her and smiled at her. Hope smiled back.

“I ran into your dad. He said he and your mom will be down in the morning to check in, but that they love you.”

The twins smiled at that.

“So about today...the stuff you can do now...do you think it works both ways?” Penelope asked.

“What do you mean?” Lizzie wondered.

“Can you siphon power and feed it to us...like if we need an extra burst or something?”

Hope thought about it for a moment. “Let’s bring it up to Freya and try it tomorrow.”

Penelope smiled widely. “Cool.”

They ate and talked about everything and nothing. When they were finished, it had gotten late enough to start thinking about lying down for the night.
Hope handed out the pj’s she brought down for them. When she handed Josie hers, she smirked at the girl’s blush.

“I was hoping you have forgotten.” Josie said as she stared at her Star Wars pajama bottoms.

“Never.” Hope told her fondly. “I’ve been dying to see them on you.”

The girls all turned away from each other and dressed quickly in silence. When they regrouped in the middle of the room, they lay out a few blankets and all curled up close together.

“I hate that we have to stay in the dungeon. It’s so dark and gloomy down here.” Lizzy groaned.

Penelope flicked her wrist and illuminated the room in a soft glow that was reminiscent of the moonlight. So, Hope went a step further and re-created the starscape she had made for Landon once.

“Show off.” Penelope muttered, but she had a smile on her face.

Lizzie and Josie took in the room with awe plastered on their faces.

“I’m kind of digging the book you were reading this morning, would you read some more to us?” Penelope wondered with a yawn. “At least until I pass out, then stop. Because I don’t want to miss any.”

Hope smiled and grabbed the book so she could start reading it to them. She didn’t get very far before she felt Josie’s hand on her arm.

“They’re both asleep.”

Hope looked over at them and sure enough, they were. She smiled as she closed the book and sat it on the floor beside her.

“Today was an interesting day.” Hope said when the quiet seemed to become stilted.

“You say that as if it’s been boring around here these days.”

“You’re right.” Hope rolled over on her side to face Josie. “But I was talking about the sparring.”

Josie flushed deeply.

Hope smiled at her and brushed a stray strand of hair behind her ear. She let her hand linger there, resting on Josie’s face as their eyes locked. Josie eventually closed her eyes and cleared her throat. But Hope didn’t move away, not just yet. Not when she got to be this close to her.

“Landon’s back.” Josie said.

Hope frowned at the sudden change in subject. It was jarring to think she had shared a nice moment with Josie to be basically slapped in the face with a reminder of just how much they really needed to discuss with each other.

“I’m glad he’s back. That he’s safe...but that’s all.” Hope said as she inched just a little bit closer to Josie. The brunette’s breath hitched at the action. “You know that I am not at all interested in him, right?”

Josie licked her lips and Hope’s eyes fluttered down to watch the movement.

“I do now.” Josie admitted.
It was that simple utterance that broke the spell for Hope. It broke her. How could Josie ever doubt it? How could she not see what was so completely obvious to Hope? Why didn’t she know? Or feel it? Or...maybe she did, but she didn’t understand yet. Not truly.

Hope adjusted herself so that he was sitting on her knees and peered down at Josie. With determination. With adoration. She took a deep breath and went for it.

“I’m in love with you, Josie. And not the love is blind, falling too hard too fast kind. I walked in with my eyes wide open. I don’t love you because I think you’re perfect. I love you because you’re not.” She took hold of Josie’s hand with both of her tremblings ones. “I love your smile, your compassion, your strength, your selflessness, your intelligence, your sense of humor, your ability to be vulnerable and let me hold you while you cry, your passion, your determination, and all the little things I think I’m the only one who notices. You are absolutely gorgeous, Josie. Inside and out.” She kissed Josie’s hand and then touched it to her racing heart. “I love the way you make me feel. I love the way you furrow your eyebrows in concentration when you can’t figure something out. And the way you play with your hands when you’re nervous, or with my hands. I like that best. And the way you bite your lip when you’re trying to censor yourself...even though you should never censor yourself, because I want to hear everything you’re thinking or ever thought or will ever think. I love the way your voice sounds when you’re sleepy, or the soft hum you make when you’re itching to sing along to a song but you don’t actually no the words. And I love the feel of your weight on my chest when you fall asleep in my arms, I even adore your soft snores.”

“I don’t snore!” Josie whisper-yelled with wide eyes and Hope couldn’t help smiling.

“You do. And it’s cute.” She bent down to quickly and chastely peck Josie’s lips. Then she pulled away, but remained hovering closely above her. “But will you please let me finish? I’m on a roll here.”

Josie raised her head to eliminate the inches between them, and kissed Hope back. It was brief and it was unexpected. But it was enough to hasten Hope to continue.

“If you’ll have me, I’m yours Josie. I don’t just want you because we’re mates. And I need you to know that.”

Josie nodded. “I know.” She breathed out.

“I promise to hold you firmly enough that you’ll feel safe and always know you’re mine. But loose enough for you to remember that you’re still yours. I promise that I won’t love you just for the rest of your life...but for the entirety of mine.”

Josie stared at her with wide eyes and a look of pure adoration sparkled in them. “When you make me a tribrid...those two will be the same thing.”

Hope swallowed thickly at that admission; it took everything in her not to cry at the implication of it. That Josie, without saying much at all...had said everything. She basically acknowledged that she was giving herself to Hope. Always and forever. And all the days in between. She just promised Hope an eternity together. An eternity of Hope sharing her life with another tribrid....her mate... Josie.

“I’ve never been good at feelings...or expressing how much I care…” Her voice wavered. She was losing it now. Josie placed a hand on Hope’s right cheek and held it there. She grounded her. It was what Hope had needed to continue. “I didn’t think I’d be good at having friends let alone anything more...but you make it easy. Loving you has been the easiest thing I’ve ever done. And I know I won’t always get it right. Or do the right things all the time...but know that I will never intend to hurt
Josie’s soft hand caressed Hope’s face as the brunette smiled at her with watery eyes. “I don’t love you because you’re perfect, Hope. I love you because you’re not.” She tried to wink at her to show that she was intentionally repeating Hope’s earlier line, but it didn’t go over very well with her tear-filled eyes. Then she frowned suddenly. “I don’t have a whole big and beautiful speech. But if you’re asking for me to be your girlfriend...the answer is yes. It will alway be yes.” She let her hand drop from Hope’s face, and Hope instantly missed the contact. “You know I’ve always been the quiet one. So even if I don’t have the right words to properly express what you mean to me...I can make you a promise of my own. You will always be able to hear me. Not because of a charm or because we’re mates...but because I want you to. I want you to know everything about me. My words may not always come, but my actions will always show you how much I love you. I don’t ever want you to doubt that. To doubt that I don’t love you just as much as you love me. That I’m not just as invested in this. In us. I may not have done a good job of that up until now...but I’m all in. I am so completely yours. And I...”

Hope couldn’t wait any longer. She bent down and kissed her. The kiss was sweet and delicate and intentional. It was a promise. It was a declaration. And it was also just a taste. Hope eventually pulled away.

“I know there’s so much going on. And I know that we both have so much to work through. So we don’t have to rush things...we can take things as slow as you need to. I just...I cannot tell you how content I am right now just knowing that you love me back.”

Josie bit her lip and swallowed slowly. Then she put both of her hands on Hope’s face and tugged her down into her for another kiss. They took their time. Their tongues explored. Their hands slowly and carefully wandered. And when her breathing became labored and her sense of self control started to dwindle, Hope pulled away.

“Okay...taking things slow...but not glacial. I got it.” Hope smiled happily. “I honestly have never felt lighter in my entire life....more free even than running as a wolf makes me feel.” She ran her hands through Josie’s hair and then her eyes lit up in excitement. “I can’t wait to share that experience with you. Running with you. Alongside of you. Teaching you about your wolf. There are so many things I’m excited to teach you...to experience with you.”

“I can’t wait.” Josie told her with a soft whisper.

And then she pulled Hope into her again. But not for a kiss this time; she simply just pulled Hope into her so they could cuddle together. So that they lay, heart to heart. And it was the steady and thorough beat of their hearts that lulled Hope into the most peaceful sleep she had ever experienced.

Hope distantly recognized the muffled voices interrupting her sweet dreams.

“It’s hard to believe that those four are likely to become the most powerful beings on the planet. Hope being a tribrid did worry us all, because we didn’t know what to expect...but she’s grown so
much...she’s powerful and fierce...but she isn’t something to be feared. Not the way that the different clans are bound to.” Alaric stated.

“Maybe she’s right...her mom was able to bridge that gap...maybe these four can as well.” Freya commented. “I mean...look at them...all that power and yet...all that vulnerability.”

“They’ve already done so much...we’ve already expected so much out of them. And here they are. Asleep like this...it reminds me how young they all really are.” Caroline added fondly.

“You’re taking the whole mate thing better than I would have thought you would...as parents...as their teachers. I just thought you’d be more protective.” Keelin admitted quietly.

“Yeah, well, Hope’s ours as much as the twins are. We helped raise her...we looked after her...we love her. And we know exactly the kind of woman she as become.” Alaric started but was cut off by Caroline.

“And we also know our daughter. She’s been crushing on Hope since they were young. I didn’t need a big coming out speech from my daughter telling us who she was...I’m her mom, I always knew.”

There was a brief silence.

“We should let them sleep longer.” Freya sighed. “We worked them hard yesterday. And today...today is going to be worse. Even if they have the capabilities of controlling themselves...it will be tested tonight. And since we’ll have to also bring the other wolves down here...we are all in for a very long night.”

“Yeah, we better get stuff done.” Alaric agreed, then added. “I think we can integrate their training with some of the boys today.”

“I would be interested in seeing how well the girls work together as a team.” Keelin offered. “Go set things up. We’ll come wake them when it’s time.”

And then they were gone so Hope cuddled further into Josie and surrendered to sleep once more.

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The next time Hope was interrupted from her slumber was much more pleasant. Josie was sprinkling her face with kisses.

Hope smiled as she pulled the brunette closer and held her firmly against her. Then she opened her eyes and was filled with joy at the sight. Josie smiled at her so brightly...so genuinely full of excitement that Hope had to kiss the smile off her lips. She couldn’t contain herself either.

“Hey you.” Hope whispered with adoration.

“Well...we certainly missed that development.” Penelope muttered as she stretched out and distanced herself from them. “What happened last night?” Sat sat up and smirked at them. “And if it’s juicy, then spare no details.”
Josie blushed and Hope bit her lip to contain her own amusement.

“So...you are together then. Like officially?” Lizzie yawned as she studied them from the other side of Penelope. “It is about damn time.”

Penelope and Hope laughed at that.

Even Josie giggled a bit. “You’re telling me.”

Hope’s attention wandered as she trailed her eyes down Josie’s body while the other girl wasn’t looking. When she finally looked back up to rejoin the conversation, Penelope was staring at her with a raised eyebrow. She shrugged and smiled at her. Penelope made a show of checking out Josie’s ass when the girl stood up to stretch. Hope laughed out loud at that and Penelope smirked at her with her own raised eyebrow.

“I feel like I’m missing something...but since it’s the two of you, I don’t think I want to know what’s on your mind.” Lizzie commented as she stood up as well.

“That’s a good call.” Penelope admitted.

Hope nodded in agreement.

“I really think the world is ending when the two of you are scheming together.” Lizzie smiled sweetly and batted her eyelashes for emphasis.

Josie chuckled along with her sisters antics, but she shook her head and disagreed. “I happen to like that they get along so well.”

Lizzie’s eyes widened. “I’m sure you do.”

Josie frowned.

“I’m just saying...who wouldn’t want to have their cake and eat it too.” Lizzie shrugged.

Penelope smirked. “Which one of us is the cake that gets eaten?”

Josie blushed, Lizzie blanched before fake gagging. Hope shared a heated look with Penelope before she looked away with a blush also.

“I’m going to go for a walk.” Lizzie demanded as she slammed her eyes closed and covered her ears. It looked like she was trying to extinguish any unwanted images from her mind. Hope wondered if she was successful.

The three remaining girls watched the blonde leave, but remained silent.

“Oh, hey. I think Freya must have used magic to fix all these broken cage doors.” Lizzie commented as she walked around the basement, further and further away from them.

“Yeah, they’ll need them tonight...with the full moon and all the other werewolves in the school.” Hope replied.

“Right...” Lizzie said as she continued to walk around and stretch her legs.

“And then there were three.” Penelope breathed out, suddenly nervous.

Josie sighed loudly and sat back beside the girls. “I was thinking...or I...I have to tell you something,
The other girl’s eyes widened and she hesitantly nodded for Josie to continue.

“So...Hope and I are officially together. And I...I just wanted to make sure you’re okay. With it. With us. Because you may not believe this...with the whole mate revelation....but my feelings for you. They were real. I did love you. I still do. I just…”

Penelope raised her hand to stop the rambling. “I never doubted it, Josie. Or you. I hate that I made you doubt me. And how I felt...feel about you.” She glanced at Hope. “I already told Hope...I gave her my blessing. Because if it isn’t me...then I’m glad it’s her who gets to have you.”

Josie smiled at her sadly. And then surprised them both by flinging herself at Penelope and hugging her tightly. “Thank you.”

Hope watched as Penelope reveled in getting to hold Josie in her arms. And then the witch opened her eyes and met Hope’s. Hope smiled at her and Penelope gave her a lopsided grin back as her eyes started to tear up.

Eventually Josie pulled away. And before standing back up, she placed a quick kiss on Hope’s lips. The tribrid would never get sick of the easy affection Josie so willing bestowed upon her. Josie, her girlfriend. She had a girlfriend. For the first time in her life... she was someone’s girlfriend. It was the greatest feeling in the world.

Josie started to get dressed in the corner of the room. Hope glanced over to notice that Penelope was trying desperately (and failing) to avoid looking. She reached over and held Penelope’s hand, then squeezed it softly in assurance. As a reminder, that looking was okay.

Penelope licked her lips and nodded, then let her gaze fall on Josie again. The brunette must have felt their shared gaze, because she turned around with her recently discarded shirt in her hands and caught them staring.

“I...ah...aren’t you going to get dressed? The adults should be down soon and we’ll have to get right to work.”

Both Hope and Penelope both simply nodded. She rolled her eyes at them and threw the shirt toward them. Then she turned around and picked up the clean shirt she was going to wear that day and quickly put it on.

“You’re both perverts.” She said as she re-approached them.

The blush still dusted her cheeks, but she was smiling softly.

“No...you’re my girlfriend. Part of my job is to admire you.” Hope beamed with pride.

Josie shook her head with a smile, then settled her gaze on Penelope. “And what’s your excuse?”

“You’re beautiful.” Penelope breathed out honestly and without any sarcasm or in jest. It was just a simple and true statement.

“Thank you.” I’m going to find Lizzie while the two of you get ready for the big day ahead.

She left the room with a slight skip to her step. Penelope turned to Hope with sincerity in her eyes.

“Thank you for being okay with me still having a place in Josie’s life….and for allowing me to look
as long as I don’t touch.”

Hope stepped closer to her. “I never said you couldn’t touch....”

Penelope’s eyes widened. But Hope simply shrugged.

“Josie’s affectionate. I can’t stop her from hugging you or grabbing your hand in excitement. She isn’t mine in that way. She’s still her own person. And you mean a lot to her.”

Penelope nodded, but looked unsure. “You’re really okay with our close relationship--given our history together?”

Hope licked her lips and stepped away, then ran her hands through her hair. “Given how you still obviously feel about her...are you really okay with me being with her?”

Penelope relaxed at that. “I am. You make her happy.”

Hope smiled because that is exactly why she was okay with it. Because it was always about Josie first.

Penelope lowered her voice. “Just so you know...I’m more than okay with you being together than you realize.” Her gaze dropped to Hope lips and she smirked. “You weren’t very quiet last night...and I was right there.”

Hope’s eyes widened and darkened instantly. She had to force herself to breathe. She choked out an awkward cough in response.

Penelope stepped away and busied herself with getting dressed as she continued to talk. “The love confessions were cute.”

Hope shook her head and walked to the other side of the room while she got dressed as well. “I can’t believe you were awake for all of that and didn’t say anything.”

“Did you really want me to interrupt? You were on a roll. And you got the girl. Are you really complaining right now?”

“I guess not. I just...”

“Hey...your secret late night love confessions are safe with me.” Penelope finished dressing and turned to face Hope who had finished moments ago. “I just...maybe be a bit more careful next time...with all the other stuff, I mean.”

“Believe me, we will.” Hope groaned.

“Hey, now, don’t be like that.” Penelope exaggerated a pout.

They walked out of the room and found the twins wandering around the basement. A few minutes later, Freya and Keelin walked into the room.

“Good morning...how’d you sleep last night?”

Penelope couldn’t help bursting out in laughter at the question and Hope growled at her.

“We slept well, thank you.” Josie answered and then threw an inquisitive gaze toward the two.

Hope forced a smile and Penelope sobered up quickly.
“I thought the first thing we’d do today was see if you could transform at will. Since we now know you have enough control to prevent it from occurring when you don’t want to change...I want to see how much control you have when you want it too.” Keelin got right to business.

The girls looked eager to learn, but there was still a sense of uncertainty among them.

“How do we...change without the pain?” Penelope wondered nervously.

“Unfortunately, you can’t. It will always hurt. You’ll just get used to it.” Keelin answered.

Penelope shifted from side to side, suddenly no longer eager to attempt it. Hope sighed and stepped in front of her. She put a hand on each of Penelope’s shoulders and made sure she looked her in the eye.

“I know you’re scared. Because it does hurt. But the first time really is the worst. And you already did that.”

Penelope bit her lip in consideration, but then shook her head defiantly. “No, I’m good.”

“Penelope....” Hope breathed out and glanced at the twins. They were listening intently to whatever she might have to say.

Josie walked over to them and stood beside Hope, Lizzie followed. Hope redirected her attention to Penelope.

“There’s no way I can describe it that will do it justice. But the freedom I have when I’m a wolf...the way I can clear my mind and just...be. There’s nothing else like it in the world. Running. I love running. And being a wolf...the enhanced senses. Everything is better.”

Penelope smirked at that statement and Hope rolled her eyes.

“The smells in the woods...the wind flowing against your fur. The thrill of the hunt. The pure power and adrenaline of just being the largest and most dangerous thing out there. It can be addicting. I’ve heard of people who give up their humanity completely...to live as a wolf. And there have been times where I considered it. Where it was tempting. Because when you run...in that moment...nothing else matters. And it’s so liberating.”

Penelope listened with wide eyes. Josie had wrapped Hope in a one-armed hug as she spoke and it made Hope aware that not only was Josie listening...but it reminded her of all they would get to share together. Of how excited she was to have that experience with her.

“I'll try.” Josie said thoughtfully. “I want that. I want what you talked about last night.”

Hope released her hold on Penelope and turned toward Josie with pure joy. “You do?”

“More than anything.” Josie admitted with a resolute nod. “Tell me what I have to do.”

Hope ran her hands through Josie’s hair and pulled the brunette into her for a hug. “You have to give yourself over to it. Remember when you were pulling power from me yesterday and you said that you felt exactly when I surrendered it to you?”

Josie nodded.

“It’s like that. You have to summon the power...you will feel it...it will be overwhelming at first...maybe even scary a little...but you have to get through that...you have to just let go. Give
yourself up to that and let it take you over.”

Josie bit her lip and closed her eyes. “Do I think of anything specific? Like happy thoughts or something?”

Lizzie chuckled. “This isn’t Peter Pan and pixie dust, Jo.”

The brunette blushed cutely.

“Hey...it helps me if I remember why I’m doing it. Or if I’m thinking about a certain feeling...about what else has made me feel free or strong. Or sometimes...I’ve transformed as an escape...so I no longer had to think about something bad. Whatever helps you in that moment....whatever helps you to want to fully let go of your human side and just...be.”

Josie considered it, then her brown eyes filled with tears. “I know exactly what I plan on escaping.”

Hope nodded. Then she gently kissed her forehead. “Why don’t you go over in our cage...transform in there. It’s a bit more private.”

Josie shakily exhaled a shallow breath and turned to walk into their recently abandoned cell.

Ten minutes later, Josie’s screams echoed off the walls and Hope recoiled in pain. She noticed that Lizzie and Penelope had done the same thing.

“It’s hurting her...we have to stop it.” Lizzie said with worry.

“No...she’s doing it. It’s working. The first time is the worst...remember?” Hope told her regretfully.

“It didn’t hurt so bad when we helped Penelope.” Lizzie frowned. “Wasn’t that our first time?”

“Not really. You shared the pain among the three of you...and you used magic. It’s not the same thing.” Keelin told them.

When the blood curdling screams seemed to slow down and animalistic growling took their place, Hope approached the partially closed door.

“Hope, be careful.” Freya warned.

Before Hope could fully reach the door, the big brown wolf came trouncing out of it with its tongue lolling out of its open mouth and its tail wagging excitedly.

“Damn fierce wolf that girl is, geez.” Freya commented with amusement.

Hope laughed and crouched down to pet her. Josie happily licked all over Hope’s face causing the usually stoic girl to descend into laughter.

“She looks happy.” Lizzie commented. “Happier than she’s been in a long time.” Then she frowned. “Does she understand us? Can we talk to her?”

“Yes, absolutely. She understands everything. And she’ll remember it all, too. She’s still completely Josie...or maybe, more completely so.” Hope told her as she ran her hand through Josie’s fur and rubbed the underside of her belly. She smiled when she realized Josie really liked that, because she liked it, too.

Josie rolled over and laid on her back, giving Hope full access to pet her there.
“Okay, let me try it.” Lizzie said almost excitedly.

She walked into the cell, so Hope backed away and walked to the others. Josie obediently followed. Hope continued to pet Josie’s brown fur as they waited. After a few minutes, Josie was distracted and trotted over to the others to sniff them. She circled Freya and Keelin, then settled in front of Penelope. The wolf sniffed at her and caused Penelope to jump with delight.

“That tickles.” She grinned before she bent down and slowly extended her hand toward Josie—the same way she had to Hope, when she had been in wolf form.

Josie sniffed at it, then scampered closer to the girl and buried her head in the girls open arms. Penelope closed her arms around her in a brief hug, before she sat on the floor and happily pet her. The wolf practically climbed in her lap. Hope rolled her eyes playfully before she walked over to them and sat beside the other girl. Immediately, the wolf left Penelope’s lap for Hope’s. But she couldn’t get comfortable there either, so she decided to drape herself across both of them. They took turns petting the adorable wolf.

“Yup...she’s still Josie.” Penelope mused.

After another fifteen minutes of contented silence, as they enjoyed the wolf shared between them, Lizzie’s grunts of pain started to be heard. Josie lifted her head up in alert.

“She’s okay. She’ll be okay.” Hope told her.

The grunts turned into screams, and Josie took off running toward the room her sister was in. Slowly, the yells disappeared and nothing was heard or seen. Hope frowned. She stood up and ran to the room only to stop dead in her tracks with a smile on her face. The two wolves were licking at each other and playing and dancing around the room in a strange show of solidarity. It was perfect.

She felt a presence behind her. And turned to see that the others had all joined her.

“Their bond will be even stronger now. They are Gemini Coven twins...but now they are also part of a greater wolf pack.” Keelin told them. “See how they wrestle, Lizzie instantly submits to Josie...it’s...she’s bonded to her. She recognizes her as her Alpha. It really is incredible.”

“It is.” Penelope smiled as she watched them in awe.

“No, you don’t understand. It takes most evolved wolves a lot longer to learn such control and to understand their place in the pack. Regular werewolves...those with the gene activated...like your friend Rafael...they go through a process of enhanced anger...a heightened and intense rage that only fully manifests once they finally have their first transformation. Then they have sort of a blood lust...the animal instinct...to hunt...to run. And yet...these two...they just fully transformed with intent, and they’re playing together. There’s no hint of uncontrollable aggression. They’re not attacking us or even acknowledging us. And they have shown no desire to escape...to run. I’m in awe of them.”

Hope smiled with pride. Yup, that was her girlfriend. Always defying expectations.

“I’m starting to think that we don’t even have to be concerned with the full moon tonight...which is a small victory, with everything else that’s still on our plates.” Keelin added.

“Can I...I want...” Hope couldn't stand it anymore.

She needed to properly meet Josie. While they were both wolves.

Keelin smiled. “Go ahead...meet your mate.”
Hope stripped without thought and changed immediately. Josie stopped playing with Lizzie and rushed to greet Hope. The two wolves immediately fell into a ritualistic type of dance as they circled each other. And studied each other. Hope gave in first and lunged at Josie playfully; then suddenly the wolves were tangled in a show of dominance. They wrestled and nipped at each other. They bared teeth and nudged at each other with their snouts. Hope licked at Josie happily and the brown wolf returned the gesture with glee. Then they started to wrestle again and Lizzie hopped and jumped around them with excitement, but with enough obedience not to join in until properly invited.

The twins may be new to the werewolf life, but Hope realized that Keelin was right. That they already fell into their roles with perfection. They knew where they stood with each other and they knew what was expected of them. With that thought in mind, the wrestling turned into another fight for dominance. Hope, who had better skill and was more attuned to her own strength, easily pinned Josie to the ground. Then she nipped at her playfully as if to gloat.

But then Hope surprised everyone, by backing away and resting her front legs on the ground in front of Josie. She knelt down and let her head fall on her front paws as she fully and completely submitted to Josie. To her Alpha.

Josie yelped in understanding, then bared her teeth at Lizzie. Immediately the blonde wolf duplicated Hope’s stance. And without a word, Penelope knelt down on one knee and bowed her head in unison. In compliance.

“Well...damn.” Alaric breathed out as he, Caroline and the boys stood behind Freya and Keelin.

Freya looked at them and smiled. “Your girls truly are astounding.”

“I’m guessing we’re just witnessing the beginning of their ascent.” Caroline said as she knelt down beside Penelope.

Her daughters, both rushed at her and tackled her to the ground playfully as they licked at her face. Her laughter filled the room with happiness.

Hope wandered up to enjoy the scene and settled beside Penelope. The girl dropped her hand on Hope’s head and patted at her fondly. “I promise, I’ll be brave enough next time.”

Hope licked at her hand, so Penelope let her.

“I’m actually excited...you all make it look fun. And I’m not about to feel left out. Not after you promised me that I had a right to be here. To stay.” Penelope continued.

“So...they changed at will?” Alaric asked after a while.

“They did.”

“And can they change back just as easily?” Caroline asked as she finally stood from the floor and dusted herself off.

“Why don’t we let them try.” Keelin suggested. Then she corralled them out of the room and left the wolves on their own.
Threat Assessment

Chapter Notes

After last night's wonderful Hosie...I wanted to further reward you all. Enjoy! And come yell with me on twitter!!

The girls were cornered, Hope’s mind worked overtime to try to figure out how to get them out of this. They had been training with the boys for a few hours before it was apparent to Alaric and Freya that they needed to up the ante. Which is why, Penelope, Josie, Lizzie and Hope were currently back to back being surrounded.

“I say we take out their weakest link first...we need to eliminate them one by one.” Hope uttered only loud enough for her girls to hear her.

She scanned the area trying to assess who was the weakest.

“Or...do we take on the leader...leave them in disarray?” Josie wondered from Hope’s left.

Hope considered that. Freya was definitely the strongest. They were barely sheltering themselves from her magical attacks as it was. She wasn’t sure how much longer the protection field Penelope cast around them would hold.

“I say if the twins focus on Freya...Penelope and I can start eliminating the rest of them.” Hope suggested.

“I call dibs on Rafael, he’s really starting to piss me off.” Penelope growled under her breath.

“Great. You get him, and I’ll grab MG and Kaleb.” Hope added.

That would still leave them to face off against Keelin, Caroline, Alaric and Dorian. But at least it was a good start.

“Oh...on two...we break.” Josie whispered. “We have to move fast because once we separate...the protection field won’t be able to protect us anymore. We’ll be on our own.”

“We’ve got this. We’ll just have to go after Freya with everything we have. They said we have free range to use what powers we have. They need to see what we’re capable of.” Lizzie commented. “I say we show them that they don’t mess with our pack.”

“Sounds good to me. On three.” Hope said. “One. Two.”

“Three!” They all declared in unison as they took off in the direction of their targets.

It took Hope all of three seconds before she closed the distance on MG. She lunged at him, and caught him while he was mid-punch. She grabbed his outstretched arm and used her momentum to spin them in a half circle before throwing him full force at Kaleb. Even though it knocked them both down, she ran to meet them before they stood up and “staked” them with some practice Eskrima sticks.
“MG and Kaleb you’re out of the fight.” Emma called from the bleachers.

Hope smirked at them as they groaned, not only in pain but, in frustration for losing. She continued to survey the room. Penelope used magic to throw Rafael into a wall, before she ducked a strike from Alaric.

“Rafael, you’re out.” Rebekah yelled.

Hope caught sight of the twins. Lizzie deflected every attack Freya threw at them--while Josie used any spell she could remember to go on the offensive and also ward off Dorian’s advances. They seemed to be holding her off fine, so Hope focused her attention on Caroline and Keelin.

Hope tried to separate the two, but planned to try to keep both far enough away from the others that they couldn’t assist their teammates or interfere with hers. Keelin transformed into a wolf mid run and jumped toward Hope, so Hope transformed to meet her in the air. The collision was brutal and nearly took Hope’s breath away. They landed on the gym floor with a loud thud, and Hope immediately recovered so she could wrestle Keelin to the ground.

She struggled to overpower the older wolf. Keelin had experience and years of control on her side. But Hope had intensive training of her own, and pure unchecked strength. Penelope flew by her line of sight as Alaric tossed her and attempted to advance on her. Caroline broke away from pursuing Hope and went to help Alaric take out Penelope.

Suddenly, both Keelin and Hope stopped struggling in awe as they saw a lightning bolt of power electrify the room. The entire place sizzled with so much raw energy that Hope’s fur stood on end. She glanced over to the twins and saw that Josie was not only extending her hand to quickly eliminate Dorian from the game, but also one hand was extended toward Penelope. And just as quickly, Caroline and Alaric were hit with a magical burst coming from Penelope that sent them cascading across the room and tumbling into the wall on the other side.

“Fuck.” Alaric groaned as he struggled to get up. But Caroline recovered faster and was in a dead sprint toward Penelope again.

Penelope grinned at the twins. “Thanks for the power up!”

Hope bared her teeth in a show of pride before turning her attention back on the still stunned wolf. She bit into Keelin’s neck with enough force to make the other wolf howl in pain.

“Alright. Alaric, Dorian and Keelin, you’re out.” Emma said in awe. “It looks like now it's four on two.”

Hope transformed back into her human self, not at all caring that she was completely naked at this point. It was basically war. And in war; you did what had to be done.

Penelope struggled against Caroline, now that the blonde vampire was effectively pissed off. So Hope went to her assistance. As they surrounded Caroline and both used magic in an attempt to subdue her, Freya cried out in pain of her own. The twins had stopped going on defense and had just decided to be done with it. Hope felt the power that was being drained from Freya and she felt some of it transfer into her. She glanced at Penelope, who smirked at her and actually winked as she made a show of checking her out. Hope rolled her eyes and nodded her head toward Caroline to remind the girl that they still had work to do. So, Penelope helped her as they “finished” Caroline off with a burst of lightning meant to maim, not kill. Maybe they tried a little harder than necessary, but they were ready to be done with the exercise.
Caroline screamed in pain before she collapsed from the attack. She struggled to breathe with uneven and labored puffs on breath. She glared at them as she dutifully left the ring.

“Freya...you calling it quits yet? It’s just you.” Rebekah asked her sister with a bit of concern in her voice.

Freya staggered from the power drain, but she didn’t give up. She tried spell after spell as the twins easily deflected them. Hope and Penelope shared a nod before they ran to them and, once again, they were huddled underneath a protective cloak of magic.

“We drained her of almost all her power...I say we give it all back to her.” Lizzie smirked.

Each of the witches smiled in conspiratorial glee. And then unleashed everything they had on the woman. Within reason. Enough to properly subdue her. Enough to cause her a bit of stress and pain. And enough to rub it in her face that they had won. That they just bested the most powerful witch in existence.

Freya fell to the ground in a hump of pain and anger. She let out a string of curses.

The room fell silent. Hope heard nothing but the throbbing hearts of the girls around her. Soon MG, Kaleb, Raf and Landon came rushing at them.

“That was so amazing!” MG yelled as he handed a blanket for Hope to wrap herself up in.

“Thanks.” She blushed now that she was out of survival mode; she had the decency to be, at least, somewhat modest.

“Yeah...kind of feeling better about being forced to sit this one out.” Landon admitted with a small smile.

“I’ll be feeling the impact of that wall for days. And I have super-healing.” Rafael commented.

Hope smiled at them, hugged Josie and kissed her on the cheek with pride. Then she left to check on her Aunt Freya.

“You alright?” She wondered as she approached.

“I’ll survive.” She winced. “Barely. What the hell did you guys do to me?”

“They drained you of your power...then we released it all back to you. I think you were overwhelmed with the power surge.” Hope told her.

Freya’s eyes widened. “The control that they have...it still amazes me. And did you see how they literally transferred power to Penelope?”

Hope nodded happily.

“Alaric’s lucky he had your blood in his system before we started this training….I honestly don’t think he would have survived that blow if he didn’t.” Freya added thoughtfully. “And Caroline is pissed.”

“Aren’t you?”

“How can I be? What the four of you were able to accomplish with just a few hours of practicing as a team...I mean...it’s like you always know where each other are. And you instinctively know when one of you is in trouble. Filtering power back and forth to each other….I just...I thought I understood
pack life...from Keelin, but she’s just as amazed as I am.”

Speaking of Keelin, the woman had transformed back and was limping toward them. She had a blanket over herself now as well.

“Remind me never to actually get on your bad side.” She told Hope with a genuine smile, even if it masked some of her pain.

Alaric clapped his hands together to gain everyone’s attention, then grimaced in pain as he did so. The group gathered around and listened to him speak.

“Alright...great job everyone. We learned a lot of very valuable information today.” He told them before pausing to hug and kiss each of his daughters with pride. “Rebekah and Emma took notes as they watched us. They have some highlights for us all. They also compiled a list of each of our own individual strengths and weaknesses, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of each team. We need to know what we should emphasize in a fight, and what we need to compensate for. So, let’s give the floor up to the two of them for a moment.”

“We’ll go over the broad stuff for now and the overall things we noticed. Then we’ll do the individual and team stuff after you all take a break.” Rebekah told them. “The way that the girls all worked together was the reason they won this fight...well one of the reasons. They divided and conquered and they worked as a team, whereas the other group seemed to be more all for themselves. We can all see how well that worked out.”

Rebekah smirked at Freya’s glare. Then she winked at Hope. Hope couldn’t help chuckling.

“Freya was basically on her own after Dorian was out, if anyone had assisted or defended her rather than leave her to fight someone else...the outcome may have been different. We’ve compiled a list of strengths and weaknesses that we plan to share with everyone later. We need you to know and understand what your teammates are capable of as well as yourselves. You can be the strongest witch in the room...but if you’re fighting alone, it’s a losing battle.” Rebekah added.

“Okay. I get it.” Freya groaned petulantly. “I get that maybe I needed assistance, and should have known how and who was best able to assist me. I honestly did think that brute force and superior magic were our best strengths, that mistake is on me.”

“I did tell her that we should focus on the twins. If we had taken them out from the start, the game would have been over in no time.” Alaric commented.

Hope and Penelope growled in unison.

Keelin laughed out loud. “Easy girls. You already handed us our asses, you don’t need to fight anymore.”

“I think one thing to note, because some of you learned it the hard way...is that no longer just one thing works against these girls. Penelope might have been an easier target if she was just a witch...but you forgot about her speed and strength as a new wolf...didn’t you Raf?” Emma stated and cut her eyes to Rafael in question.

“Yes, I thought I could have easily overpowered her. But I was wrong.”

“None of them are a single thing anymore...you can’t approach them as such. The weaknesses vampires or werewolves have...don’t necessarily affect witches. And vice versa. And also, if you think you’re fighting one of them...understand now, that they are linked...you are ultimately fighting all of them.” Emma continued.
“Would it stand to reason then...if we took out one of them...that the link would be severed or at least dampened?” Kaleb wondered.

Freya and Keelin both shook their heads.

“I’m pretty sure if you injure one of them...that the wrath you face will be three times more severe.” Hope growled protectively. “It may disorient us...but it won’t stop us. And I’m warning you all now...if you mess with my pack...I don’t care who you are...you’re dead.”

“Hey...that wasn’t a threat. I was making sure. If we’re out on the battlefield together and I’m expecting you to have my back...but one of them goes down...I wanted to know where I stood.”

“I will never choose you over any of them. That’s where you stand.” Hope spat out.

She felt three hands rest on her shoulders and instantly calmed down. “Sorry.” She whispered with a small apologetic smile. “I’m still amped from the fight.”

“Understandably.” Rebekah nodded. “Why don’t we all take a break. Hope and Keelin go put some new clothes on. Emma and I will work on the list and we’ll all grab a bite to each and meet back here in two hours.”

They all mumbled their goodbyes and broke away. Hope and her friends talked excitedly as they made their way up to their rooms.

“Seriously...the power surge thing is my new favorite thing.” Penelope declared with excitement.

“I still can’t believe you flung our parents into a wall. Hard.” Lizzie stated with trepidation. “We’re probably going to be so grounded.”

Josie smiled. “But...it was worth it.”

Lizzie grinned too. “It was so worth it.”

Hope laughed at that. “I think your mom will be more pissed that her team lost than she is that it was her daughters who basically handed her ass to her.”

“Yes, she’s always been competitive. Family game nights were brutal.” Lizzie deadpanned. “You think she’s vicious, trying playing Monopoly with her.”

“So...the two of you can extract power and expel it. You can transfer it. What else is there for us to try out? I want our next training session to be even more epic.” Penelope mused as they walked down the hall and settled in front of Hope’s room.

Hope unlocked and opened her door as they continued talking.

“And the way that both you and Keelin were able to transform in mid-air...that might be my new favorite thing...even better than the power up.” She frowned. “No...I’m not sure. They were both pretty awesome.”

“You only liked the wolf thing because you got to see them naked afterward. You’re so horny. There’s probably pills you can take for that.” Lizzie groaned with a disgusted frown.

“There probably are, but why would I want them?” Penelope answered with a smirk.

Lizzie threw her hands in the air with exasperation and collapsed on Hope’s bed dramatically.
“She’s just jealous because you have a sex life and she doesn’t.” Hope commented as she grabbed a change of clothes and headed to the bathroom.

“I could! I almost did!” Lizzie yelled to Hope’s back.

“And I don’t anymore.” Penelope admitted. “I like sex…” Hope paused and turned to glance at Penelope as she continued to speak. “It’s just… I may talk about it a lot, but I’m not really like that. Not in the way you think.”

Hope stared at her as she talked, then remembered why they were in her room in the first place. “Hold that thought...I want to get dressed quick and then I want to hear what you have to say.”

Hope put her clothes on as fast as possible, then she rejoined the girls on her bed. Penelope looked at them awkwardly and vulnerably. Then she sighed loudly and readied herself to speak.

“You don’t owe anyone an explanation.” Josie told her quietly. “You told me why it happened and I understood...it’s none of Lizzie’s business.”

Hope nodded her head in agreement. “Josie’s right. It’s not our place to judge or to force you to explain anything you don’t want to.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry. I’m just exhausted and starving and I’m taking it out on you. I don’t even really mean it. I’m mostly over it all anyway.” Lizzie added.

“Except that you’re not. Because you brought it up. I hurt Josie and you forgive me. And you even like me. But part of you will always wonder why until I tell you.” Penelope admitted.

Lizzie looked guilty.

“Hey, I don’t even blame you. I hated it at the time...but I do like the way you look out for Josie. You do have her best interest at heart. Sometimes, you didn’t always go about it in the right or best way, just like me.” Penelope told her.

Hope got more comfortable on the bed and Josie curled into her as they patiently waited for Penelope to be ready to say what was on her mind. Josie reached over and took Penelope’s hand in her own, which caused the other girl to smile at her with so much adoration and love that even Hope could sense the feeling.

“I told you about my parents...about how they basically abandoned me. Or kicked me out or disowned me. However you want to say it. Anyway...I have...issues okay, and maybe, sometimes...I use sex as a means for intimacy or...I used to. It’s like...I...I never wanted to allow myself to care about anyone else again, because I didn’t want to feel that....pain of not being good enough. Of them not wanting me back. And I was so good at just not caring about anyone or anything...until Josie. And it was so amazing for a while...but then the doubt crept in. And I would see the way Lizzie hated me...the way that she made Josie sometimes feel like she wasn’t good enough….and I just...I self-sabotaged. Instead of actually communicating with Josie about how I felt...and what was going on in my head...I kept attacking Lizzie. I attacked her because she made me feel small and unwanted...like my parents had. And I lashed out at Josie because of it. And then, when I felt Josie pulling away...I was so scared of losing her....of her telling me that I wasn’t enough for her....that I...I...I made sure that it was my choice. My decision. So I ruined the only good thing in my life....because I was too scared to fight for it. Because I was too scared to admit that I was scared. That I was hurting. And that I had something in my life that actually mattered to me that I was too scared of losing. So instead of risking losing it...I shattered it to pieces. It was selfish and mean, and so childish...but at the moment, I was thinking that...that I wanted Josie to hurt as bad as I did.
Because maybe that meant that she actually did love me, too.”

Penelope spoke the words without emotion...but Hope knew it to be a lie. Her lack of emotion meant that she felt too much and she forced herself to seem apathetic just to get through the speech. Hope couldn’t help feeling that the story could have pretty much been her story. That...if Josie hadn’t almost died...if the fear of losing Josie to death didn’t scare her more than the fear of rejection, then the story Penelope told may have just as well been her own life.

Josie tugged at Penelope until the girl fell into her. Then she wrapped her arms around her. Penelope’s arms snaked around Josie as well. And Hope scooted closer into Josie so that she could embrace both of them.

Lizzie sat there in stunned silence. Her eyes were wide and filled with tears, and her mouth had fallen open.

“I didn’t say all of that so you’d feel sorry for me, Saltzman.” Penelope told her with a bit of sadness mixed with her usual mirth. “I told you so you’d understand. The way I figure it. The more we open up to each other. The less barriers we have standing between us and the more real we are with each other...it will only make our link stronger. And if we succeeded today having only been a true back for a couple of days...then imagine what we can do when we innately understand and feel each other. When we can read each other as well as ourselves.”

Hope smiled at that. It was true. Their bond as a pack would only continue to strengthen the more they bonded as actual friends.

“And when I transform as a wolf...when I can do it on command the way you all do...that will cement our bond, I think. At least, I would assume so.”

Hope nodded. “I agree. I think that the more time we spend as wolves, the stronger we’ll be--even in human form. And I also think that it’s good that we have a real bond as friends...because...I can honestly admit...that pack or not...you guys are my life. You’re my family. And have somehow become my reason for living.”

“Fuck really?” Lizzie full on sobbed now. “I’m not even over Penelope’s speech yet and you go and say something like that.”

Penelope pulled Lizzie into the rest of them and the four of them laughed and cried together for another five minutes.

“I know I keep saying this...but I’m sorry I was such a bitch to you for so long.” Lizzie admitted barely above a whisper.

“I didn’t tell you that story to make you feel like shit. I told you so you’d think I was less of a piece of shit.” Penelope admitted softly.

And it was that admission that completely broke Hope.

“Okay. First of all. Lizzie you’re not a bitch. You care about people too much sometimes that you feel the need to cover it up with sarcasm and sometimes mean remarks. But it’s obvious to anyone who takes the time to actually know you that you do care. And you do care about Josie most of all. Why don’t you admit to Penelope the real reason why you were so mean to her.” Hope stated firmly.

“I...I...at first it was because I didn’t think that Josie really liked you that much...because I thought she was interested in someone else. God. I knew she always had a crush on Hope.”
“You did?!” Josie screeched.

“And I didn’t think that you’d be around long, so I didn’t want to bother getting to really know you. But then...when I saw that Josie actually was in love with you...that she was defending you and sticking up for you...to me…”

“You did that for me?” Penelope asked Josie in awe and Josie blushed.

“I guess I just...I was scared that she would choose you...over me. And Josie is all I have. So...I...I tried to sabotage your relationship because I was just as scared of losing her as you were.”

Silence befell the room. Hope had guessed at some of it, but she hadn’t expected Lizzie to be so forthright. It impressed her a bit.

“I’m kind of pissed at both of you right now.” Josie admitted quietly. “Both of you ended up causing me to have my heart broken because you both thought you knew what was best for me. That you had the right to decide who I should love and how. And that really sucks. I cried for weeks for no reason. Because if you hadn’t both been monumental jackasses and actually talked to, I don’t know... then none of us had to hurt like that. It’s all so pointless.”

Penelope shifted in their embrace to face Josie, and Lizzie sat up as she hovered over her.

“You’re absolutely right. And I know we’ve already discussed some of this, so you know how sorry I am and how much I regret it...” Penelope told her seriously. “And Hope may not want to hear this part, but it does need to be said in case you’re wondering. Yes, I used to use sex as a substitute for actual intimacy or commitment. It had been my way to connect with someone without all the stupid emotional baggage that comes from relationships. It had been, until I dated you. That was all real.”

“I know.”

“Good. I just wanted to make sure that you didn’t feel like I used you for that part of it. Sex with you was mind blowing.” Her eyes widened and she stared at Hope in horror. “I didn’t...”

Hope rolled her eyes. “It’s fine. Josie needs to hear it. She needed to know that she mattered to you.”

Penelope smiled. “And yes, I cheated. Once and I hated myself even as I did it.” She bit her lip and lowered her gaze to avoid eye contact from everyone. “I haven’t been with anyone since. It hasn’t felt right to do so. And I know I need to eventually move on. But we keep joking about my sex life and I keep laughing it off. But I need you to know that you changed me. Ruined me, in a way. I know now, that I actually deserve better than being some idiot guy’s booty call. And I want more than that now, too.”

Hope smiled to herself at Penelope’s admission.

“I guess that leads to my second point. I wanted to tell you, Penelope, that you are better than that. That you deserve more. And that your parents are fucking assholes to have made you feel any less than amazing.” Hope told her.

Penelope met her eyes briefly before averting them as she blinked the wetness away.

“I feel like I’ve been hit by a Mack truck…” Lizzie admitted with a huff of hot air. “But also...I don’t know...lighter in a way. More whole.”

“The truth will set you free.” Josie told her as she sighed. “It felt good to yell at you even if I felt immediately guilty afterward.”
Lizzie shook her head. “Don’t feel guilty. We both deserved it. We may not be the people we were, but that doesn’t mean that the damage we inflicted on you back then vanished just because we wish we hadn’t done it. You need to be just as honest with us, about that pain, if we’re all going to heal.”

“Going forward...can we all just agree that it’s my life and I get to be the one who lives it. I may make mistakes and get hurt along the way...but I want to be the one making those choices. I want to be the one who decides how I want to live and who I want to share my life with and all those important things. And all the small ones too.” Josie told them. Then she turned to Hope. “You’ve already been so great about this. You’ve given me so much space and autonomy. I worry that in doing so though...that you’re choosing my happiness over your own. And you already promised me you wouldn’t do that. You told me that you would let me know if I do anything that hurts you or affects your own healing and your own journey.”

Hope touched her hand reverently to Josie’s cheek. Then she leaned closer to her and gazed into her eyes so Josie could see the truth in them. “Seeing you happy makes me happy. It’s as simple as that. If I need or want something specific...if anything changes...you will be the first to know. I promise.”

Josie smiled and leaned up to kiss her. Hope instantly deepened the kiss.

Distantly, she heard Lizzie’s groan as the blonde climbed off the bed and excused herself from the room. But mostly, Hope craved Josie. Watching her in their mock battle this afternoon was exhilarating. It made her proud. It filled her with relief to know that Josie was capable of taking care of herself so that when the real fight did come, Hope wouldn’t have to worry about protecting Josie and trying to save herself. But she could also admit that it turned her incredibly on to have such a powerful mate.

Penelope cleared her throat and pulled Hope back to the present. She slowly pulled away from Josie with regret.

“I just wanted to remind you I was here before you started ripping each other’s clothes off.” Penelope smirked at them with darkened eyes.

Josie blushed and Hope knew she had as well.

“I didn’t peg you for the type that preferred an audience though.” Penelope teased.

Hope rolled her eyes and further distanced herself from Josie. “You could have left when Lizzie did.”

This time it was Penelope who blushed and she didn’t even have a proper retort. Hope decided to file that information away for later.

“Where did Lizzie go? We have over an hour before we have to get back. We could have all grabbed dinner together.” Josie asked.

Penelope shrugged. “Probably met up with the boys. We can head that way too, if you want to.”

Hope really didn’t want to. Josie chewed on her lip in contemplation. Hope could sense that she didn’t really want to either. Eventually Penelope picked up on it too, and her eyes widened.

“Right. Okay. I’m going to go down there and grab food. I’ll grab you both a plate before the cafeteria closes.” She climbed off the bed. “Don’t be too long. We can’t be late for the big team meeting.”

They waited until the door closed behind Penelope before they burst out in laughter.
“I can’t believe we forgot they were here.” Josie giggled.

Hope hadn’t forgotten completely, she just hadn’t cared in that moment. And she didn’t regret it either.

Josie slowly sobered up. “Do you really think Penelope’s as okay with us as she says she is?”

Hope thought about it. She remembered the way that Penelope checked her out earlier. And how this had been the second time Penelope had been present during a makeout session. She didn’t at all seem bothered by it...not the way Josie was asking. She seemed more...Hope shook her head. Nope. She was not going to entertain that train of thought.

She smirked at Josie predatorily. “We finally have a few minutes to ourselves. Do you really want to be talking about Penelope right now?”

Josie’s eyes lit up bright yellow and she shook her head rapidly. “Not at all.”

Hope pushed Josie down so that she had her back to the mattress and then straddled her. “Ever since we sparred yesterday...I’ve been wanting to try so many things with you.”

Josie visibly swallowed and her glowing eyes flashed brighter. Hope felt a spark of energy pass through them. And it was enough to spur her into action.

She bent down and kissed Josie hungrily. She slightly bit down on Josie’s bottom lip causing the brunette to moan into her mouth. Hope pressed more fully into her...grinding into her for a bit of friction. Josie’s hands began to wander up Hope’s body and resting just underneath Hope’s shirt, touching her bare skin with a bit of electricity humming through her fingers. The desire that Hope felt was all-encompassing.

She pulled away simply to catch her breath before she re-attached her lips to Josie. This time her mouth landed on Josie’s pulse point and she nipped her a bit before she licked it with a long caress of her hot tongue. Josie’s hips bucked in response, and her hands dug into Hope’s bare waist. Hope sucked that same spot with intention as her hands wandered with abandon. And when she knew that she had left her mark, she pulled away with a proud smirk.

Josie tried to control her own breathing as she looked at Hope intensely. Her eyes were no longer glowing yellow...they were completely black. Her pupils were blown and Hope was entirely certain hers matched them.

“I’m already yours...did you really feel the need to claim me?” Josie asked with a raised eyebrow as she touched at her bruised neck.

“Don’t worry, it’ll probably heal by the time we get downstairs.” Then Hope heaved a gigantic sigh. “Unfortunately.”

Josie smiled at her. “And here I thought you were the one that wanted to take things slowly.”

Hope understood it was the right thing to do. She knew that they should be. And she would try her best to take their time. To have fun. To work up to it. But she also wasn’t sure if she could control herself when it all came down to it. Josie seemed just as into it as she was, so until Josie actually asked to slow things down...Hope would continue to do what they were doing. Or maybe…

“Is this okay? I know what I said and I’m completely fine with throwing it all out the window. I mean...we’re facing the end of the world here, we can’t possibly expect to wait until everything is honkey dory and all that...right?”
Josie laughed out loud.

“What?” Hope frowned.

“I promise I’m not laughing at you. I think it’s sweet that you’re so eager and that you’re checking in...and I know that we still have a lot to deal with and all that....but I also know that I’ve wanted this...you...for longer than I care to admit. So as much as I appreciate you checking in and, I am huge on consent, just know that you don’t ever have to worry whether or not I want it. Want you.” She did her best to sit up a bit, but struggled with Hope still straddling her. So Hope adjusted herself so that she was on Josie’s lap and helped the brunette sit up properly. “But something Penelope said really struck me...and I just need you to know...that whenever we do make that leap...when we do have sex. That it isn’t the endgame for me. It isn’t what I’m looking for with you. That I don’t need it with you to be happy. I need you to know that. You mean more to me that just that. And I’m not saying I don’t want it, because have you seen yourself?” Hope laughed through her blush. “I just want you to know that I want everything with you.”

Hope leaned in and caught Josie in another kiss. Only this one was soft and filled with adoration and respect.

“I love you.” She whispered against Josie’s smooth, pink lips and felt Josie smiled against her.

“I love you, too.”

Hope pulled away and rested her forehead against Josie’s. “Always and forever.”

Josie smiled and touched her fingers to Hope’s mouth. “And every second in between.”

They kissed again. Leisurely. In a way, it felt like coming home. Hope had finally found her place in this world. And it was wherever Josie was. Because Josie was home.

Josie pulled away this time. “I think we should head downstairs before we miss dinner and the meeting completely.”

Hope climbed off Josie slowly and then sat on the bed and just stared at her. “You’re truly the most beautiful person I’ve ever seen.”

Josie blushed and looked away awkwardly.

“No, don’t do that. You don’t get to compliment me and say wonderful things and then not let me say them back.” She crawled back toward Josie. “You are beautiful. Gorgeous. Insanely sexy. And I mean...I don’t know if you realize this...but I might have just become addicted to you.” She smiled at her. “But seriously. You also happen to have the most amazing soul I’ve ever had the pleasure to witness. I’m better for knowing you. I would say that I’m trying to be better for you. But you made me realize that I’ve got to be better for me. And I promise....I’m doing that.”

“Gah!” Josie tackled Hope and the tribrid landed flat on her back as Josie kissed her senseless. “How are we supposed to make it out of here when you say stupidly adorable stuff like that.”

Hope laughed. Then she playfully pushed Josie away from her. “Get away from me woman, I am more than your sexual plaything.”

Josie blushed and giggled. But she climbed off the bed and Hope followed her. They walked downstairs hand in hand.

Their friends were already nearly finished eating when they joined them in the cafeteria. There was
space on one side of the table between Lizzie and Penelope, so Hope and Josie squeezed between them. Hope immediately rested her hand on Josie’s thigh and absent-mindedly drew shapes on her bare leg with her fingers as she ate. She had always felt compelled to be around Josie, even before they were friends. Even when they were more frenemies (Lizzie’s words, not hers). In fact, she often sought them out knowing that their interaction would likely end in insults and tears (Lizzie publicly cried, whereas Hope always did alone), just to be near Josie for a little while. It should have hit her then, just what Josie meant to her. But now that she got a taste (and yes, her mind did wander a bit at the thought…) of what it was like to be near Josie all the time, to be free to touch her and kiss her and…

“You do realize I can feel what you’re feeling right?” Penelope whispered as she leaned in close to Hope. “I mean…I’m not complaining, but if I can feel it, I’m pretty sure the others can too.”

Hope blushed deeply at that. She spared at glance at Josie who was smirking slightly with a blush.

“Shit? Are you serious right now?” Hope whispered to Penelope with annoyance. “I’m not even trying to think about it…it just sort of…” Hope sighed. It was all Josie’s fault.

“Hey, it’s a natural thing. You’re human...sort of. Well, not really. God, I’m bad at the whole pep talk thing.” Penelope sighed dejectedly. “Gossip I can do. Insults and flirting are my forte…”

“Yeah, you’re not helping.” Hope said under her breath. Then a horrible thought hit her. “If you can...sense those types of feelings...does that mean Lizzie can as well? If so. I’m screwed.”

Penelope cackled at that. “Screwed huh? Isn’t that why you’re in this mess in the first place.”

Hope slapped at her when she spoke a little too loudly for her liking. “Shut up.”

“Are you doing okay over there?” MG asked as he studied them. By the uncomfortable way he shifted in his seat--he had heard most of the conversation and likely guessed the gist of what he had missed.

Hope’s eyes scanned the room and realized that Rafael and Lizzie sported similar looks. She hated that her friends had supernatural hearing.

“Fuck my life.” Hope growled and slammed her head down on the table.

Penelope laughed harder. “Again...with that choice of words, really?”

“Can we please not talk about sex when it’s my sister you’re talking about.” Lizzie groaned.

Josie took things rather well, however, given the intense and embarrassing spotlight that suddenly shown on her.

“So the full moon’s tonight...how does that affect crescent wolves, other than us being able to control our change?” Josie gratefully saved Hope from more humiliation.

“I’ve never really been all that affected by my wolf side other than the occasional angry outburst...which I usually just attribute to my being a Mikaelson. But I do tend to need more run time the closer I am to the full moon. Either running, or expelling my energy in other ways.”

Penelope snorted.

Hope glared at her. “I meant through sparring or going on missions to keep my mind busy.”
“Is that typical of evolved wolves or is that an exaggerated response because of the full moon?” Rafael wondered.

Hope shrugged. “I think it’s typical. The wolf is not a curse or some hand-me down gene that you inherit...no offense.” She frowned. She wasn’t explaining it right. When Josie’s hand rested on hers, it helped her regain her focus. Hope smiled at her girlfriend and took a slow, steady breath before she continued. “It’s literally a part of me. Like...I don’t feel whole when I don’t embrace the wolf side often. You guys only have to transform once a month...but if I don’t do so more often than that...I actually feel...I get depressed. I feel incomplete. I don’t know how else to explain it. I crave it. I need it.”

“And does that mean we will, too?” Penelope looked uncertain. Or perhaps, worried. Worried she wouldn’t be able to change on command. Worried that if she couldn’t find a way, that she would always be missing a large part of herself.

Hope rested her free hand on Penelope’s shoulder and squeezed softly before she smiled at her encouragingly. “You’ll be fine, Penelope. We’ll be there with you as you learn to change….as long as it takes to make you feel comfortable with that side of you. And maybe it will be different for you, I can only tell you how I feel.”

Penelope nodded and forced a smile in return.

“But I can tell you that Keelin was right. You’ll have more of an appetite, you’ll feel restless sometimes, you probably won’t like mornings...sleep is good.” Hope told her.

Josie leaned across Hope to look at Penelope as she spoke. “And once you do change...it truly is liberating. Hope was right. You feel free.” She smiled brightly and held Penelope’s hand on top of the table. “And wrestling and playing and running together...it’s so much fun. I can’t wait for you to join us.”

Penelope nodded. Hope let her hand fall from Penelope’s shoulder, and rested it atop of Josie’s hand; so that the three of them were connected. She felt warmth flood through her. She raised an eyebrow, because she knew that the feeling had come from Penelope and not just her.

Hope noticed Landon raise his hand and looked at him more fully.

“I have a question.” He grew shy as everyone’s eyes fell on him. “Since you’re all witches...can you access your magic as wolves?”

Hope shook her head. “In my experience, it doesn’t work that way. I’d assume that you are either one or the other.”

“But Emma and Rebekah said before that you’re both...that we can’t fight you as one or the other.” Landon stated.

“True. Each of the sides compliment and strengthen the other. It will make it harder for you to focus on the best way to fight us. But that doesn’t mean I can start sprouting magic out of my paws.”

MG’s eyes lit up. “Imagine if you could though...how dope that would be!”

The girls rolled their eyes at him.

“So...if you were wolves...and got bitten by a vampire or anything strong enough...would it kill you?” Rafael asked.
“Not me.” She furrowed her eyebrows in thought. “You three are still vulnerable to things that I’m not...we need to figure out if I can change you soon.”

“Don’t you think we should get used to being wolves first before you throw vampire blood into the mix?” Lizzie argued.

“I think I’d probably make a better vampire.” Penelope declared.

“That’s true. You certainly do have the temperament for it.” Kaleb teased.

Penelope stiffened. Hope sensed her regret instantly. Penelope didn’t want to be that kind of person anymore. She wanted to be remembered for more than the spiteful and bitchy ‘It Girl.’

Kaleb raised his hands in apology when he realized his joke was taken the wrong way. “I was just teasing. I thought that’s what we do. We all pick on each other.”

Lizzie glanced at her phone. “We really should wrap this up and head back to the gym.”

The others nodded in unison. The boys began chatting away amicably again, but Penelope remained a bit more subdued than usual. Hope made a mental note to check in on her later if her demeanor didn’t change soon.

They went as a group to the gym and were not at all surprised that the adults were already inside waiting for them. They took their seats in the bleachers.

“Alright, we were able to discuss a few things while you were away, and we have a lot of information to throw at you so make yourselves comfortable.” Emma addressed the cabal. “First things first, we’ll address each person’s individual strengths and weaknesses. Not to pick on any of you or to point fingers at someone. We simply need to know how best to work as a cohesive unit. So, like we said before, knowing your team’s capabilities is our greatest asset.”

Hope listened intently as Emma and Rebekah listed off the pros and cons each person had to offer the team. She had already figured most of them out during their last war games training session. MG and Kaleb were very strong, but they were also newer to their supernatural abilities so they had a lot of room for improvement when it came to control and understanding the power they possessed; and using it to the entire team’s advantage. They were also not as skillful fighters as the rest of the team. Aside from Penelope, Lizzie and Josie...they were the least skilled fighters in hand to hand combat.

Rafael was a more skilled fighter than the others, but he was the newest to inherit is powers (apart from her pack, who she was proud to admit were already leaps and bounds ahead of Rafael in self-control and self-awareness). Whereas MG and Kaleb were basically immortal, pending certain vampiric killing options, Rafael wasn’t nearly as invincible. Just as they had spoken about at lunch, he could kill vampires with his bite. But he was also able to get killed far more numerous ways that the others could, especially since he couldn’t transform on command and would likely be fighting most of the battle as a superpowered human not a wolf.

Keelin, Dorian and Caroline were nearly invincible and were fierce fighters and skilled in combat. But they, just as all the others, were susceptible to magic. And that was their biggest downfall. If they were able to counter magical spells, then they would truly be threats to anyone they fought.

Freya was the wild card. She had supreme control of her powerful, but she was unfortunately and ultimately human and, therefore, mortal. If she were to lose her power, then she would be an easy target. The same went for Emma. As a witch she was a great ally, and she was a tremendous fighter (or so she was told) but she was also mortal.
And that left Alaric, who was mortal as well. A human in a supernatural world. And he also happened to be the father of two people Hope loved more than life. She even loved the old man herself. So, although Alaric was a skilled fighter...probably the best of the bunch...he was still someone Hope would worry about in a fight. The same went for her Aunt Rebekah. And now, Landon. All three human. All three a liability as far as Hope was concerned.

Before Rebekah had even finished her threat analysis on each member of the group, Hope had enough.

“Can we address the elephant in the room?” Hope interrupted, but not unkindly. “We’re well aware of what most of the group has to offer. And as a team, I think we actually stand a chance. But we do have some liabilities in this fight and it’s to all of our advantage to address them.”

Rebekah and Freya glanced at each other. They knew what she was talking about, or at least they were able to deduce on who those liabilities most likely were.

“We already discussed the fact that every human here will be using your blood as a backup plan. We’ll keep it in our system until the threat is over...or until the blood does its job and turns us.” Rebekah was the one who answered.

Hope understood what she meant. They were all willing to give up their humanity….perhaps not only to win the fight, but most likely, to prevent others from dying just to protect them. Which is exactly what Hope would have done, had it come down to it. Because Freya, Rebekah, and Alaric meant too damn much to her for her not to be worried about their safety in the fight.

But did that mean….

“Are you saying...we’ll take it, too? Like already...before we really know how being a wolf affects us?” Lizzie questioned.

Rebekah nodded. “We wouldn’t ask it…” She frowned and shook her head. “We wouldn’t require it of you, if we thought there was a better way. If the two of you are our best bet at stopping this whole end of the world thing...than we need to ensure you stay alive to see it through.”

Hope felt Josie’s determination as the brunette nodded resolutely. “I understand.” Then she turned slightly to face her sister. “We already planned on this, remember? It’s just happening a little bit sooner than we anticipated. But hey, it won’t even matter...until it does. And at that point, I know I’ll be happy we did it.”

Hope held Josie’s hand in solidarity and support. Lizzie and Penelope both nodded in agreement with Josie.

“So now that that issue is resolved, I’d assume to your satisfaction…” Rebekah raised an eyebrow at Hope. Hope nodded.

“Then let us continue with our assessments. Penelope you’ll want to work on your control as a wolf tonight...and as often as you can after. We need you to be able to transform at will. Some monsters are best killed by werewolves and we need as many of them in this fight as possible.”

Penelope nodded resolutely. Josie rested her head on the girl’s shoulder and softly kissed her temple. “You’ll be fine. We’ve got this.” She whispered.

Hope smiled at the blush that covered Penelope’s face and neck.

“But you are a tremendous witch.” Emma continued her assessment of Penelope. “You are great
under-pressure. And your connection with the others in your pack will prove extremely beneficial in any fight.”

Penelope smiled proudly at that.

“Lizzie and Josie...you are by far our secret weapon.” Rebekah stated. “Sure, they may be after you and they know you are siphoners. But they don’t know what you are capable of and they don’t know you’re hybrids. So we can use that to our advantage. We actually would love to work with you a little more this evening before we call it a day. We need to know how strong you are separately. We’ve witnessed what you could do while in close proximity and working in tandem, but we need to know what else you’re capable of.”

Both girls nodded.

Freya stood up. “I would also like to work with you more on your ability to drain power. It was helpful when you were up against me...but that cannot happen during a fight. If you drain my power and I am useless…” She shook her head. “We need to find a way to amplify what you can siphon without draining us completely. We need to all be stronger in this fight...not weakened by our own teammates.” Then she smiled sincerely at them. “That in no way is me degrading or belittling what you’ve done today. This is me trying to find a way to make the two of you even more formidable. I know you can do what I’m asking of you.”

Lizzie sat up straighter with pride, while Josie glanced back at Hope with a smile that Hope mirrored.

“And that brings us to Hope.” Emma continued. “You have the combat skills, the strength, the magic and the connection with your pack...you are truly the strongest component on this team. And that’s why we’ve chosen you to lead it. Everyone, including myself, will defer to you when we’re in the field. What you say goes. No one argues. No one questions. We just listen. Got it?”

Everyone in the room nodded their heads. Hope had never felt more validated in her entire life. It felt fantastic.

“That being said…” Emma continued. “We will still have two squads. We need to have one team going on the offensive and the other will have to guard and protect the twins at all costs.” Emma grabbed the paper that Rebekah held out from her and read from it. “Okay. Team One will consist of Hope, Penelope, Lizzie, Josie, Landon, MG, and Caroline. Team Two, the attack team, will be Alaric, Dorian, Rebekah, Kaleb, Rafael, Keelin, Freya and myself. Depending on who we’re fighting, and how protected the veil is when we find it, these teams will be subjected to change. We’re working with our strengths here. And since these are the teams we think will work best together...we need to practice as a unit. So starting tomorrow, train with your team. Get to learn each other’s fighting styles. Get to learn what works and what doesn’t.”

“Alright...I think that’s all we have for you now. Hope you’ll have to go with Keelin to extract your blood. We’ll need enough for all of the ones we’ve already mentioned.” Rebekah told her. “Lizzie and Josie, you stay here and work with Freya. The rest of you are dismissed for the night.”

“Rafael, you’ll have to head down to the dungeons. We have to get you and the other werewolves chained in for the night. It’s only a few hours before sunset.” Alaric stated as he walked out of the room with Dorian, Emma and Rafael on his heels.

MG, Landon, Penelope and Caroline didn’t move from their seats, so Hope assumed that they were going to stay and watch the twins train. Which is exactly what she’d prefer to be doing. Rebekah and Keelin walked out of the room, so Hope disappointedly followed behind them.
The three of them walked silently toward the nurse’s office, which was basically just a small office room that had blood vials, needles, medicine and a few cots.

“So...are you going to go for a run with us tonight?” Hope asked Keelin as the woman set up the vials and prepared to draw some of Hope’s blood. Rebekah sat beside Hope and held her hand for moral support.

The older woman shook her head. “No, I think it’s important that you bond as a pack tonight. You need to have that time to yourselves.”

Hope nodded. “Speaking of packs and stuff...so, you know how we feel each other’s emotions?”

Rebekah’s eyes widened at that little tidbit of information. But Keelin simply nodded as she sliced Hope’s forearm and started to fill the first vial of blood.

“What if there are some things I don’t want all of them to feel?”

Keelin replaced the full vial with an empty one. Rebekah grabbed the vial from Keelin and she downed it with a grimace.

“I never thought I’d have to drink blood again.” She frowned. Then she shook her head. “Sorry, do go on, dear.”

“I just...some things are private, you know? And I don’t want Lizzie all up in my business...”

“When you’re thinking of having sex with her sister?” Rebekah completed the sentence with a smirk.


Keelin studied her. “What about Penelope?”

Hope’s eyes widened. “I haven’t thought about having sex with Penelope.”

The other women shared a look that made Hope’s stomach turn. Keelin filled another vial of blood as she handed the full one to Rebekah to hold on to.

“I was actually wondering if you were upset if Penelope knew what you were thinking or, rather, feeling.” Keelin said as she repeated the action again.

“Oh.”

“Is your connection different with Penelope than it is with Lizzie?” Keelin wondered softly.

“What do you mean?”

Keelin handed another full vial of blood to Rebekah and continued to fill a new one. “I’ve been wondering, since little is certain about the effects of actually turning someone. You bit Penelope. But not Lizzie. So have you noticed anything different in your connection between the two?”

Hope frowned. “Well, yeah. Penelope seems more attuned to me. Or maybe she’s just more blunt about it. But that doesn’t make sense, I didn’t bite Josie either.”

“Josie’s your mate.” Keelin pointed out as she handed yet another blood filled container to Rebekah.

“I know. Which is why it wouldn’t make sense for me to also care so much about Penelope.” Hope argued.
“Except that you do.” Rebekah said as she was handed more blood.

“I care about all of them. Deeply. Josie most of all.” Hope defended.

Keelin shook her head. “Does loving more than one person diminish your love for each of those people?” She filled the last one and sealed it. “I love Freya and my son, Elijah. I also love my pack, and all of you. Do you think that Freya feels any less loved simply because I also love others?”

Hope bit her lip. She didn’t feel less loved by Josie even though she knew that part of Josie still loved Penelope. She didn’t feel like she had to force Josie to choose her over Lizzie to feel more loved. And she didn’t feel the need to compete against Penelope at all. She felt the unconditional and absolute love Josie had for her. And she also had unconditional and absolute love for Josie. And lust. She absolutely was in lust with her girlfriend.

“So...you think that my intense connection with Penelope is because I bit her? Like...she’s special to me because of it?” Hope tried to work it out.

“I think that you allowed yourself to bite someone you already cared deeply about. I think she was able to change because of that connection, because most bites...I have to be honest...they kill. Or else the transformation could.”

Hope nodded. Then she sighed. “But you still haven’t answered my question. How do I keep people from feeling things I don’t want them to?”

“How do you keep the sun from rising?” Keelin asked wistfully.


“How would you like my advice?” Rebekah asked with a smile.

Hope eyed her suspiciously. “I’m not sure.”

Rebekah rolled her eyes. “Follow your heart. It hasn’t led you astray so far.” She rested her hand on Hope’s. “You deserve to be happy, Hope. And as your family...we will support you in every way we are able. No judgement.”

Hope smiled at her. “Thank you. That didn’t actually help me with my confusion or answer any of my problems. But it actually makes me feel better.”

Keelin laughed out loud. “Geez, I swear to God if Elijah is just like the rest of you Mikaelson’s, I’m in for it.”

Rebekah and Hope smirked at her and laughed together.

“You could only be so lucky.” Hope said as she hopped off the table.

“Someone’s in a rush to see her girlfriend kick ass.” Rebekah mused as she stood up as well.

When Hope reached the gym, the room was filled with smoke, there was a small fire in the corner by the armory room. And both Lizzie’s and Josie’s eyes were glowing bright yellow. She could see it through the smoke and from across the room. They were at separate corners of the basketball court as Freya stood near the door Hope had just walked through. Hope approached her aunt.

“What’s happening?” She asked.
“They were able to extract some of my power without my knowledge, and I’m assuming they were bolstered by some of Penelope’s so they basically just set fire to the school. Or, at least, some of it.”

“Could they not control it?” Hope wondered anxiously.

Freya grinned. “No, they controlled it. They did exactly what I asked them to do.”

Hope’s eyebrows shot up her forehead. “You asked them to start a fire in the school?”

Freya rolled her eyes. “I asked them to take my power without dampening my powers and not letting me be aware of it. Then I told them that if they could actually do it...they had to prove it.”

Rebekah laughed at that and Hope’s eyes lit up with pride.

“Well, what more proof do you need?” Rebekah asked her sister with mirth.

“I want to see what they’re capable of when I’m not in the room. I want to know how far away they can draw power from.”

Hope nodded in excitement. “Go upstairs to my room.” She told her aunt.

Freya smiled and walked away to do so.

“Hey, Josie, come over here. Lizzie you stay there.”

They did so. When Josie approached, she greeted Hope with a quick kiss that left the tribrid light-headed and deliriously happy.

“I missed you.” Josie smiled as she stepped away, but only slightly.

“I missed you, too.” Hope replied losing all train of thought.

Rebekah cleared her throat loudly and Hope blushed darkly.

“Oh, yeah. Sorry.” She grinned sheepishly at her aunt before addressing Josie. “Do you think that you and Lizzie can pull power from people you can’t see?”

Josie frowned a second and then nodded her head with certainty.

“Great. So, you and Lizzie...I want you both to also be in separate rooms. Not able to see each other.” Hope took a step forward. “Lizzie...go outside for a minute. I want you to siphon whatever power you can find and transfer it to Josie...”

Lizzie nodded and did what Hope told her to do.

“Penelope?”

The witch stood from the bleachers and ran over to her.

“Yeah, Coach?” She smirked and winked at her.

Hope blushed again and hit Rebekah when she laughed at her.

“I need you to go to the other side of the school. And let Josie have whatever power you are able to transfer to her.”

Penelope saluted at her and jogged off in the opposite direction that Lizzie had gone.
“I’m going to go sit on the bleachers. I want to test your power and your control. So take whatever you can take from everyone...but you know...not enough to actually hurt them.”

Josie nodded in understanding.

“Then I want you to expel it all. I want you to strike the bleachers...as close to me as you can manage. Don’t hold back. You know I can’t die. So...take our power and unleash it.”

Josie’s eyes widened. But she nodded anyway.

Hope went to turn for the bleachers and glanced to Rebekah who shook her head. “Nope, I’m good. I’m going to stay as far away from you as I can.”

Josie chuckled at that and Hope rolled her eyes. She went and sat in the center of the bleachers right directly in front of Josie.

“Alright, baby, go for it. Show me what you can do.” Hope grinned at her girlfriend.

Josie blushed at the term of endearment, then immediately closed her eyes to concentrate.

Hope watched in anticipation as she felt the power of her pack crackling in the air around her. She could already feel Lizzie and Penelope surrendering their magic to Josie, so she did the same. She waited and watched as the room grew dark and cold. Josie opened her eyes and they weren’t yellow or golden at all...they were bright orange with pure and uncharted power. It was breathtaking to see. She was breathtaking.

Fire erupted around Josie as power from the entire school...perhaps all the witches in it...filtered into her...and then lightning shot out of Josie’s fingertips and struck the the bleachers in a sizzle. Hope looked to her left...inches away from where she sat and stared in awe at the basketball sized hole burned into the wooden benches.

Josie showed precision and power. A strike of that magnitude would kill over a dozen people if Josie had chosen not to condense the burst into a small ball of magical lightning.

Josie’s eyes were already back to their beautiful brown and the lights in the room were longer dimmed. Lizzie came running in the room, Penelope arrived shortly after.

“We did it guys. We really did it.” Hope said with amazement.

“And just to prove that I could...I may have performed some magic of my own while she was siphoning it from me.” Penelope smirked as she opened her hand and revealed a golden rose in full bloom. “I wanted to make sure that even giving up most of our power to the pack...that we were not vulnerable.” Then she bowed her head and kneeled as she extended the flower to Josie. “For you, m’lady.”

Josie smiled widely and took the rose with reverence. “Thank you.” She looked around the room. “I made sure not to take enough from anyone else to have them actually notice they were being siphoned from.”

“But I could feel it. I could feel it all filtering from them through us...it felt...I can’t even describe it. It’s....” Hope tried to find the right word.

“Astounding.” Freya breathed as she walked in the room. “You siphoned my power from out of sight and left me enough to still use some magic on my own.”
Hope shook her head in amazement. “That’s not all they did.”

Hope filled her aunt in quickly as the rest of the group put out the fires and cleaned up the room. Keelin and Caroline also handed out the vile’s of Hope’s blood for each of the mortals in the room to consume; Hope’s pack included. She watched them with pride and a heart full of contentment, even as she spoke with her aunt. When she finished retelling the events she witnessed, Freya stared wide eyed.

“I actually have no words.”

Hope took that as the compliment it was meant to me.

“I’m also very impressed with how well you were able to command them. They listened without argument and have no doubt in your leadership.” Keelin commented when her task was complete. “A true and absolute Alpha all on your own.”

“Speaking of Alphas...and my pack...after that...experience, I really need to run.” Hope told them.

Rebekah raised an eyebrow. “Run? That’s what we’re calling it now?”

Hope shoved her as she walked away. “Yes, that’s what I’m calling it. Because that is all we’re doing.”

Hope led Josie, Lizzie, and Penelope out to the clubhouse and they got undressed one by one as they began to change. Lizzie went first, then Josie. Soon, it was just Hope and Penelope standing there watching the other wolves run around and play.

“After what we were able to do as a pack moments ago...imagine what we’ll be able to do when we are fully and completely linked. You’re a wolf, Penelope...you have to let yourself be one.”

Josie trotted up to Penelope and Hope when it was apparent that they weren’t ready to join then.

“We’re right here with you. I promise.” Hope told her one more time. Then she stepped closer to her and lifted her chin to make the other girl look at her instead of Josie. “I promise.”

Penelope bit her lip. “It’s not even the pain...it’s...I already feel this connected to you guys...if I really do this...if I give in and let myself be...and then I lose you...I’ve already lost her before, and what if I’m not a good enough wolf. Or I’m the weak link in the pack. Or…”

Hope shook her head rapidly. “No, hey, you’re already enough. And no one in our pack is weak. This will only make all of us stronger.” Hope sighed. “And you aren’t getting rid of any of us that easily. Josie’s not going anywhere. And for the record, you have me, too. Forever and always.”

Penelope’s gaze faltered as she looked at Hope with alarm and adoration in her watery eyes. But she recovered quickly.

“Right.” She closed her eyes and mentally prepared herself. Hope could feel the moment when the decision had been made. When Penelope opened her eyes, they were yellow. “You're right. I’ve got this.”

Penelope smiled at her fondly. Then she turned away to undress herself and it took her no more than three minutes to transform. She didn’t even howl in pain, she just...was. The black wolf took off running and Josie instantly shot off after her.

Hope quickly discarded her clothes and joined them. They ran together, all four of them. Hope led
them as they wind through trees and jumped over fallen logs. They wrestled around with each other and yelped with enjoyment.

If running as a wolf was freeing...running in a pack was exhilarating. It was a calm comfort wrapped up with excitement and wonderment and it all gave way to peace. Hope loved being a wolf. She had said it made her feel whole. Or complete. But she had been wrong. She hadn’t even realized that there had still been pieces of her that were missing...until now. NOW she felt so at ease within herself. Free was not a strong enough word, nor was liberated. She couldn’t describe what she felt other than pure unadulterated joy.

Unfortunately, when Josie’s howl echoed off the trees as the brown wolf stopped dead in her tracks and bared her teeth in a low growl...the joy Hope had just felt immediately turned to dread. Pure and simple fear for what she saw.

The school was under attack. And if that army of monsters had already gotten this far, that meant the night watch guards were dead. That meant that the protection charm had been dispelled. And it meant that their time had run out.
They took off in a dead sprint back to the clubhouse and transformed immediately. Hope was on the phone as she started to get dressed. She nodded reassuringly when she saw the others do the same. They needed to make sure everyone in the school was awake. They needed to warn them.

She launched right into a monologue as soon as Freya picked up. “Freya, they got in. There’s a whole army of monsters heading for the school. We’ll do our best to cut them off. But wake everyone up...and release the werewolves from the basement.”

She hung up her phone as she put her shirt on over her head and was now fully clothed. Josie had just hung up as well and was buttoning up her jeans. “Dad and Landon are heading to the armory. Mom’s on her way out here. We have to stop them before they get to the school.”

Hope nodded as she and Josie got a head start on the others. But Lizzie was quick to catch up. “MG’s on his way out with the vampires.”

“The witches are awake and they’re casting a stronger protection spell on the school.” Penelope added as she caught up to them as well.

They reached the edge of the treeline and saw that some of the monsters had veered away from the others and were heading right for them.

Before they had time to react, a flame of fire came from above and struck the ground right in front of them.

“Shit!” Penelope tripped trying to stop herself from running into the fire. She looked up. “A dragon?!”

Hope frowned. “We already killed a dragon. Please don’t tell me there are more than one of those things.”

Another burst of fire shot at them, but they were able to easily deflect it with magic.

“How’d you kill the last one?” Lizzie wondered.

“With the knife that Landon stole.”

“Well fucking perfect!” Josie cursed so loudly that it caught Hope off guard. Then the brunette raised her hands toward the dragon and started muttering a spell Hope didn’t recognize.

Lizzie smiled and raised her hands as well. They chanted in unison and instantly, the dragon fell out of the sky as it morphed back into a human.

“Hope…” Josie started.

“I’m on it.” She interrupted with a smirk as she ran at the unconscious human woman, bared her teeth and ripped into her neck with her fangs.

As she tore out the girl’s jugular, she rose with a nod and wiped at the blood on her chin with the back of her hand. Her eyes glowed red, as her two vampire fangs receded and she stared at her
friends in awe of what she had just accomplished.

“I shouldn’t think that’s hot. But that was hot.” Penelope muttered with wide eyes before she shook her head and sighed. “Well, one down only four dozen more to go!”

They took off for the rest of the army of monsters.

“And don’t think we aren’t talking about that later.” Josie told her as she released a burst of electricity at the oncoming assortment of atrocities.

Hope felt some of her power transfer to Lizzie as the blonde used it to take out the monster closest to her. She actually used it like a laser to cut the beast in half. Hope was mightily impressed.

“I think I just killed an actual Minotaur.” Lizzie stated in disbelief as she returned her attention on some of the other monsters.

“I thought Landon said they already killed the giants and a cyclops...but....” Penelope’s eyes widened as she took in the group that was now heading for them at full force.

Hope was confused as well, but she didn’t have time to think about it. They needed to regroup and actually come up with a plan. She saw the vampires finally join in the fight in the distance. They attacked in droves as the they tore through some of the monsters. It was glorious and bloody and Hope should not have been as enraptured by it. Because war was not at all glamorous. But the scene before her left her mystified.

The cyclops had broken ahead of the giants and was in a dead sprint right toward Hope.

“Hope!” Alaric yelled from her right and she looked at him just as he tossed her a spear.

She caught it with a smirk and launched the thing right into the cyclops’ eye. The monster stumbled and fell to the ground. A pack of wolves was on it just as it collapsed and mauled it to death. Hope nodded at them in appreciation and then turned toward Alaric.

“Thanks.”

He smiled and tossed her a sword next. She smirked at him and ran full force toward the giants as the twins and Penelope fended off a horde of orgs. Hope was completely in the zone. Fighting was her element. And as much as it shouldn’t be, killing was something she excelled at.

She skillfully and elegantly cut through giant after giant. First she took out their legs from under them, then she climbed on them and went for the heart shot.

Sometimes she had a little fun with it and took off their heads instead. Just to mix it up. But she was efficient, and that was what was necessary in that moment. She was about to climb off the last dead giant when Penelope shoved her out of the way before morphing into a wolf mid jump to collide with something that looked like a demented angel.

Hope knew that Penelope just saved her life, and as impressive and grateful as that was, the fact that she transformed in mid-air was something that Hope felt uniquely proud of. Because Penelope did it. She could do it. And she did it for her.

They rolled on the ground in a tumble of black fur and white wings. Penelope’s growl was unmistakable...it was raw and unbridled wrath. She was protecting her pack. Soon, the demonic angel thing stopped moving because Penelope had ripped its heart out of its chest. There were feathers flying everywhere, and when Penelope shook herself off more floated in the air around her.
After glancing at Hope to presumably make sure she was okay, Penelope took off to join the rest of the wolves, fully intent on staying in wolf form for the rest of the fight.

Hope surveyed the battleground again. She saw the body count piling up and it wasn’t just the bad guys. The wolves were fighting alongside the vampires as the last line of defense against the school, but they were holding their own. Alaric and his team seemed to be struggling the most. So Hope decided that that was where they needed to be. Her and the twins. So she made her way toward them and felt that the twins had followed her.

She scanned for the greatest threat. There was a gigantic scorpion looking thing that was giving Rebekah and Landon some trouble. Keelin was full on wolf, as she and Caroline had just killed a freaking three headed demon dog. Freya was trying to use magic to take down some flying demons.

“Those look like fucking dementors.” Lizzie said from Hope’s side as they approached the others. “I always wanted Harry Potter to be real...but now we’ve got fucking dementors.”

“Yeah.” Freya muttered. “And I can use some help. They’re trying to suck my power…”

“Your happiness and you soul.” Lizzie corrected numbly. “If they are dementors.”

But even as she spoke, she lifted her hands to help Freya.

“Wow...these things are strong.” Josie commented as she joined Lizzie. “If they take power from magical beings...imagine what power they possess...what kind of power we can take…”

Lizzie’s eyes widened as she understood what Josie meant. And together, they worked to drain them of their power.

Hope let them do their thing and went to work to help the others. She was on her way to kill the stupid scorpion thing when it noticed her approaching and spun to meet her. But as it did so, it used its giant tale and slashed at Rebekah, stabbing her through the stomach.

“No!!!!” Hope screamed the same time Freya did.

Rebekah fell to the ground in a heap of blood. Rage surged through Hope as she jumped toward the scorpion and swung her sword with so much force that she cut it in half. She continued on her rampage and sliced her way through each monster as she made her way to her aunt.

Rebekah was already dead when Hope arrived. And it took seconds for her eyes to pop back open and her to wheeze a loud, sharp breath.

“Shit.” Rebekah sighed. She touched the blood stained shirt and rolled her eyes.

Hope was glad that Rebekah was alive, she needed her to be okay. But she understood how much her aunt had wanted to be human. How much she cherished it.

“Sorry.” She whispered to her.

Rebekah stood up and shook her head. “Not your fault. Now, let’s kill these bastards.”

And together, they danced with death. Killing as many monsters as possible. Demons. Fairies. And big ugly things Hope had no name for. They killed everything they could.

When they were out of monsters in their vicinity, they attempted to join the other vampires and werewolves in their fight. But before they were able to get very far, the entire sky lit up with a blue
glow and the hair on Hope’s arms stood on end. It was more power than she ever felt before...it was
the twins. They had drained every last one of those dementor things of their power and unleashed it
into the abyss. But not before taking down every last monster with it. Those remaining monsters
dropped dead instantly, sizzling from having been baked from the inside out. It was the grossest thing
Hope ever witnessed and the most impressive.

Everyone looked around in stunned silence at the carnage that lay before them. It was truly a
battlefield. Hope quickly made her way to Josie and wrapped her girlfriend in her arms as she kissed
her with everything she had.

She pulled away with a smile. “You’re amazing.”

Josie shook her head. “We didn’t do it in time. We couldn’t save all of them...we couldn’t save
Rebekah.”

Said blonde shook her head. “Hey, you did what you could. And I’m actually grateful to be alive.”

Josie nodded thoughtfully.

“We’ll find a way to fix it. Freya thinks we can cure vampirism...we’ll make sure we can. For you.”
Lizzie told her honestly and with determination.

Rebekah smiled at her fondly. “Let’s hold off on that until after the war...I’d really hate to die again.”

Lizzie nodded. Hope rested her hand on Lizzie’s shoulder and then patted her back with pride and
with respect.

“Thank you.” She told her.

Lizzie’s smile was so wide it nearly split her face in two. Josie stepped away from them and scanned
the area with wide, worried eyes. Then a smile settled on her face when she saw the black wolf
trotting up to them. Josie bent down and hugged Penelope with relief and even kissed her snout
happily.

Penelope’s tail wagged excitedly in return. Hope knelt down beside Josie with a smirk of
amusement. “And you called me a big puppy dog.” She teased as she rolled her eyes.

“You are.” Josie grinned as Hope ran her fingers through Penelope’s soft coat and smiled at her.

“She saved my life.” Hope told her girlfriend.

“I know. I saw.” Josie stated with worry lines etching into her frown. “I was so scared for both of
you. I don’t know what I’d do if...”

“Hey, none of that. We’re fine. All of us.” Hope told her and kissed her cheek. “I plan to show you
just how fine I am later.”

Josie blushed at that and pushed her away playfully. “We should go inside. We’ll have a lot of clean-
up to do in the morning. And I, for one, am exhausted.”

“Yeah, why don’t you all get some rest. We’ll start taking care of this and re-cast protection spells.”
Freya told them. “I’m worried that this is far from over, and that you are no longer our secret
weapon. They know what you’re capable of now. And I fear we got off easy this time.”

Hope stood up and bit her lip in thought. Then she expelled a deep, heavy breath. “They are re-
generating the monsters. I think with the veil torn...that the monsters we kill don’t stay dead.”

Alaric frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“It could have been a coincidence with the cyclops and giants. But there’s a gargoyle as well, I saw it. And there was a dragon…the twins turned it human….and it was the same woman I had already killed. There aren’t just multiples of those monsters...they’re the same monsters.”

Alaric’s eyes widened. “So next time...we get this entire army again...and whoever it is that’s behind it all.”

“That’s what I’m thinking.” Hope told him.

“God help us all.” Keelin muttered in horror.

Josie threaded her fingers through Hope’s as her other rested on the black wolf’s forehead. Lizzie shuddered beside them.

“I just...I cannot…” The blonde shook her head clear of whatever images invaded her mind. “I need a hot shower.”

“Yeah, we’re going to head back.” Hope told the others. “We’ll discuss what this means tomorrow. And where we go from here.”

“The first thing we do...once again, is evacuate the school. We don’t have all that many students present to begin with...but we can’t risk another night like tonight.” Caroline said as she ran her fingers through her hair.

“I also think it’s time to call in those reinforcements.” Freya uttered gloomy.

Alaric nodded sadly. And Rebekah pulled out her phone to presumably call Marcel and the rest of their people down in New Orleans. It really was time for all hands on deck. Hope left them to do what needed to be done. She and her friends, and all the remaining students walked back to the school.

Hope opened Penelope’s room for her with magic, so she could transform and change in peace. Lizzie excused herself for a much needed shower. And Josie followed Hope toward her room. They barely had time to close the door behind them before Hope’s lips were on Josie’s and she pinned the tall brunette to the door roughly.

“Sorry…” She breathed into the kiss. “I just...I…”

“It’s okay.” Josie smiled into the kiss before deepening it herself.

Hope rested her hands on Josie’s waist as she bit down softly on Josie’s lip, tugging it into her mouth before sucking on it harshly. When Josie moaned into Hope’s mouth, Hope took the advantage of the opened mouth and thrust her tongue inside. She explored all that Josie offered her. Their tongues stroked each other in an elegant dance. Hope wrapped her arms around Josie’s waist and lifted her up in the air, smiling into the kiss as Josie’s legs wrapped around her and she carried her to their bed.

She gently lay Josie down on the bed and crawled on top of her. She attached her lips to Josie’s neck and sucked hard, planning to make her mark again. Josie’s hands snaked up Hope’s body and traveled under her shirt. They lightly dusted Hope’s exposed torso before exploring higher...high enough to...
Hope’s eyes glowed bright as she ground her hips into Josie’s to find purchase. She panted loudly as Josie cupped her bare breasts in both of her hands.

“You’re...not wearing a bra.” Josie stated; stunned.

“Yeah...well, there was an attack of monsters and I got dressed quickly. Some things weren’t necessary.”

“I approve.” Josie nodded as she bit down her own lip in a way that made Hope whimper.

And when the brunette squeezed Hope’s breasts in her firm grip, the whimper became a snarl and she re-attached her lips to Josie’s. She continued to grind down into her until she worked herself up and then it still wasn’t enough.

She assisted Josie with taking off her own shirt and smirked in pride with the look that Josie had given her. Josie’s eyes darkened as she stared in awe at Hope’s bare chest, before she flicked her fingers and pinched Hope’s hardened nipple with just enough pressure to embarrassingly enough...topple Hope over the edge.

She muttered out a slew of expletives as she came, and then continued to kiss Josie with passion and adoration.

“Fuck.” Penelope breathed out from the doorway.

Hope smirked into Josie’s mouth as she slowed down the kiss, but didn’t stop.

“I just…” Penelope stuttered. “I knocked. A few times.”

Josie’s hands, regrettably, fell from Hope’s breasts and settled safely on her waist. Eventually, Hope sighed and sat up, still straddling Josie as she put her shirt back on.

“Impeccable timing as always, Park.” Hope said with snark, although she wasn’t as upset as she should have been at the interruption.

“I’d apologize again…but...” She walked the rest of the way in the room and shrugged. “Sorry, not sorry.”

Josie blushed at that as Hope climbed off her and sat beside her on the bed instead.

“We...it wasn’t planned...it just happened and...we sort of got carried away...and.” Josie rambled cutely.

“It’s really okay. I promise.” Penelope told her.

“Right. Okay.” Josie nodded once and then snapped her mouth shut.

And awkward silence overtook the room. Josie stood up and climbed off the bed.

“I’m going to go shower quickly and check on Lizzie. I’ll be back?” The last part was a question directed at Hope.

“Of course. You can all stay here again tonight. I feel better knowing we’re all together.” Hope told her with a smile. Then stood up and pecked Josie on the lips.

Penelope and Hope watched her leave.
“I am sorry to interrupt, you looked...very into it.” Penelope stated with a quirked eyebrow.

Hope rolled her eyes and sat back down. Then her face grew serious.

“Hey, while Josie’s gone...could we talk?” Hope asked.

Penelope shuffled nervously on the bed across from her. “I...yeah. What’s up?”

“Nothing bad. I promise...it’s just...” Hope sighed before blushing a little at even having to mention it. “I know you like to flirt and it doesn’t have to mean anything, but...some of the stuff you say...I get the feeling that maybe it isn’t just about Josie.”

Penelope’s eyes widened. “You’re asking if I like you?”

Hope swallowed. “I was asking if...well, yeah. I guess. It’s just, I haven’t figured out if what we...share...if it’s a stronger bond because I bit you...or if it’s Josie. Like...maybe I feel what she feels for you and it’s confusing me. And maybe...you’re doing the same?”

Penelope seemed to consider that. Then she shook her head. “You might be confused...but I’m not. Do I still love Josie, absolutely. You already knew that. Do I care about you....yes, without a doubt. Do I think that watching the two of you is hot? Incredibly so. But do I only care about you, because of Josie or because you bit me and we now share a pack connection...I really don’t think so.”

Hope nodded her head in acceptance of what Penelope told her. Then she sighed. “Okay...since you really do seem to be okay with talking about me and Josie...can I tell you something? I don’t really have anyone else to talk to about it.”

Penelope got off her bed and took the few steps that brought her to Hope’s. She sat beside her and smiled. “You can tell me anything. I promise.”

“I want Josie so bad and I...I can’t stop thinking about what it would be like with her. You know, sex?”

“It’s fantastic.” Penelope smirked.

Hope blushed at that. “I’m sure it is. And I...we talked about it and I know we seem to be on the same page. Like, I’m pretty sure she’s more than fine with the way things are advancing.” Hope sighed. “But I’ve been...” She lowered her voice. “I dream about sex. With her. This morning I woke up from a sex dream...a very vivid one and had to shower before you all woke up.”

Penelope smirked at her devilishly.

Anyway, I’m trying to do the right thing and not just jumping her whenever I want to...which unfortunately, seems like it’s all the time now. After the gym today...before we went for our run...I was so fucking turned on by what I saw her do...and, I wanted nothing more than to take her right there. In front of everyone if I had to.”

“I, for one, would have been okay with that.” Penelope mused.

Hope shoved at her. “See, that’s what I mean. You say stuff like that and I don’t know if you’re just teasing me, or if you actually want that.”

Penelope swallowed thickly and her eyes darkened. “I most definitely would want that. I mean, I’d watch gladly. Would I want to only watch, not on your life.” She chuckled. “But I mostly just say it to tease you. Because I love how it flusters you and I know that it won’t ever happen. It is amusing
though, how much you let me get away with...for a big bad Alpha, you’re not that intimidating.”

Hope rolled her eyes and growled at her but Penelope only laughed more.

“Anyway, my problem isn’t how much I want Josie...or how desperately.” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “My problem is that I’m not sure what to really do...I haven’t...I never...” She threw her arms in the air. “I never even wanted to before...and now, what do you know, it’s all I think about.”

Penelope’s eyes widened. “You’re a virgin. I don’t know why I assumed you weren’t...but, wow. Geez, now I almost feel sorry about flustering you.”

Hope shook her head. “Don’t...feel sorry, I mean. I actually...I like it.”

Penelope stared at her in disbelief. “Really?”

Hope nodded.

“And you...earlier...when you continued making out knowing that I was watching....” Penelope wondered without saying the words.

“I...” Hope let herself fall on her bed as she put her hands over her face in embarrassment. “I liked that, too.”

Penelope leaned over and pulled Hope’s hands away from her face. “Let me ask you a question. If...if you like the thought of me watching you...” Penelope’s heated gaze met Hope’s. “Do you think you would ever...I’m not saying I’d ever make a move or do anything to come between you and Josie. I just...hypothetically....when I talk about my past with Josie...having sex with her...how does that make you feel?”

Hope frowned. “Like am I jealous by it? I already told you that...”

Penelope shook her head. “That wasn’t what I was asking. I was wondering if you think about it...when you think about me and Josie...together....does that turn you on?”

Hope’s eyes widened, and then darkened. She shut them to hide it.

“I think you just answered my question.” Penelope said as she sat up straighter on the bed and had the most pensive look on her face. “Does any of this help clear up your question from earlier....about why you are suddenly feeling these things?”

Hope slammed her hands into the mattress and opened her eyes in frustration. “If anything, it just makes everything more confusing. I honestly don’t know what’s going on with me.”

“I get that you’re frustrated because you don’t understand it. But apart from the confusion about all of this...are you okay with it? With living in that gray area of not knowing...because we don’t have to understand it today. We have time. A lot of it, actually. Just so long as we outlive the apocalypse.”

Hope had to laugh at that. Even with all her confusing feelings for Penelope, she did, without a doubt, enjoy the girl’s company. She was hilarious. And strong. And incredibly smart. And she cared so much about her friends, especially Josie. She would do anything for them. That thought reminded Hope of what she had meant to tell the girl earlier.

“Thank you for saving my life.” Hope told her honestly.

Penelope shrugged. “I’d tell you that I did it for Josie--so she wouldn’t have to live without you. But
I did it just as much for myself. I don’t want you to die, Hope. You’re far too important to me.”

Hope’s heart soared.

“Well, either way, thank you. And it was badass as hell. You transformed in mid-air as if you’d been doing it for years.” She told her honestly.

“Yeah, I was pretty proud of myself for that.” Penelope smiled confidently. “And you were right...being a wolf is everything. I loved the freedom...the strength...the pack. When we ran together...before everything happened...I can honestly tell you that I was never happier in my entire life. It felt like...I don’t even know how to describe it...it felt like…”

“Home.” Hope finished for her.

Penelope nodded. “Exactly. I felt whole for the first time in my life. And it wasn’t just because I as so free...it was because all of you were there beside me. I have a family now. A real one.” She took Hope’s hand in her own. “And even though I tease you a lot, and despite the conversation we just had...you guys are my family. And I would never do anything to jeopardize that. No matter how horny I get.”

She smirked at the end, but Hope knew it was only a re-direction because she had tears pooling in her eyes. Hope kissed Penelope’s hand, the one that was on her own. Then she reached up and wiped at the tears. She left her hand on Penelope’s cheek.

“Josie told me that the tears you don’t cry...freeze in your heart.” Hope told her softly. “Please don’t let that happen. You aren’t any less badass and awesome for showing us how you really feel sometimes. Plus, if you do it with Josie around...you get bonus cuddles and maybe even some kisses.” She winked at Penelope who chuckled.

“She really is amazing, isn’t she?” Penelope sighed with adoration.

“She is. She’s everything.” Hope told her.

They sat in a comfortable silence before the door opened again and Josie walked it. Rather than jumping apart, Hope slowly let her hand fall from Penelope’s cheek and smiled at Josie.

“Feel better?” Hope asked as Josie climbed into bed with them.

“I do. Much better.” Josie glanced at Penelope and saw the tears streaming down her cheeks.

Without a word, she leaned into the girl and kissed each of her cheeks softly, then pulled her into a warm hug.

“I’d ask if you’re okay, but it seems like a stupid question.” Josie whispered as she held her tighter.

Penelope held her back just as tightly. “I’m actually fine. Really good.” She pulled away from Josie slightly, just to look her in the eye. “These are happy tears.”

Josie didn’t look entirely convinced.

“They are. Promise. I was talking about what it meant to be a wolf, and how I finally felt at home. With all of you.” Penelope told her.

Josie smiled widely. “It’s true. You are home. You’re one of us. And you’ll always have a place with us.”
Penelope’s eyes met Hope’s and Hope raised her eyebrow at her in jest. Penelope smiled at the action.

When Josie finally pulled away from Penelope, she cuddled into Hope’s embrace. Then she tugged Penelope down to join them. The three of them cuddled contentedly together until Lizzie entered the room.

She quickly closed her eyes with her hands. “Do I even want to know?”

Hope laughed. “We’re all clothed.”

“Yeah, like that stopped the two of you earlier.” Penelope teased.

“Ewww.” Lizzie groaned.

Josie untangled herself from between Hope and Penelope and climbed off the bed to hug Lizzie. “I love you.” She told her affectionately and Lizzie’s entire demeanor changed. “I love you, too.”

Lizzie walked over to the empty bed and turned down the blankets.

“I declare it’s sisters time tonight. We’ve been forced apart for so long and now that we know the merge isn’t affecting our dreams anymore...or us at all...I want to reclaim our time.” Josie told Lizzie whose smile was so genuinely pure that it made Hope’s heart melt. She could feel the relief and happiness ooze out of Lizzie. She had undoubtedly missed her sister and perhaps, she had been feeling a bit left out.

“Are you sure your girlfriends can manage without your for the night?” Lizzie wondered as she gazed at the other girls.

“I’ve recently learned I’m a cuddler...as as long as Penelope doesn’t mind…” Hope grinned.

“Bring it on, Mikaelson.” Penelope’s eyes lit up with delight.

Josie smiled happily. “See, they’ll be fine without me.”

“Well….not fine.” Hope declared, then she sighed. “But we’ll manage.”

The four of them chatted excitedly for another hour before the adrenaline wore off and they became exhausted. Then they took turns getting ready for bed. Hope was far too tired to have any dreams that night, erotic or otherwise. And for that, at least for the moment, she was thankful.

The next morning, Hope was startled awake when Josie shook her lightly. Hope’s eyes flew open and she scanned the room for a threat.

Josie smiled and pressed a finger to Hope’s lips. “Shhh..nothing’s wrong...I just...” She grabbed Hope’s hand and pulled her (Hope let her do so willingly) out of bed, and then led her to the bathroom before she closed the door behind them. Josie quickly turned on the shower and then reached behind Hope to lock the door. Then she claimed Hope’s lips in a kiss.

She pulled away after a moment, and Hope unconsciously chased Josie’s lips with her own. Josie giggled at her as she held Hope in place. “Sorry. I thought we could talk a little before the others woke up, but I also really needed to kiss you.”

Josie pecked Hope’s lips again, then licked her own as she stepped away. Hope traced the movement with her eyes as she immediately felt her own arousal burn deep within her. She groaned and
snapped her darkening eyes shut, and then she let her head fall back against the door.

“What did you want to talk about?” Hope wondered, attempting to be as casual as she could.

Josie shrugged and suddenly looked anxious; so Hope stepped toward her and wrapped her arms around her securely...gently...reassuringly.

“Whatever you have to say...whatever you want to talk about...you don’t have to be scared. Just say it.”

Josie looked up at her. “First of all, Lizzie...she...I know that she’ll never actually say it, not now, not after Penelope’s revelation about why she cheated on me and Lizzie admitting why she hated her. But...I know she’s terrified of being left behind. I’m not the only one that feels things shifting for all of us. I know she can feel it, too. We’re all getting closer. But *some* of us are getting closer than others.”

Hope frowned. “You’re not jealous or threatened of Penelope, are you?”

Josie shook her head. “Not at all. I like the way you are together. You’re so serious all the time, so concerned about everyone and as amazing as that is and as noble as you are...sometimes, I just really like to see you smile. And I know I make you happy. I do. But Penelope makes you laugh. She’s funny and she brings out a side to you...a side that I love to see. You’re lighter around her. You are with Lizzie, too. The gentle teasing and playful banter. It’s great. I never thought I’d see you open up the way you have, to let so many people in...and being happy looks really good on you.” Josie smiled at her seductively. “Like...*really* good.”

Hope smirked and kissed her again. But she didn’t push too far because she could sense that Josie hadn’t finished what she needed to say.

“But?”

“But Lizzie *is* feeling left out...like she isn’t as important to our pack...like she’s expendable. She knows she means everything to me, but if you could just...take some extra care to include her, to maybe spend one on one time with her sometimes. Let her know that no matter how close you and I continue to get...no matter what else happens down the road...that she is important. That she matters. That she’s needed and loved.”

Hope nodded resolutely. “Absolutely. I can do that. And she *is*. I love her like a sister. I need her in my life. And she is better and stronger and more amazing than she realizes.”

Josie smiled happily. “She is.”

Hope leaned into Josie so that their foreheads touched and she looked deeply into Josie’s magnificent brown orbs. “And so are you. Strong, amazing, beautiful, perfect.” She grinned. “Well, imperfectly perfect. Just the way I love you.”

They kissed again. Hope’s hands wandered easily and frantically up and down Josie’s body.

Eventually, Josie pulled away breathlessly. “You know...we could actually take a shower…”

Hope’s eyes widened and darkened intensely. And immediately she helped Josie remove her shirt. Then she quickly removed her own clothes while Josie took off her pants and underwear. Hope stared at her girlfriend in awe as her mouth dropped open.

“You’re gorgeous.” She said stepping closer. “And sexy.” She closed the rest of the distance
Josie blushed as she let Hope’s hands wander reverently over her body. Then she whispered. “Always and forever.”

Hope led Josie into the shower and then pushed her against the wall as water fell in force over their already heated bodies. The hot water steamed up the bathroom as they worshipped each other’s bodies. Hope’s fingers traveled down Josie’s stomach and slowly made their way down further until they reached their destination. She moaned in pure ecstasy as she felt Josie’s desire for her pool on her own trembling fingers.

And suddenly, it didn’t matter that she’d never done this before. It didn’t matter that she wasn’t quite sure what to do. Because she knew exactly what she wanted to do. Last night had been fantastic, but this time...this was everything.

She took her time exploring Josie’s core. First, she circled Josie’s clit and smirked into their kiss when she felt Josie shudder in her arms. Then she wrapped her free arm around Josie to hold her in place as she moved her fingers through the slick folds and let out a moan when she felt Josie’s fingers do the same to her own. They locked eyes, both darkened with lust. And soon, they pumped erratically in and out of each other with force, and matching in pace.

Nothing Hope had ever experienced in her life, prior to this moment, prepared her for just how special being with Josie in this way felt to her. It sealed their connection. It strengthened their bond. As much as Hope had worried that she was being too horny or too lustful lately--how she thought about sex far too often than she’d appreciate--this was anything but simple lust. This was the definition of making love. She felt how thoroughly Josie loved her with every touch, with every kiss, with the way they looked at each other and the way that she made Hope feel loved, and safe, and out of control all at the same time. Her only hope was that she made Josie feel the same thing...that Josie could feel her love for her with her entire being. Because Hope’s love for her was all-consuming.

They came at the same time and muffled each other’s screams with a heated kiss. Then when Hope pulled out of the kiss, she stared at Josie with affection...but also with desire. Her eyes glowed red and she exposed her fangs for Josie to see. Then she looked at her with a soft, uncertain question in her eyes. She needed to make sure that Josie wanted this, too.

Josie nodded and tilted her head to the side, giving Hope full access. And Hope immediately sank her teeth into her exposed neck as she slowly worked her fingers back into a rhythm so that she could bring Josie into another orgasm. Her girlfriend’s blood was intoxicating, more so because Hope could still taste a hint of her own within it. She sucked enough that her desire for Josie became dizzying and she had to pull away. She closed her eyes to try to calm the overwhelming sensations that pulsed through her body, but sped up her pace inside of Josie until the girl promptly came again...breathless and shivering in Hope’s arms.

Hope held her as Josie regained her own senses, and then they stood staring at each other as they caught their breaths. Hope tried not to notice the rise and fall of Josie’s chest, but she was only human after all. Or at least...in some ways.

“I think now is a really great time to address the fact that somehow you activated your vampire gene.” Josie said when she finally caught her breath.

Hope laughed. “Really? Now is a good time?” She raised an eyebrow.

Josie blushed and chuckled. Then she stepped away slightly. “I mean, well…”
“I think I always could...you know...” Hope sighed. “Part of me was always scared...I’m so much like my father...in so many of the bad ways, or I used to think so.” She stepped into Josie just so she could be held by her. She needed the comfort in that moment. “I was scared that unleashing that side...that I would become him. I would be what you all hated. I would be dangerous and I wouldn’t be able to stop. MG’s not the only one who was terrified of the possibility of being a ripper. I was scared that if I tasted blood, that I would crave it too much.”

She felt Josie release a breath against her neck and it made her whimper.

“And...do you?” Josie wondered softly.

Hope shook her head. “No. I mean...you taste so good. It’s almost addicting.” She kissed Josie’s chin. “But I’m sure I just found other things about you that I crave far more.”

Josie laughed at that.

“Honestly, though. Knowing that I have the capabilities of vampirism now...that I am truly and completely a tribrid...it doesn’t terrify me anymore. Instead, I’m just happy that I’ll be powerful enough to protect you, Lizzie and Penelope from whatever is coming.”

“Speaking of powerful...I…” Josie stepped away. “The training we’ve done, and what Lizzie and I were capable of last night...all the power we now possess...I can’t explain it. It’s addicting as well.” Josie paused and seemed to be measuring her words. “I know that I’m not having nightmares anymore, which is great. And talking really has helped jump-start the healing process, but I feel far less vulnerable now. I feel strong. And I like that feeling. I love it. It makes me feel like I’ll really be okay, in the end, after all of this. I’m not scared about who I am anymore or what I’ve become. I like what I’m becoming. And a lot of that has to do with you Hope...how you make me feel. About you. About myself. About my place in the world. I love you beyond words. But is it okay if I also love the way you love me?”

Hope beamed with so much pride and she stared at Josie with the most endearing gaze in her eyes. “It’s more than okay. Because for the record, I love the way you love me, too.”

They shared a chaste kiss and then decided now that the water was almost freezing, it was time to actually take a shower. They washed each other quickly before they redressed and exited the bathroom--only to find that Hope’s room was empty.

“Do you think they heard us?” Josie wondered with a blush.

“Most likely.” Hope rolled her eyes. “And you can bet our lives on it that Penelope will bring it up when we see her.”

“You act like that bothers you, but you love it.” Josie said matter-of-factly.

They changed out of their pajamas and into clothes for the day. Then they went down to the cafeteria to join their friends for breakfast. Lizzie’s face was beat red as they approached.

“Oh, yeah, they heard us all right.” Hope commented with amusement.

They tried to set down as nonchalantly as they could. But as soon as they set their plates down at the table, Penelope opened her mouth.

“Serious props, Josie...getting Hope to give up her V-card so quickly.” Penelope smirked at them. “I’d say I’m impressed, but I already know you have game.”
Josie’s mouth dropped open and her eyes went wide. She stared at Hope with confusion in her eyes and her eyebrows furrowed in confusion. Then she shook her head and grabbed Hope’s hand to pull her away from the group.

“Hey look, we knew she’d say something. It’s okay. She’s just poking. And our friends support us, they won’t judge us for having sex already.” Hope told her as they walked away.

Josie stopped and let go of Hope’s hand; then ran her hands nervously through her hair as she sighed loudly. She actually looked pained, and it broke Hope’s heart.

“Josie...what is it? What’s really wrong?” She asked as she reached toward her and took Josie’s hand in her own. She kissed the palm of it and then laced their fingers together. “Tell me what this is about, please…”

“I just…” Josie looked torn...heartbroken...worried. “You really think I care what our friends say? I know they love us. I know Penelope wasn’t trying to hurt us. But I didn’t know you were a virgin, Hope. And we just had a quickie in the shower. Your first time…” She sighed again and squeezed Hope’s hand in her own. “If I had known, I would have made sure to make your first time special. I would have made it perfect and we could have taken our time and it could have been all about you...it wouldn’t have been rushed in a bathroom while Penelope and Lizzie were in the next room.”

Hope’s eyes softened and nearly teared up at Josie’s sweet admission. Her heart fluttered in her chest as it re-stitched itself back together. Because Josie didn’t regret what they had done. She wasn’t embarrassed about being called out on it. She felt hurt because she thought she ruined Hope’s first time; even though that had been the furthest from the truth.

“Josie, sweetie, my first time was special. It was more than perfect…” She kissed her softly; not caring that they were in front of a room full of people. “Because it was with you. I loved every minute of it. And if you want to try again and spend time worshipping my body…” She raised an eyebrow tauntingly. “I would not be opposed to that in the slightest. I would encourage it actually. I’m all for more sex. It was fantastic and beautiful and you were amazing. And I cannot wait to do even more to that glorious body of yours.”

Josie bit her lip and ducked her head. Hope smiled at the action softly before she used her free hand to raise Josie’s chin up so they could share eye contact.

“So...we’re good. More than good. We’re perfect. It was perfect. Okay?” Hope reiterated.

Josie nodded. “Okay.”

Hope kissed her again, and then led her back to the table where Penelope looked completely remorseful and Lizzie looked concerned.

“I’m fine. We’re fine.” Josie smiled genuinely as they sat down and she started to eat her breakfast.

“I’m sorry.” Penelope offered genuinely.

“No apology necessary. Just a misunderstanding. But we sorted it out.” Hope said as she rested her hand on Josie’s. Then she leaned over and whispered for only Penelope to hear. “For the record, it was as great as you’ve imagined it. Better probably.”

She smirked when Penelope choked on air and blushed deeply at the images that no doubt just flooded her mind.

The rest of the meal was eaten in absolute, but comfortable silence.
After breakfast, Alaric and Caroline led a memorial for those they lost last night. Sixteen students and three teachers died in the battle. And Hope allowed herself to mourn each of them. They were innocents caught in the middle of something that no one understood.

Following the memorial service, Alaric announced a mandatory evacuation of the school. All nonessential personal was forced to leave. Luckily, Elena and Damon sat up a refugee camp of sorts in the Mystic Falls chapel. Bonnie even put a protection spell on it to protect them all. Sheriff Matt Donavon also declared a town emergency to evacuate the rest of the town. Hope was grateful that saving and protecting the remaining innocents was the only involvement those four needed to have in the war that was coming. She wanted to keep them out of it as much as possible. And she knew that Caroline and Alaric did as well.

Throughout the day, Hope’s family from New Orleans started to arrive. Marcel, Davina, Kol, Vincent and his witches, and Keelin’s entire pack of crescent wolves came to join in the fight. When the school was properly evacuated and Freya re-enforced the protection spells around the school, the people remaining all met in the gymnasium for another strategy session.

Hope addressed the group this time--as an Alpha, and as the anointed commander of their small army. She also happened to have the most to say.

“First things first, as I mentioned last night...our enemy has the capability of regenerating the monsters we already killed. So basically, dead doesn’t mean dead anymore.” She told them.

“There are only so many beings in this world capable of that kind of thing...and none of them are anything I want to go up against.” Vincent stated with a frown.

“We’ll have to discuss every option we have though...we need to know every possibility we might be facing.” Hope commented. “And second of all...” She revealed her fangs and let her eyes grow red. “I’m a full-fledged vampire now.”

“When the hell did that happen?” Alaric asked with wide eyes.

“Last night...during the fight.”

Rebekah nodded. “That explains a lot actually. The way you just...yeah.”

“But can you still perform magic?” Freya asked.

“Yes.”

“Can you perform magic in that form?” Freya wondered specifically.

Hope raised her hand and created a ball of fire within her palm. Then she raised her other hand and used it to cast a spell that surrounded them with swirling light. And just to show off, she let the sparkling light turn into a beautiful wolf and let it run toward her aunt before it disappeared right before it reached her.

Freya rolled her eyes as Hope asked with a cocky smirk. “Does that answer your question?”

“You’re such a fucking Mikaelson.” Freya smirked at her with amusement and adoration. But she nodded at her with the look of a proud mother.

Hope’s heart warmed at the thought. At the feeling.

“So, we may have lost the element of surprise when it comes to the twins, but at least we now have
another ace up our sleeve.” Rebekah stated with the same look of pride in her shining eyes.

“You’re a tribrid and you’ve created more hybrids, and the four of you, from what we’ve heard are so powerful that Freya doesn’t even know the limits of your magic.” One of Vincent’s witches, one that Hope didn’t know, spoke.

“Is there a question there?” Hope wondered, because she figured she knew what was coming.

“Yeah, we want to know what will stop you from trying to eliminate any of us who disagree with you...or change those of us now that you can create wolves or vampires of your own?” Another witch asked.

“And as a wolf myself...am I supposed to respect those…” A wolf from Keelin’s pack started, but Hope interrupted with a growl.

“Be careful what you choose to call my pack.” Hope told him fiercely. Then she sighed in frustration. “We’re all on the same side here. And whoever we’re up against is far scarier than myself and my pack.”

Josie stood up and walked to Hope’s side; which immediately calmed her so she wasn’t so annoyed at the turn that this conversation had taken. Lizzie and Penelope instantly joined them in a show of loyalty and unity.

“You don’t owe us respect just because we’re wolves now. But we will earn your respect, because in this war...we’re all in this together. And as long as you fight on our side...you’re our pack, whether you choose to be or not. We’ll fight for you. And we’ll die for you. So if you have a problem with that...or any of my pack...then why the hell are you even here?” Josie spoke passionately.

The wolf shifted uncomfortably, but remained silent.

“Hope didn’t change us just because she wanted to. She isn’t a threat to any of you wolves or witches. Or even the vampires. She changed us because your people...people you trust, thought that Lizzie and I were the best chance for all of us to survive this thing. Because like it or not, an apocalypse is coming.” Josie continued. “We are powerful witches in our own right. And we are evolved wolves who can transform on command. You need us in this fight more than we need you. So you may not trust us. You may not like us. But you will acknowledge that you need us.”

“I vouch for these girls on my life.” Keelin declared with a ferocity that Hope hadn’t witnessed from the other woman before. It made her swell with pride.

Freya stood up and addressed the two witches who had questioned Hope earlier. “I vouch for them as well. They don’t just have a power that is awe-inspiring...these girls have empathy, intelligence and most importantly, they have a conscience. They’re great under pressure and they have not only handled everything we threw at them, but they thrived in the leadership roles we thrust at them.”

Caroline, Kaleb, MG, Rebekah, and Jed stood up, but it was Caroline who spoke. “They have earned the respect and allegiance of the vampires as well. They aren’t trying to divide us...they have been dedicating their time to bringing us together. You all trusted Hayley...Hope is Hayley’s daughter in every way that matters. Give her a chance. She may not be the girl you remember...she made mistakes that you may want to hold against her. But we all make mistakes. We all change and grow up. Give her the chance to show that she has.”

Hope smiled at Caroline gratefully.

Vincent nodded his head respectfully. “You already know you have my allegiance. Just as your
mother did.”

Soon, everyone in the room seemed to be in agreement and Hope was happy to finally get back on track.

“Great. Now that that is all settled. Can we please get back to what really matters?” She asked with a raised eyebrow.

Before Hope could say anything further, the entire room went dark and cold. It made Hope shiver violently. Not only was it eerie and disconcerting, but Hope felt an unimaginable power radiate throughout the gym. She snapped her fingers to illuminate the room again. But as soon as she did, she regretted it.

Josie’s, Penelope’s, and Lizzie’s necks all snapped simultaneously as they hit the floor...dead.

Hope’s eyes widened as she screamed out in anguish and fell to her knees next to them. Trying to touch them, hoping it wasn’t real. The lights flickered again but didn’t stay off. And out of nowhere, a beautiful woman with glowing green eyes and flowing black hair stood in front of her.

Hope stood up and lunged for the girl, ready to rip the heart out of whoever just shattered her own. The only thing that stopped her was Josie’s hand on her shoulder. Hope stopped in her tracks and stared at Josie with wide eyes.

“You’re...you…” She touched her reverently just to make sure she really was standing there...alive.

Lizzie and Penelope stood up as well, and it suddenly hit Hope. They were vampires now.

She turned back to the intruder with a growl.

The woman raised her hands in surrender, and bowed her head demurely. “Relax...I mean you no harm.”

“The fuck you don’t.” Penelope bared her teeth. “You just killed us.”

The woman stood up and shook her head with a sad smile. “I simply ensured that you were ready for what’s coming for you.”

Hope swallowed harshly because the very thought terrified her to her core. “Who the hell are you?”

“My name is Persephone. And we need to talk.”

Chapter End Notes

Just wanted to say a few things about this chapter and therefore the story, before you all ask. Yes...it will eventually work it's way into Phosie BUT not until the story is complete. I will add an epilogue of sorts so that those who only want Hosie won't have to read it
and will not miss any of the actual story. And for those excitedly waiting for Penelope to join them and have her happy ending...I assure you that the epilogue will be worth the wait. (I already wrote 5 pages of smut just for you!)

Anyway, I hope that answers any questions or concerns that many of you may have. This is a Hosie fic, first and foremost and so much is still in store for them. So I hope that you all still continue to follow this journey with me!

Thank you.

Also, I am leaving for vacation in two days which is why this chapter is shorter. I will be posting shorter chapters less frequently for the next week or so while I am spending time with all my friends in sunny California talking about all the gay stuff we love. (There's this awesome con we created together called TGIF/F if anyone is interested. It's about all things femslash. I'm on a few panels this year. And next year, I plan to print a copy of this story and include it in an auction we put on at our con. You can get more info at www.tgifemslash.com It'd be awesome to see some of you there next year and meet you all in person to talk Hosie/Posie and all things femslash)
“As in the fucking goddess, Persephone?” Penelope spat out in awe.

And the woman actually had the audacity to bow. “One in the same, my dear.” She replied.

Hope stared at her with confusion mixed with residual resentment, anger, and distrust.

“What are you doing here?” Alaric stood up to approach her, but she lifted her hand to still him.

“I’ve come to help you, of course.”

Caroline frowned. “You just killed our daughters, I wouldn’t call that helping us.”

Persephone shook her hand with amusement and walked toward Hope.

Josie, Penelope and Lizzie bore their teeth and stepped protectively closer to her.

“You truly are magnificent, aren’t you?” The woman circled the four of them not entirely predictarily, but it still made Hope uneasy. “You know, some of the gods hate you. Not you specifically, but immortals in general. You have too much power. You’re ruining the balance of things, and all that.”

She came to a stop directly in front of Hope and eyed her with intrigue. “I used to hate you.”

Josie, Penelope and Lizzie let out low growls, but Hope raised her hand to silence them. “What do you want?”

Persephone sighed and starting pacing around them again, staring at them with intrigue. “A few of the gods went rouge. You see, we are not supposed to directly interfere with the lives of mortals. We can’t kill you by our own hand. It’s forbidden. But some of them got bored. And they figured you weren’t really mortals...gods and their loopholes.” She stopped in front of Josie this time and rested her palm on the girl’s cheek. Penelope and Lizzie pulled Josie back while Hope stepped between Persephone and her girlfriend.

Penelope looked directly into Hope’s eyes. “Morpheus interfered with your friends’ minds and influenced their dreams. Hades opened the gates of Malivore to wreak havoc in your world...and has sent monsters to kill you.”


Penelope rested her hand on Josie’s lower back to comfort her while Hope continued to stand protectively between the goddess and the people she loved.

“Why?” Lizzie choked out. “What’d we do to make them hate us?”

Persephone's eyes softened. “I told you. You’re special. You aren’t supposed to exist. They wanted you all dead. Your power...you immortality...it threatens some of them.”

“So...they won’t stop...until all supernatural beings are...dead?” Penelope asked anxiously.

Persephone shrugged. “Zeus had enough of the little revolt. The gods....we were all instructed not to
interfere. Malivore is open. The damage to your world is done. Now, we have to sit back and see what happens. Either you win...and supernaturals are to remain a part of this world...or you lose...and everything immortal or unnatural dies with you.”

Hope’s eyes widened.

Freya stood up and slowly walked over toward them. “Isn’t you being here going against your strict instructions to stay out of it?”

Persephone turned to face Freya. “I cannot harm you. And...technically, I have not.” She raised an eyebrow in challenge. “And I cannot save you. Loopholes remember. As long as I don’t directly affect the outcome….anymore than I already have, then I am well within my rights.”

“So...if you hated us...what changed? Why help now?” Josie wondered.

“I’ve been helping you all along. I sent my own son here, to this school, to retrieve one of the seals and bring it to me for safe keeping.”

“Your son?”

“Landon…” Lizzie’s eyes widened. “Landon’s a demigod.” She turned to Josie excitedly. “Percy Jackson is real too! Our entire childhood...I just…” She shook her head in amazement. “I have no words.”

“I’m not…” Landon frowned. “How can I be…?”

“Hades is a jealous god. And my... indiscretions ...my actions...may have brought his wrath on you and this school...and for that, I truly am sorry.” Persephone looked pained as she spoke to Landon. “I’ve watched you grow. I’ve protected you. I’ve guided your hand so that you could find Rafael, so that you’d be brought here. Because I need your friends to save you. If Hades wins...they aren’t the only ones who die. I’ll lose you all over again.”

Landon’s eyebrows furrowed as he tried to comprehend what he had just learned about himself. Hope’s own mind was reeling as well.

“So...you’re the reason that Landon felt compelled to take the knife. And why he doesn’t remember doing it.” She stated.

“I knew you weren’t ready for the fight yet. I tried to buy you time.” Persephone sighed. “That’s when Hades recruited Morpheus. He knew that you were the only ones with the power to stop what was happening. When they couldn’t kill you, they went after my son.”

“But...they can’t interfere anymore? Right? So what the hell was last night?” Rebekah muttered with ire and annoyance.

“Us gods can’t interfere. The monsters...the tear of the veil...it’s been done...and we can’t take it back. You have to defeat them on your own and seal the veil. That’s the part that’s up to you.”

Persephone was silent as she studied the room. Everyone tried to understand what had been told to them. There were varying degrees of disbelief, fear and anxiety etched on their faces.

Hope bit her lip as she tried to work it out for herself. She stared at Persephone with intensity.

“And why the hell should we even trust you? You literally came in here and snapped the necks of the three people I care about most in this world. Now you’re spouting a bunch of nonsense that
we’re just supposed to take at face value?” Hope snarled at the goddess.

“If I really wanted you dead. You would be.” Persephone stated simply.

“You never answered...what changed for you? I know it wasn’t just Landon. And the fact that you now have skin in the game. You said you used to hate us. You never said why you did...or why you don’t anymore.”

“The underworld...is my home. I have been surrounded by death even longer than your aunts have been in this world. I must say, though, that the Mikaelson’s have been most effective at ensuring the underworld is full of patrons.” She glanced with respect toward Rebekah and Freya and then settled her eyes back on Hope. “And you’ve lost a few of your own along the way. I know everyone who comes through the underworld. And your kind played fast and loose with morality and immortality. Like I said, you went against the natural order of things.”

Hope felt anger erupt inside of her. She didn’t care that this woman was an actual, real life goddess, no one talked about her family so flippantly. No one dismissed her that easily.

“Relax little one.” Persephone cooed at her softly. “You asked me a question. Allow me to answer it.” She paused to see if Hope would argue, and when she remained silent, the woman continued. “I was surrounded by death, as I have said. And I used to think that death is what gave life its value. I’ve seen the way people mourn their loved ones. The way they fear the end and in doing so, make sure that their numbered days have meaning. A purpose. It was all I knew.”

She looked Hope dead in the eyes. Hope was surprised to note that the woman’s eyes swam with respect, empathy and admiration rather than vile hatred and disgust.

“But I’ve been watching you, Hope Mikaelson. The first of your kind.” She glanced at Lizzie, Josie and Penelope with a soft smile. “And as I watched...as I noticed...when I look at all of you--it isn’t death that gives life purpose. Nor do you fear it for yourselves. You give each other purpose. You live to serve one another. You love without condition. You make mistakes and you try to fix them.”

Her gaze settled on the twins. “You have so much power...and yet you have so much humanity. The other gods are wrong to say that your immortality deprives you of that which makes you human. Love is the most human thing there is.” Her eyes found Landon. “I learned much about love. And loss. All on my own.”

Persephone folded her hands behind her back as she practically glided across the room. “The gods were right to fear you though…. we aren’t worthy of our immortality. We have done nothing to earn or deserve it....but you have. And that is why I want you to win. Because no one deserves to live a full and happy and long life more than each of you.”

“Well fuck.” Penelope groaned as she wiped at a tear in her eye.

Lizzie and Hope had the decency to attempt to be more discreet about it. But Josie...she seemed too stunned to cry.

“So...you’re here to help us win then.” Alaric wondered.

“I just did.” She grinned happily. “I let you know what you were up against. You already have what you need to win. And you already have the information...you just have to remember it.”

She directed the last part at Landon.

“Wait, you’re not actually going to help us?” Hope wondered when she properly recovered.
“I ensured the twins had the best chance at survival. That’s the best I can do.” She looked torn. “I can warn you, however, that Hades’ monsters take one to two days to re-generate now that the veil is torn. So...you’ve got to make your move fast. I truly wish I could do more for you.” She smiled affectionately. “You are my favorite humans.”

“But...I have so many questions....” Landon stood up as he approached Persephone. “Like...who’s my dad? Do I have powers? Will I see you again?”

“End this war and I will answer any questions you have.” She told him fondly. “As for powers...like I said, you already have what you need to win.”

And with that, she was gone. The room was filled with a stunned silence. Hope took Josie’s hand in hers and then wrapped her arms around her just to prove to herself that she was alive. That she really was there with her.

“You had me so scared....” She admitted softly. “When you died...”

“I know...hey...it’s okay though, I’m okay.” Josie told her before kissing her softly. “I can’t imagine what you felt...or I can, since I know how I’d feel. But we’re all safe. I promise.”

Lizzie and Penelope joined them as they shared a group hug. Hope let herself feel them. Smell them.

“We’ve got a day or so to figure out where the tear in the veil is before the monsters all come back...and we still need to find out how to close it....any theories?” Marcel wondered.

“I could hit the library. Now that we know we’re looking for content on gods and the underworld...” Dorian frowned. “I can’t believe I just said that sentence out loud. How do gods actually exist and why did we not know about it?”

Caroline shrugged. “It’s not like we go around outing ourselves to the world if we can help it. It’s all about hiding in plain sight.”

“Plain sight...” Lizzie muttered so softly that only Hope, Josie and Penelope likely heard her.

Hope raised a questioning eyebrow but didn’t ask her to elaborate what she was thinking.

“We should still set up a protection spell...not that they actually work on gods if they choose to come here and kill us.” Freya muttered.

“So we’re taking her word for it then.” Rebekah stated though it was more of a question.

“It makes sense...Morpheus is powerful enough to not only influence dreams, but likely kickstart the merge. The monsters we faced last night...some of them were directly out of greek mythology.” Lizzie rumpled her brows in thought. “Though...is it still considered mythology now that we know it’s real?”

“And the god’s abiding by Zeus’ demand not to touch us?” Penelope wondered.

“Technically Hades, Morpheus and Persephone never actually laid a finger on any of us.” Lizzie countered.

“Speak for yourself...she touched Josie.” Penelope growled and Hope nodded vigorously in agreement.

“I wanted to rip that hand off her body.” Hope spat out.
Penelope grinned. “Me too. I bet we could have taken her.”

Lizzie rolled her eyes at them with a fond smile, but then she sighed. “Please focus.”

“Landon...when you took the knife, I know you don’t remember taking it...but do you know where you were heading?” Josie asked.

His face grew frustrated as he tried to remember. Then a minute or so later, his eyes lit up. “Virginia, I think.”

Lizzie’s eyes widened and she snapped her fingers. “Hiding in plain sight!”

“Please fill us in, I’m lost.” Freya demanded as she approached them.

“The underworld is the land of the dead. What is one of the most famous cemeteries in the country?” Lizzie asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Arlington!” Hope exclaimed excitedly.

“Exactly.” Lizzie grinned. “If Persephone had Landon retrieve the knife to deliver it to her, presumably in the underworld...then that must be where the entrance to the underworld is. And that means...the veil...we could access it or at least, it’s our best chance.”

Hope smiled wide. “I could so kiss you right now.”


Hope laughed out loud, as did Penelope. Josie smiled brightly.

“And if Landon could deliver it to her...that means he has access in and out of the underworld…” Penelope turned to Landon with a smirk. “Your superpower is going to get us inside so we can close the veil and beat the gods and shit.”

Freya stared at them in wonderment. “You four continue to surprise me.”

Lizzie shrugged nonchalantly. “Josie and I lived off this stuff as kids. It’s my jam.”

Penelope burst out in laughter and Hope actually giggled.

“Shut it.” Lizzie demanded with a blush dusting her cheeks.

Josie hugged her sister, and Lizzie relaxed instantly then re-directed her attention at the group.

“If Hades is behind this all...I really think we can trust Persephone. She may be his wife and the goddess of the underworld, but in every book we’ve ever read, she’s the victim. She was forced to live down there with him,” Lizzie told them. Then she glanced at Josie with a wicked smile. “Well, except for that one story you read, sis. The very gay one where Hades was a woman.”

This time Josie blushed.

“Damn. I want to read that book.” Penelope whistled lowly. Then she glanced at Hope. “As soon as you finish reading the one about werewolves to us, I’ll read that one to you.”

Hope smiled at that.

Freya snapped her fingers. “Okay, I love you all. But again, let’s focus.”
“So this isn’t just about her wanting to help us, or save her son...this could be revenge?” Caroline mused.

“Revenge really is the best motivator.” Rebekah declared. “I mean, speaking from experience.”

Caroline shared a soft smile with Rebekah that revealed their mutual acceptance of their past.

“Well, once again, the girls take point on this. We don’t have any better theories and no other leads. Dorian you can grab some research materials to read on the way, but it looks like we’re all going on a roadtrip.” Alaric stated.

“Yeah, we should head there as soon as we’re able. I say we pack, grab whatever supplies we may need. All the weapons we’ve got. And we head out within the hour.” Emma added.

Everyone separated as they went to pack. Hope was done quickly, so she went to the twins’ bedroom. Josie was just finishing up when she arrived.

“Hey.” Hope smiled and kissed her chastely. “Want to go make sure Penelope’s packed? I’ll help Lizzie finish.”

Josie smiled at her and left the room in a hurry. Lizzie paused in her packing to stare at Hope.

“You really are okay with the two of them, aren’t you.” Lizzie commented.

“I am.” Hope smiled and stepped closer to Lizzie. “But I also wanted to talk to you.”

Lizzie raised an eyebrow. “If you’re going to hit on me...I’ll end you.”

Hope chuckled. “I do love you, Lizzie. But not at all like that.” Her eyes widened. “No offense! You’re really great. And beautiful. And anyone would be lucky to have you.”

Lizzie cracked a crooked smile and shook her head with amusement. “I appreciate that Hope, but I knew what you meant.”

Hope blushed and rolled her eyes at herself. “Anyway. I love you like a sister. And if I could have any choice of sisters, I’d pick you. Always.”

Lizzie’s face softened. “Thank you.” Then she rolled her eyes at Hope. “Don’t expect me to say the same. I already have the most amazing sister, and I wouldn’t change her for the world.”

“I don’t blame you. But would you like another? You can never have too many, am I right?”

“You’re a dork. That’s what you are.”

“But I’m your dork.” Hope grinned.

Lizzie laughed out loud. “I missed this. I missed you.”

Hope didn’t even try to argue. To tell her that she was still there. That she had never left. That she saw her more often than they used to, so there had been no need to miss her. She didn’t say any of those things, because she understood what Lizzie had meant. Lizzie had just acknowledged that she knew things had changed. That things were different between them all now. And without saying more than that, she had just confessed to Hope what Josie had alluded to. Lizzie was scared of being left behind.

“Besides loving you like a sister...you do know that you’re my best friend. Right?” Hope offered.
“I...I didn’t. I do now.” She frowned for a moment. “You’re mine, too. Apart from Josie and Pedro...you’re all I have. Or did have. I know I have Penelope too, and god help me, but that girl has grown on me.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” Hope breathed out.

Lizzie smirked and shook her head. “You really are something, Mikaelson. So...my sister isn’t enough for you?”

Hope’s eyes widened. “It’s not like that at all! I swear. Josie is my everything.”

“I knew that. I just wanted to make you say it.” Lizzie must have realized that she needed to continue packing so she packed her bag as they talked. “I honestly can’t believe how much you’ve changed in these past weeks. You even look lighter. Like you’re no longer carrying the world on your shoulders.”

“I still am….I just have other people to help with the weight of it now.” Hope smiled at her sadly.

“Do you think you’ll ever feel...free. Not like, werewolf free. But like...it isn’t your burden to make up for the sins of your father type of free.”

“God I hope so.” Hope breathed out in a loud sigh. Then she busied herself with helping Lizzie pack. “I actually came in here to talk to you though. About you, not me.”

Lizzie glanced at her but didn’t say anything.

“Great job down there...it’s a really great theory and a really solid plan. You were pretty awesome. So I just wanted to tell you that.” Hope said.

“It still amazes me that so much of the things I loved as a child are real. I mean, what is my life?” Lizzie mused.

“And now you’re a tribrid.” Hope stated and just let it hang in the air between them.

“There our four of us now. You weren’t even supposed to exist...and now four of us do.”

“How are you feeling about everything? I know you were apprehensive about taking my blood to begin with.”

“Now I’m really glad I did. Or I’d be dead.”

Hope nodded. “I’m glad you’re not.”

Lizzie smiled. “Me too.” She stuffed the last of her items in the bag and zipped it up. Then she looked at Hope with sincerity. “I didn’t necessarily choose this life. Or immortality. Or any of it really. But if I have to live forever...I can’t think of better people that I’d want to share forever with.”

Hope’s eyes watered at the admission and she blinked them rapidly to try to stop from crying.

“I’m not crying, you’re crying.” She muttered as she wiped at them when blinking away the tears completely failed.

“I am crying. I didn’t even mean to be so sentimental.” Lizzie admitted as she wiped at her eyes too.

“For the record, I agree. I want to share forever with you, too.”
“Don’t let Penelope or Josie hear you say that.” Lizzie released a watery laugh as she tried to make a joke to break the tension.

“Also, I missed you, too.” Hope whispered.

“Oh god.” Lizzie’s laugh turned into a loud sob. “I’m a mess.”

Hope hugged her. “But you’re our mess and we’re always going to love you. And you aren’t going to lose us. And you can’t get rid of us even if you tried...because like you said...you’re stuck with us....forever.”

“I can live with that.” Lizzie breathed shakily as she hugged Hope back.

Josie and Penelope walked in shortly after that. Lizzie pulled out of the hug and smirked at Hope before turning the wicked glint in her eyes on them.

“Done making out already?” She asked devilishly.

Josie opened and closed her mouth and then frowned. “We didn’t... I wouldn’t...we...”

Hope smiled at her. “She’s kidding. She didn’t want you to notice that she was crying like a celebrity at an awards show.”

Penelope and Josie laughed, and soon Lizzie joined in.

Then they gathered their belongings and brought it all downstairs to join the others and start their trek toward the underworld.

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Their caravan drove all evening and late into the night before they decided to stop at a hotel to recoup, re-group and get some well needed rest.

Hope could hear the soft snores and light breathing of Lizzie and Penelope from across the room. She tightened her grip on Josie and snuggled further into her. Hope had not let the girl out of her sight, or away from her touch since they left. She had been far too close to losing her to ever want to give her up for mundane things like every day life and living. Sure, she would still allow Josie to have her autonomy, as long as she was within sight or touch of Hope at all times. Always.

“You’re thinking so hard, I can almost hear you.” Josie whispered.

“Just thinking of how much I love you.” Hope said softly as she kissed the back of Josie’s head. “And I’m thinking of how badass I would be taking on all the gods who try to kill you. If anyone harms a hair on your head...I will fillet them like a fish!”

Josie turned around in Hope’s arms and kissed her lips softly. They shared a languid kiss as Hope continued to revel in the feeling of Josie in her arms. When they finally pulled apart, Josie cuddled into Hope and tucked her head under Hope’s chin and rested her head on her chest.

“I’m scared.” Josie admitted softly.
Hope didn’t know how to respond, because she was scared, too.

“I’m not even scared for me...I…you’re probably going to hate me for saying this and tell me to think more about myself and less about every one else...but…” She looked at Hope and bit her lip. “I’m not scared...not of dying or losing or not being strong enough. I’m scared of what will happen to you if any of those things happen. Because when I woke up...as a vampire, after Persephone killed us, I saw what you were going to do to her. You would have burnt the whole world down. And you just admitted as much now.”

She touched a finger to Hope’s lips when Hope opened her mouth to argue. “I love that you want to protect me. But remember when we talked before...about my happiness being at the expense of yours?” She waited for Hope to nod. “You didn’t like the person you were, Hope. You used to see yourself as a monster. And you were wrong, you’ve never been a monster. So please don’t let them turn you into one now.” She kissed Hope. “Promise me. That no matter what happens, you will not be the person you always feared you were. I’m not worth it.”

Hope’s eyes widened. “But you are.”

Josie smiled. “I’m not belittling myself. I’m acknowledge that I don’t want to be the kind of person...the reason...that you would lose your humanity. Your soul. I don’t want that to be our legacy. Love shouldn’t be that. We’re better than that and we deserve better than that.”

Hope stared at Josie with adoration and love. Then she swallowed thickly and closed her eyes to control her thoughts.

“You’re asking me to…” She shook her head. “Will you promise me that it won’t need to come to that?”

Josie looked conflicted. “You know I can’t promise that. It’s out of my control.”

Hope kissed her forehead. “Then I will promise for the both of us, that I’ll make sure it doesn’t come to that. I will move heaven and earth to make sure that I don’t ever have to consider a world without you in it. And all our friends and family have our backs on this.”

Josie was quiet.

Hope sighed and tightened her grip on her. “I promise that no matter what happens, I will always be the person you think I am. I want to be worthy of you.”

Josie backed away and stared at Hope with wide eyes. “I didn’t say...I...Hope, you’ve always been worthy of me. You are amazing and strong and special and perfect and everything I could ever want. I just wanted you to never forget that. Never lose sight of who you truly are.”

Hope smirked. “So we’re in agreement then. You won’t die.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it. I’ve been promised forever with you. Do you really think I’d let anyone take that away from me?”

Hope smiled as she leaned in to kiss Josie with passion and affection and need. They made out for a few more minutes; alternating between slow, sweet kisses and hungry and frantic ones. Either way, Hope always craved more. Desired more. But unfortunately, now was not the time or the place.

She regretfully pulled away, but not far. Hope licked her lips and smirked when she saw Josie’s eyes track the moment.
“When we end this thing and save the world...I plan to do so many things to you.” Hope practically purred.

Josie shivered and her eyes darkened. “You are such a tease.”

Hope’s eyes widened and she frowned. “No, I’m not. That was a promise.”

Josie stared at her before she closed her eyes slowly. Hope could feel the change in the girl’s demeanor, she could smell her arousal. It was nice to know that Hope wasn’t the only one who got turned on by just thinking about having sex with her girlfriend.

Hope kissed her again, and let her hands roam Josie’s body. She slowly made her way down Josie’s sides and rested her hands on the waistband of Josie’s sleep pants. Josie took one of Hope’s hands in her own, and led her underneath her pants and down to her underwear. Then she looked directly at Hope and nodded her head, which greenlit Hope to continue to wander...down to where she wanted to be. Needed to be.

She tucked her fingers inside of Josie’s panties and let them travel through the wetness that she found there. Hope was content just to explore. Just to be there, to feel what her mere presence did for Josie. She circled the bundle of nerves that she knew gave Josie the most pleasure. And when she did so, she caught Josie’s moan in her mouth as she dove in for another kiss.

They weren’t alone, and she knew that. So she couldn’t do everything she wanted to do. Everything she knew Josie wanted her to do. So eventually, she pulled out and without second thought, she brought her fingers to her mouth and tasted Josie on them. Her eyes closed in ecstasy as she sucked the juices off with vigor. When she opened her eyes, she saw Josie’s darkened orbs staring at her. Then she felt Josie’s fingers deftly enter her, slip quickly through her wetness and then disappear. Josie brought her fingers to her own mouth and sucked on them, one by one.

“Okay...so that’s teasing.” Hope whimpered out. “It isn’t even fair.”

Josie smirked and then stuck her fingers in Hope’s mouth. Hope’s core coiled with intense arousal and she groaned around the taste of herself that lingered on Josie’s fingers.

“Does it matter than we’re not alone right now...because I don’t know how PG I can keep being knowing what you really taste like. Hell, what I taste like on you.”

Josie chuckled softly. “As much as I’d love to continue this...we really should sleep. And actually focus. We both need to survive the end of the world after all.”

“Knowing exactly what I have to look forward to...there’s no doubt in my mind that we’ll survive this thing.”

Josie smiled at her. Then her face grew serious. Not sad, just pensive.

“I meant to say something earlier...but thanks for talking to Lizzie. I can already tell that it helped. She seemed happier today than she has in days. And knowing exactly what we’re about to face and how dangerous it is...that’s really saying something.”

“You don’t have to thank me. She’s my friend, I planned to check on her anyway. I knew how worried she was about the tribrid thing. She seems to really enjoy being a wolf, and she has really gotten a handle on her magic...so I can only imagine how worried she would be to have those things threatened or becoming out of control.”

“But...she’s okay, then.”
Hope nodded. “She’s good. She’s glad she’s alive. I think she’s taking being a vampire much better
than Aunt Rebekah is.”

“We’ll find a way to change Rebekah back. Lizzie and I...we both want to do that for her. We know
how much being human means to her.”

“I really appreciate that. And so will she.”

“I know it’s hard for you though….knowing that as a human, she will eventually die on you.”

“But unlike my mom and dad….it will be peaceful and she will be happy. It’s her decision, and
knowing that she had a good, full life with no regrets is enough for me. I just wish that everyone had
the option. This life...the supernatural....it’s not for everyone.”

“I know I’d never change any of it.” Josie kissed her cheek and then her forehead. “I might change
being brave enough to have made a move sooner…”

“You didn’t make the first move, I did!”

“How do you figure?” Josie raised an eyebrow.

“I gave you the charm.”

“I kissed you first.”

“You were having a nightmare and you apologized for it afterwards, so it doesn’t count.”

“I gave you a Valentine’s Day card!”

Hope smirked. “You were like eight, that doesn’t count.”

“I offered you my friendship.”

Hope rolled her eyes. “Offering friendship isn’t making a move.”

“It’s gay culture. Look it up.”

Hope smiled softly at her. “You really are competitive, aren’t you?”

“I made you a bracelet and bought you chocolate.”

“After I already gave you a necklace. See, I made the first move.”

“I made you orgasm first.” Josie pouted. “That should count for something.”

“Oh, sweetheart, that counts for everything.”

They kissed again.

“And for the record, I fell in love with you first.” Hope added as she pulled away.

Josie rolled her eyes at her. “Prove it.”

So Hope attempted to as she deepened the kiss and held Josie against her chest. She knew that Josie
could feel her beating heart. The way that, as cheesy as it sounded even to herself, it beat entirely for
her. Always and forever.
They cuddled together, Hope allowed her amped up sexual desire to wane (as much as she was able) and they eventually fell asleep holding each other. If the apocalypse wasn’t on their doorstep, everything would have been perfect.

They woke up the next morning and Hope could feel Penelope’s gaze on them, but the girl said nothing. So neither did Hope. The group assembled quickly, grabbed a hot breakfast and then were on the road again. They were set to arrive at Arlington National Cemetery in two hours. Two hours before they attempted to find and enter the underworld. Two hours until they took on the gods. And hopefully, not long after that she would be able to officially start her forever with Josie.

They arrived at the cemetery around mid-day. It looked pretty unspectacular for possibly being a portal into the underworld. Or, at least, Hope thought so. Some of the crescent wolves did a quick perimeter check of the area, while the rest of them had a short strategy session ensuring that everyone knew their roles.

“Alright. When everyone gets into place, I’ll use a cloaking spell so we don’t terrify any tourists.” Freya stated as the group walked toward the front gate.

“Landon, you’re lead on this. We’re hoping that Persephone at least gives us a small signal that we’re in the right place.” Hope told him. “Josie, Lizzie, Penelope and I plan to follow you inside if you’re able to find an entrance. And if we’re able to actually enter.”

“MG, Kaleb, Jed, Raf, Marcel and Rebekah…you’re with me. We’ve got guard duty. We’re the last line of defense before anyone reaches those girls. They’re counting on us.” Caroline told them.

MG smiled at the girls. “Don’t worry, we’ve got you.”

Hope smiled back.

“All witches will stay close to the twins in case they need to draw our power from us.” Vincent told his group of witches.

Davina and Freya nodded resolutely and shared a resolute look with Hope. Hope nodded back at them in thanks and in solidarity.

“And the rest of us are on monster duty. Kill anything and everything you see.” Alaric told the others.

Hope took a deep breath and exhaled with determination. “Pretty sure as soon as the cloaking spell is triggered, any monster within range of here as heading our way.” She glanced at Josie. “And as soon as we open a gate to the underworld… every monster we ever killed will be out to get us.”

Josie met her eyes. “But we’ve got this.”

“Damn straight.” Hope smiled, even though she was terrified about the outcome.

With that, they broke off into their designated groups as Freya prepared to cast the cloaking spell. Hope and her pack followed Landon through the cemetery.
“Feel anything?” She asked him impatiently.

“I’m worried this might be a colossal waste of time. I don’t have powers. I’m just...I’m human. I’m not some demigod hero.” He muttered until he stopped mid-step and stared wide eyed. “Pretty sure we’re here, actually.”

The ground started to shake beneath them. There was a tomb in front of them whose door swung open violently and a bright light poured out of it. The entire sky grew dark and the air chilled. It reminded Hope entirely of Persephone’s grand entrance, except this time the bone tingling dread set in. It wasn’t the unexpected or pure godly power like last time. This was evil. Unadulterated. And it smelled of death. Death, decay and despair.

“Yup, that’s got to be the underworld.” Penelope whispered from beside her. “It smells how I would imagine it.”

Lizzie frowned. “And Persephone...she’s trapped there. That’s her life.”

Hope’s heart melted for Lizzie’s concern and empathy. She truly was too pure for this world. It was what made her most like Josie. It was the part of her that few people were blessed enough to witness.

“We save the world first...then we’ll worry about saving her.” Hope told her sincerely.

Lizzie nodded. “Just as long as we do both.”

“So...do we go inside?” Josie wondered out loud.

“God, I hope we don’t actually have to.” Penelope answered and Hope nodded her head in agreement.

That’s when they heard it. A large cacophony of brutal destruction erupted behind them as the ground ripped open and monster after monster ascended from the chasm. They seemed to be escaping Hell itself and it was horrifying.

“Fuck me.” Davina breathed out from a few feet away.

Lightning struck the ground and more monsters appeared before them.

“Shit. We’re going to be surrounded…” Hope muttered just before the wolves descended on them and began ripping into the monsters as they climbed out the of the earth.

“They’ve got this.” Freya told them. “We’ve got to start working on closing the veil.”

Josie and Lizzie glanced at each other before they raised their hands and started chanting in unison.

Penelope and Hope shared a nod before they detracted their fangs and let their eyes glow red. They would kill anyone who neared them, and they would extend whatever magical assistance the twins needed.

Hope heard the sounds of war all around them. Yelling. Screaming. Dying. She didn’t know if it was her side or the demons, but she could feel the body count rising. She felt Josie and Lizzie reach into her for more power and she gave it to them willingly.

“I think they’ve got this part...at least for now.” Hope told Penelope and then smirked. “Ready to kill some monsters?”

“I was born ready.”
They tore into monsters in tandem. If she went high, Penelope went low. They were recreating an elegant tango since they knew each other’s moves and could sense their thoughts. Monster after monster fell at their feet.

Hope could feel the power around them grow infinitely. She noticed that Caroline and Rebekah’s group was holding off the advancement of the demon army, so Hope got Davina’s attention.

“Get the other witches here now...I have an idea.” She told her.

And luckily none of them were far away, so they appeared almost instantly. “What’s the plan?” Freya asked with eagerness.

“Everyone gather around the twins. Links hands and let them use all of your power.” Hope told them.

A few of the witches looked unsure but they followed obediently when Freya and Vincent did what Hope had instructed. She went to one end while Penelope went to the other.

“Josie...Lizzie...hold our hands....use us.” Hope said as she grabbed Davina’s hand and extended her other to Josie.

Penelope did the same for Lizzie. Instantly, Hope felt her magic leave her body. It was surreal and it would have been frightening if Josie and Lizzie weren’t the ones taking it. When the entire sky lit up with a light more blinding than the sun and a deafening boom shocked the ground and shook her feet….she knew that giving the twins her power was the right choice. Then her magic was returned to her tenfold. She felt the power boost immediately.

“What the hell was that?” Davina whispered beside her.

Hope glanced at her with a smirk. “Instant power up. Just wait to see what you can do now.”

Davina smirked back.

“Did it work?” Another witched wondered.

“I think so?” Hope wasn’t sure.

Davina frowned. “But the monsters are still here.”

“But let’s hope that when we kill them this time….they stay dead.” Hope whispered back.

Out of the corner of her eye, Hope saw a gargoyle advance for Lizzie. It raised its hand to crush her just as MG lunged at it and took it down. Penelope released her hand from Lizzie’s and extended it toward the gargoyle as she expelled enough magic into it to shatter it to pieces.

The witches separated to join the fight. Hope grabbed a fallen dagger from the ground, and tried not to think about who on her side lost it. She sliced through monster after monster. When she was sick of using the dagger, she used her vampiric teeth and her strength. Penelope went the other route, and transformed into a wolf as she killed her way through the battlefield.

Freya and Davina used their power up to kill all the monsters in the sky. They slaughtered the dragon, the demented angel and all the dementors. Lizzie and Josie reunited and joined hands as they set their sights on what remained of the enemy. They electrified every monster in a ten foot radius, before they emitted their power to take out further targets. A burst of lightning with laser-like precision skewered two giants and the cyclops that were half a football field away.
Hope glanced around. They had the advantage now. She knew it was possible to win this thing. They likely already had.

“You make sure the veil really is closed. Make sure this thing is over. We’ve got this.” Hope told the twins. Then she kissed Josie quickly on the lips. “Be safe. I love you.”

She took off like a shot and ran to vanquish the rest of the enemy. Caroline and Rebekah flanked her as they joined the rest of the carnage. It took another ten minutes, but the graveyard was scattered with remains of the recently dead. Parts and pieces of the monster army. And also, some of her friends. Dorian. Jed. Three of the crescent wolves. Two witches. And Rafael.

She stood in shock as she looked at his body. He was still in wolf form, but she could recognize his form and his scent anywhere. She dreaded telling the rest of her friends. Penelope trotted up beside her, still in wolf form also and howled with sadness when she saw Jed lying dead near Rafael.

Penelope transformed beside her, back into human form. Hope took off her jacket and wrapped it around the girl’s shoulders. They had blankets in a bag around there somewhere, but she didn’t have the energy to look for them yet.

“I’m sorry about Jed. He’s your cousin, right?” Hope asked quietly.

“The only one that still claimed me.” She admitted sadly as she wiped tears from her eyes. “He believed in this. Believed in us. And...I can’t help feeling like I let him down.”

Hope hugged her. “You didn’t. He had to have been proud of you. I know I am.”

Penelope nodded against her as she took a ragged breath. “I knew there would be casualties...but I hoped....”

“That it wasn’t someone we knew well.”

“Yeah.”

It was a horrible thing to admit to feeling, but it was the truth. Death sucked. Losing someone sucked. But losing someone you loved was absolute Hell.

Alaric approached them both with a duffel bag and sat it at their feet.

“Here’s some clothes. I’m going to check on everyone. Do a quick count.” He said as he avoided actually looking at them. “We lost some good people. But we did good. We did really good.”

“Let’s hope it was enough.” Hope sighed as he walked away and Penelope got dressed quickly.

They weaved their way through the other dead bodies and came up to the tomb...but the twins weren’t there with the others.

“Where are they?” Hope asked with wide eyes as she addressed a stunned looking Freya.

“I tried to…” Her aunt said with watery eyes as she stared at the opening to the underworld.

“Tried to...what? What happened?!?” Penelope was just as frantic as Hope felt.

“Persephone came...or...Landon said she was here….calling to him. They followed him. The door swung shut after them. I tried to open it, but something threw me backwards. The door won’t budge now….we can’t get to them. They’re gone.” Freya’s voice trembled as she talked and her eyes were filled with remorse and anguish.
Hope and Penelope ran to the door and were also flung back several feet and hit the ground with a loud thud.

“I swear to god if that little bitch Landon was actually a traitor all along…” Penelope growled as she leapt to her feet and ran back to the door.

She was thrown again, this time she landed on Hope with force. Hope sat in silence for a few minutes, as she tried to figure out what to do. The promise she made Josie last night filtered into her mind. She couldn’t lose her humanity. Not yet. Not when she wasn’t sure what happened. So she concentrated all of her power on Josie. On sensing her. On feeling her.

“They’re alive.” She told Penelope. “I can feel them...can you?”

Penelope calmed down and closed her eyes in concentration.

“They are alive. They’re safe. I don’t feel their fear...I feel...peace.” Penelope frowned. “What does that mean? What’s going on?”

Hope shook her head. “I don’t know. But I have no doubt in my mind that Josie will move heaven and earth to come back to us.” She smiled. “They both will. We just saw what they were capable of."

Penelope sighed. “But where are they?”

The rest of the survivors circled around them. They looked around for answers when no one freely offered them.

“Lizzie and Josie….” Caroline breathed out frantically. Her eyes widened as tears filled them. “What happened? Where are my girls?!”

Hope tried to calm her, but even offering a hug did little to ease the blonde’s terror at losing her daughters.

“We don’t know. Freya said they...they followed Landon inside…” She let her gaze fall to the closed door. “The door closed behind them. No one can get in.”

It was hard enough for Hope to keep it together because she truly felt like dying inside. But she had made a promise to Josie that she tried her very best to keep. Everyone else was just as scared and heartbroken as she was, so she tried to keep them all from losing it. Even though, that’s all she wanted to do herself.

“Did you try…” Rebekah wondered with concern...with worry. “I mean...I’m sure you did.” She shook her head at herself. “They have to be okay, right?”

Hope hesitantly nodded. “They’re alive. Penelope and I can feel them. But we don’t know for how long...or how to help them.”

And with that admittance, she started to shake with grief, frustration, and unnerving rage. Penelope was at her side in seconds. As were her aunts. Caroline hugged her again and all of them embraced. Hope needed their support right now because damn it all to hell, she was struggling to be okay. She was struggling to not lash out on these people...the people she loved.…the people who just let Josie and Lizzie walk away and enter the underworld alone.

Power vibrated inside of Hope and she stepped out of the group hug and stared at Penelope with wide eyes.
“I feel it too.” Penelope said before Hope could ask.

Then the twins appeared in front of her as light glowed brightly around them. Hope rushed to take Josie in her arms, but she slipped through the girl as if she wasn’t really there. As if…

“You...astral projection?” Hope asked.

Josie nodded.

“But...you’re okay?” She needed to know.

“We are. We...the veil is closed. Malivore is sealed again. The threat is gone.” Josie told them.

Penelope frowned. “Then where are you...why aren’t you here?”

Josie and Lizzie looked at each other, then extended their hands toward Hope and Penelope. Suddenly, they were no longer outside with the others. They were...in the underworld. It was dark and it was full of sorrow. But the twins were still with them. Landon was there, too, and Persephone.

Hope lunged at the goddess and went right through her as well.

“Careful little wolf.” Persephone smiled softly at her. “You’re in my world now. Well, not physically…”

Hope spun around and lunged again, only for the same result to happen. “I will find a way to kill you.” She growled through gritted teeth as her eyes shined red.

“I am not your enemy. Nor are you mine.” The raven haired goddess told her. “In fact, you have saved not only your world, and my son...but you have helped to free me from my eternal cage.” She smiled at Hope fondly. “And this is your reward.”

Hope frowned. “Reward? We’re in the fucking underworld.”

“Language.” Her father’s voice spoke from behind her.

Hope’s eyes widened as she turned around slowly. Klaus Mikaelson stood facing her with the proudest smile on his face. His lips turned up in the patented Mikaelson smirk. His eyes sparkled with mirth but danced with affection as well. He took her in carefully, thoughtfully. And she did the same to him.

“Dad?” She whimpered.

Penelope’s hand reached for hers, but slipped through. But Hope was grateful for the intention. Josie and Lizzie stood beside her, as close as they could without actually touching her...or trying to.

“Hope.” He walked closer to her. “You did it.” He glanced at the four of them. “All of you.”

“Yeah, it took all of us. Freya, Rebekah and Kol are outside. And we saved the world from the gods.” Hope smiled with pride even as tears stained her cheeks.

He shook his head. “I wasn’t talking about that, although it is an impressive feat.” He reached out to her, to wipe at her eyes but couldn’t physically touch her.

She swore she felt him anyway. And it brought a warmth to her chest. A calm. A peace.

“I was talking about you. You did what I couldn’t do. You let them in. You found happiness and
love. You’re a good person. A kind person.” He blinked his eyes and a lone tear fell from one of them. “You are who I always knew you were….and who I always wished I could have been. There isn’t rage, or hatred, or self doubt or any of the things that consumed me. You, my sweet one…you are the best thing that ever happened to me. And I’m sorry if you ever doubted it. Ever doubted yourself or your worth, because I wasn’t brave enough to tell you before. Hope…you lived up to your namesake. You saved me from becoming a true monster. And now you gave the world that same hope.”

Hope sobbed completely as she fell to the ground and her entire body shuddered violently. He knelt down beside her and so did her pack. She felt buoyed by their presence, but without them actually there to hold her, she felt like this was something she was going through completely alone.

“You...you don’t regret dying for me? You don’t...hate me?” She stuttered out in ragged breaths.

“Never. I wouldn’t know how to not love you.” He told her honestly.

“The necromancer...he said that you weren’t at peace here. That you couldn’t find your peace until I found mine. I worried….I thought that I caused you more suffering, because I…”

“He wanted to break you. He knew you were their leader...their Alpha. He knew what to say to make you doubt yourself.” He told her. “I’ve been able to watch over you, to see you grow strong and beautiful. I’ve never been more proud. And seeing you happy...especially with these girls....I’m happy, Hope. I’m at peace.”

She stared at him, then she looked at Josie and Penelope, and finally Lizzie. “I am happy. My pack...they mean everything to me.” She blushed slightly. “You haven’t been like...watching everything right? Like...you don’t see all things?”

He smiled and shook his head. “I check in from time to time. Just to make sure you’re okay. That you’re happy.”

“And I...I am. With Josie. I’m...Dad, she’s my girlfriend.”

He smirked at that. “Caroline Forbes’ daughter?” He glanced at Josie and Josie blushed too. “You did well, Hope.”

“I know.”

“How is Caroline?” He wondered.

“Freaking out because her daughters are missing and we’re all terrified that we lost them. You know, the underworld and gods and all that stuff…”

He nodded.

“But she’s good. She’s kind and perfect just like you remember. She’s always treated me well. And she also supports my relationship with Josie. So yeah, she’s pretty awesome.”

“And, I’d imagine so is her daughter.”

Hope blushed again, and smiled. “Both of them.”

They stared at each other in silence. In awe for a little longer.

“How’s mom? Is she here, too?” Hope asked.
“Yes. The deal was that you each got to see one person from the underworld. You got one proper goodbye.” He sighed and looked at her sadly. “She sends you her love. She said she already got to see you, to let you know that she was okay. She wanted me to get the chance. But she said she’s happy for you. And that you picked a pretty great mate.”

Hope’s smile widened even as she felt a new stream of tears threatening to fall.

“Really?” She asked hopefully. Then she furrowed her eyes and glanced at the twins. “Deal? What deal?”

“As a thank you for sealing the veil...with Hades trapped inside...we’d get to say goodbye to someone we lost. All of us.” Josie told her.


Penelope rolled her eyes.

“Anyway. We shared our goodbyes….we got to see Jo again. And meet Stephen. For mom.” Lizzie told them. “And we negotiated that you and Penelope would get to say goodbye to someone as well.”

“Me? I don’t have anyone to…” Her eyes widened as Jed walked toward her.

Hope smiled knowing that Penelope would get a proper goodbye now, even though it would still break her to have to walk away after it.

She turned back to her dad. “I love you. And seeing you….like this….I think it will only make it harder to walk away. To say goodbye. To let you go.”

He shook his head at her sadly. “Letting go of the pain and anger and doubt...it doesn’t mean forgetting. I’ll always be with you. I’ll still be watching you.” He cocked an eyebrow at her. “And now that you’re a true tribrid….that you all are….don’t take this the wrong way, but I hope that it’s a very long time before I see you down here again. Go and live your life, Hope. I had centuries and I want that for you...because if you love them as much as I think you do….even centuries won’t be enough.”

She smiled at that. “Always and forever.”

“Always and forever.” He told her proudly and full of love.

She swallowed thickly and let herself dwell on every emotion that coursed through her veins. The good and the bad. The anger of not getting to actually hug him. The pain of having to walk away. The sadness of missing out on seeing her mom. Gratefulness that Josie and Lizzie did this for her, that they thought of her while they negotiated with a god. The true joy of knowing that they did it. That she and her pack survived. That they were safe. And the undying love she felt for all of them. But especially for Josie. She let all of those feelings settle within her. Then she exhaled steadily and with that breath, she released the bad stuff. The regret. The fear. Everything that tied her to the past in a way that felt more like an anchor. She let it all go. So that only the good remained.

At least for now. Because even the sad and troublesome emotions had their time and place. She understood that now. She embraced that now. But in this moment, she wanted to focus on the good. She wanted to focus on love.
Her dad disappeared and soon, Jed did as well. Until it was just Hope, her pack, Persephone and Landon.

“So how….” Hope questioned turned toward the twins with wide eyes.

“Turns out even gods have power than can be siphoned and, therefore, used against them.” Lizzie grinned.

“And when Persephone instilled some of her own power within us...it gave us more than we needed to trapped Hades. Morpheus as well.” Josie added. “You see, gods are forbidden to use our power on each other. It’s what kept us at relative peace for eons.” Persephone smirked proudly. “But you remember, gods and their loopholes. I couldn’t destroy Hades and free myself...but I could make sure you did. Now, we are all free.”

“It was all part of the deal.” Lizzie said proudly. “We saved the world, and Persephone. Just like we said we would.”

“And a deal is a deal.” Persephone told them. “You must get back now. Your family is missing you.”

Persephone snapped her fingers and Hope woke up on the ground. Penelope gasped for air beside her as she woke up as well. Both tried to catch their breaths as worried faces surrounded them.

“What happened? Where were you?” Freya asked as she helped Hope up.

Hope turned and helped Penelope up. “Where are Josie and Lizzie? They made it out as well, right?” She wondered as she looked around and didn’t see them.

But before she could truly freak out again, the door to the tomb opened as a golden light filtered through and the twins walked safely out of it.

Hope ran for them and wrapped Josie in her arms as she tackled her to the ground. “Thank you.” She breathed into her hair before she kissed her soundly.

Eventually, she crawled off Josie and helped her up. Then she hugged Lizzie just as fiercely. Soon, they were rushed by the others as Caroline and Alaric doted on their daughters. Penelope and Hope stood slightly off to the side and watched on with contentment. Penelope’s hand found Hope’s and Hope looked at her with a smile on her face.

“We did it.” Hope announced happily.

“They did it. They are fucking rock stars.” Penelope breathed out with pride.

When the excitement and relief died down into a constant hum of chatter, a round of applause sounded throughout the cemetery. Hope glanced over to see Marcel and Vincent clap with pride. And then the others joined in. Soon, everyone knelt down in reverence to their Alpha. Hope blushed when Josie smirked at her and knelt down to join the rest of them; with Lizzie and Penelope instantly following suit.

“I didn’t do anything. Not really.” Hope motioned for them to stand and they did so. “The twins not only sealed the veil….they did so with Hades and Morpheus trapped inside. We no longer have to fear them, or their monsters. And we have a goddess, Persephone, forever on our side. I’d say they are the true MVP’s here.”

She wrapped Josie up in a one armed hug, and then kissed her temple.
One of the witches that had questioned her authority earlier stepped toward them; Helda, Hope remembered her name was, spoke to Hope directly. “Sorry I doubted your ability and your character. You will always have my allegiance and respect.” Then she looked at Josie, Lizzie, and Penelope. “All of you have earned it.”

Hayden, one of the wolves, spoke next. “We’ll spread the word that you are not to be touched. That whoever comes after any of you...will come after all of us. Tribrid or not, you’re wolves and we’re your pack.”

She nodded at him in acceptance and in thanks.

“Vampires will know it, too. They will know not to fear you because you will destroy them...they will fear you because you could. You are not a threat to us or our kind.” Marcel told them. “But if someone threatens you and yours... we will end them together.”

Hope was in awe of the support she received. It made her feel closer to her mom, to be able to unite witches, werewolves, and vampires. It made her proud that they respected and admired her so completely. And she vowed to live a life that made their respect well-deserved. She would continue to make her parents proud. And she would continue to make herself proud. Because she was proud. She liked who she had become. She loved herself for the first time ever. And it was one of the greatest feelings in the world. Perhaps only bested by being loved by these people. This pack. Her pack.

She looked at Josie, Lizzie and Penelope with a wide smile and tears in her eyes. They were her life. And she was there’s. And together, they saved the world. Not just for themselves...but for all supernatural beings. And they did it with their humanity still in tact. Most importantly, she was able to have kept the promise she made Josie. Because Hope Mikaelson had always been a lot of things, but she was never a liar. The truth of that statement was important to her.

“Where’s Landon?” MG asked out of the blue and brought Hope from her thoughts.

She frowned. She only just noticed that he was gone. That he hadn’t come back out of the tomb when the twins had.

Josie and Lizzie shared a sad look with each other.

“He knows Rafael died. He got to say goodbye.” Lizzie told them. “And now that Persephone is free of Hades and free to come and go as she pleases again...she’s going to take him to meet his family.”

“His father’s dead. Killed by Hades as punishment for Persephone’s perceived betrayal. But he does have other family. Human family. And he wants to meet them.” Josie added.

Hope was sad that she didn’t realize she wouldn’t see him again, but she understood the importance of family. Whether blood family or found family, everyone needed a place to belong. She hoped he could find his just as she finally had.

“Why don’t we gather our dead, and bring them home.” Alaric stated after a few moments of silence. “They deserve a proper resting place, and we deserve some closure. It’s important to say our goodbyes.”

So they went about their tasks in subdued silence. It was bittersweet, to have saved the world and want to celebrate….and yet, need to properly grief all that was lost.

The ride back to the school was relatively silent as well. Hope was in the back seat sandwiched between the twins, who were both asleep on each of her shoulders. Her fingers were threaded...
through Josie’s as she held her hand. She needed the link, the attachment. The reminder that Josie was safe. That they were together. That their forever was ready to begin.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m so ready for this all to be over and for things to get back to normal.” Penelope said quietly from the other side of Josie.

Hope smiled at her. “We’re tribrids at a school for the supernatural...have things ever been normal for us?”

Penelope shrugged. “You’re right. And I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Neither would I.” Hope admitted as she kissed the top of Josie’s head. “I’m ready to stop worrying about surviving and finally start to live though.”

Penelope nodded and smiled back. “Me too.”

xxxxxxxxxxx

Chapter End Notes

Happy Valentine's Day!!!!!! Hope you enjoyed your special gift. It all was leading to this, so I really hope I didn't disappoint! And no, this isn't the end of the fic. It is wrapping down (only one or two more chapters of the main story, and then the Phosie epilogue). I'll be wrapping things up and also giving Hosie a chance to deepen and explore their relationship a bit without all the impending doom and gloom. So get ready for some fluff!
When they finally arrived safely back at the school, Hope was dead tired. She had cycled through so many emotions on the ride home that she had been unable to properly sleep. They had been granted a reprieve from all the insanity of the past several weeks and she had every intention of taking advantage of it.

Hope lay cuddled on her bed with Josie, Penelope and Lizzie as they took the time to decompress together in silence. It was the kind of silence among friends that revealed how much they simply just loved each other’s company. No words were needed. Nothing had to be said that couldn’t be felt by the others. They were all in a state of shock, really. They basically took on the gods and won. But not everyone survived. And Hope felt that pain deep in her soul.

But she also finally allowed herself to process the fact that she saw her dad. That he was proud of her. Happy for her even. And that he had truly found his own peace; so now she was able to concentrate fully on her own. Not because she felt obligated. But because she wanted to experience it more than anything. A long and happy life without constantly looking over her shoulder. Without a hole in her chest that her parents left behind when she lost them. Not that she missed them any less. But she had found a way to love them without the sadness and regret attached to their memories. And, for that, she was grateful.

They fell asleep together, holding on for dear life. Because all of them had been far too close to losing each other lately—that they didn’t want to let go. At least, not until the events of the day were a distant memory. One they fondly told their kids about. One that they excitedly boasted to their grandkids about. Those were the thoughts that Hope fell asleep to, anyway.

Hope was the last to wake up the next morning, her eyes puffy and red. She hadn’t realized that she cried herself to sleep….or perhaps cried in her sleep. She still felt drained, and was not entirely ready to face the day. But knowing that she wasn’t alone made her more excited for the new day than she likely would have been usually. And that was another great step in the right direction.

Even though her friends had obviously been awake for a while now, she was endlessly thankful that they let her sleep. But she was even more pleased, that they didn’t disappear on her in the morning. That they knew and understood her enough to realize that allowing Hope to wake up in an empty bed would have instigated a round of instant dread. The war may have been over, but the reality that sprung from it would always be with them. They had seen a lot. Done a lot. Experienced far too much for kids their age. And as mature as she was, she was still a child who fought in a war and that shit affects everyone involved.

She smiled as she stretched out her body and curled into Josie with a ferociousness that was unexplainable. But it was Josie, and she understood. So she kissed Hope’s cheek softly, and held her tighter.

“Bad dreams?” Josie asked quietly.
Hope shook her head. “I don’t remember any of them.” Then concern washed over her face as she looked at her girlfriend. “You?”

“Surprisingly not. I’m pretty sure that I was too exhausted to even dream.” Josie told her.

“Dad texted us. We’ll be preparing a memorial for those we lost. But he’s giving us all a few days to rest and recuperate. And Mom’s in full on super party planning mode. She wants to throw a Valentine’s themed party at the school next week. Everyone’s invited. Your family as well as her friends from Mystic Falls. I think she just wants us to finally be able to celebrate something…to move beyond everything that’s happened recently.” Lizzie explained.

“A big soiree Caroline Forbes style…what could possibly go wrong?” Penelope asked with a smirk.

“Well, for starters…it’s Valentine’s so I like…need to find a date, stat.” Lizzie said with wide eyes.

Hope and Josie shared a thoughtful look.

“Well, I happen to know someone who might be up for it.” Hope offered.

Lizzie blushed.

“Oh my god…do you actually…are you finally into MG?!” Josie stared at her sister in awe.

“I mean…he’s been amazing through all of this. He really is a good guy.” Lizzie smiled dreamily.

“Who also happened to save your life…” Hope pointed out.

“There’s that as well.” Lizzie nodded. “And he’s really cute.”

Penelope sighed dramatically. “It’s about damn time! I swear, that boy has been pinning after you for far too long.” She glanced at Josie. “He’s even more pathetic about it than I am.”

Josie bit her lip demurely before she looked at her sister. “If you do accept his offer…if he asks you out again….will you let him know that he’s your first choice….that he’s not some consolation prize, because…”

Because Rafael didn’t make it was left unsaid, and everyone grew quiet.

Lizzie nodded resolutely. “I will.”

“I can’t believe he’s gone.” Hope said, then reached out to hold Penelope’s hand. “Jed either.”

Penelope smiled at her gratefully and squeezed her hand in thanks.

“Want to talk about him? It might help if you focus on the good memories versus…you know, what happened.” Josie offered as she hugged Penelope.

They all settled into each other again, and let Penelope speak openly and fondly.

“He’s really been the only family I ever had. Or at least, the only one who never stopped loving me.” She sighed sadly as she closed her eyes and let the tears fall. “He was like my big brother, even though I was five months older than him. But he looked after me and protected me. He wasn’t always the most loved or the most popular one here, but he was great to me. He always had my back...even if I didn’t always deserve it.” She opened her eyes and looked at Josie. “He told me that what I did to you was wrong, even though I already knew it. But he’s also the one who convinced me to reach out to you...to fight for you.” Her eyes met Hope’s before returning to Josie’s. “He made
me believe that even after everything...that maybe I could still deserve you, because he never gave up on me. He told me that I was more than my one horrible mistake. And he told me that I was more than enough for anyone I chose to love; that I just had to allow myself to believe it.”

Josie smiled at her sadly and brushed a piece of hair behind Penelope’s ear. She allowed her hand to linger there. Penelope closed her eyes at the movement, and her smile lit up the room. Hope’s heart melted at the action.

“And do you?” Hope wondered quietly.

Penelope opened her eyes again. “What?”

“Do you believe it now? That you are worthy of being loved by someone?” Hope asked.

Penelope swallowed thickly and nodded slightly. That was the only answer she gave.

“He sounds like a great guy, I wish I took the time to know him better.” Lizzie commented. “There are a lot of things I would have done differently, if given the chance.” She smiled at Penelope. “Not treating you like Satan is one of them. I know I sound like a broken record, but I really mean it.”

Penelope reached out to grab Lizzie’s hand and held it in hers. “Hey, I made hating me very easy.”

“I wish I let you in earlier.” Hope admitted to Penelope as well. “I didn’t even know all that stuff about your parents. The fact that you were basically an orphan as well should have made us closer...but, I didn’t even take the time to know you.”

“Hope Mikaelson, the lone wolf.” Penelope smirked fondly. “How does the lone wolf feel about having her own pack?”

Hope grinned back. “Had I known how amazing it would be, I would have done so sooner.”

Penelope raised an eyebrow. “You would have bitten me sooner? Is that a proposition, my dearest Alpha?”

Hope blushed while Josie and Lizzie chuckled.

The room was quiet for a little while before Lizzie spoke up. “You don’t owe me an answer...but...Jed was a werewolf. And...who did he kill to activate the curse? There are a dozen stories that went around about him, and I never really knew which one was real. I don’t even think he ever told the same one twice.”

Penelope turned pensive for a minute before she steeled her gaze and spoke with fondness, admiration and a load of respect. “I had been in and out of the system for the past three years before I came to this school. Not all of my foster placements were good ones...” She trailed off, so Hope tightened her grip on the girl. Lizzie squeezed her hand in comfort, and Josie kissed her on the cheek.

“Let’s just say...one of my foster brothers had it coming. I told you Jed always had my back. He saved my life, but activated his curse. You’d have thought he’d hate me for it. But he never blamed me. He always said that doing so was the best thing he ever did. It sent us both here...and our lives were never the same. In the best way possible.” She forced a sad smile at them. “No regrets. From either of us. I promise.”

Lizzie frowned. “I hate myself even more now.”

“Oh, hey. Don’t do that.” Penelope comforted her.
“I’m really glad you got the chance to say goodbye to him. I really wished we could have saved him.” Josie offered.

“Hey...saying goodbye.....I don’t think I’ll ever be able to properly thank you for what that meant to me. He died fighting for something be believed in. For people he loved. He was part of something special...and for a time, he knew that he was special, too. Like I said, there are no regrets. He loved this school. He loved you guys.” Penelope told them.

“And he loved you.” Hope muttered quietly. “He’ll be happy that you’re happy. I’m sure that’s all he’s ever wanted for you.”

Water pooled in Penelope’s eyes. “I am happy. Happier than I ever thought possible.”

Silence overwhelmed them and they let the truth sink in. Things were never easy at the Salvatore School of the Gifted. But this school was home. These girls were home. And no matter what they had suffered through in their lives, they each arrived at this moment. The moment when they realized that they truly had a family now. A real one. A great one. A family that loved unconditionally. One that brought them joy and peace. One that literally couldn’t be taken away from them...not without a fight. Because they were immortal now. The only four people like them in the entire universe. And it meant everything to all of them. Hope could feel it within them.

“So do you really think MG still likes me...like in the romantic way?” Lizzie asked after a while. “Like, he hasn’t moved on already, has he?”

“To who? It isn’t like we’ve had a lot of time to focus on much more than not dying.” Penelope said and then rolled her eyes. “I mean, apart from these two idiot soulmates who somehow found love in the midst of all the chaos.”

Josie smiled and Lizzie laughed out loud. But suddenly Hope had doubts. It all happened so fast...what if it wasn’t as real as she wanted it to be? What if now that their lives were no longer in danger and all the drama slowed down...what if Josie realized that being with Hope wasn’t really something she wanted? What if she had regrets? About being girlfriends. About sleeping together. About becoming a wolf...a mate...a tribrid. Forever was a very long time. And Josie could steal the powers of gods. She could do or be anything she ever wanted to be. And now she was confident and brave enough to fight for what she wanted. So what if what she wanted wasn’t Hope?

Hope hadn’t realized she was hyperventilating until she felt Josie’s hand on her heart. On her chest. Warmth spread throughout her body. She forced deep, even breaths as she blinked slowly and then let her eyes settle on Josie’s concerned brown ones.

“Are you okay? What is it?” Josie wondered softly.

Hope glanced around and saw that Penelope and Lizzie were both looking at her with equal concern. She forced a smile and caught Josie’s eyes again.

“I’m fine. Just feeling overwhelmed all of a sudden.” She told her through an unsteady breath. “I just...this is all real, right?”

Josie frowned in confusion. “What’s real?”

“This. Us?” Hope asked shyly.

Josie’s eyes widened. She leaned down to peck Hope’s lips softly before holding her face in both of her hands. Then she met her eyes with determination. “We are absolutely real. I understand if things seem overwhelming or rushed now that we don’t have to fear the end of the world anymore. We can
slow things back down if you need to.”

Hope’s eyes widened and she swiftly shook her head. “No! I don’t…we…like where we are. How we are.”

Josie smiled at her happily. “Me too.”

Lizzie made fake gagging sounds and Penelope tried her best to avoid direct eye contact, even though it was obvious that she was curious and really wanted to watch them.

Hope studied Josie. “No regrets?”

Josie rolled her eyes. “Absolutely no regrets.” Then she leaned in to whisper. “Unless you count waiting so long to make the first move.”

Hope smirked at her and held her close to her chest. “You’re never going to win that argument. I made the first move. Just deal with it.”

“Fine. Then I get to be the one to plan our first date.” Josie’s hot breath on Hope’s neck caused the girl to shiver. “Tomorrow night…just you and me.”

Hope smiled proudly, and even a bit nervously. “I’ve…never been on an official date before. Not, really. I don’t….”

“Then it’s about time. Don’t worry about anything. I’ll plan it all out and you just show up.” Josie looked up at her with a bright smile.

Hope’s entire body was on fire because of that smile. Josie was hers. She loved her. And it didn’t matter what they did on the date, it would already be Hope’s favorite date ever. Maybe her favorite day ever. Suddenly, she couldn’t wait until tomorrow.

xxxxxx

Later that afternoon, Hope made her way to Emma’s office. She realized she had a lot she needed to discuss with the woman. So much had happened since their last official meeting and she needed to process so many different things.

“I’m glad that you decided to keep up with your visits. You had made a lot of progress and I know that a lot of the things we discussed early on are not issues you have anymore. But with everything that’s happened, it’s important for us to touch base. Is there anything pressing you want to address first?” Emma commented when they got settled in to their usual seats.

“We won.” Hope smiled.

“We did.”

“But not everyone is around to celebrate with us.” Hope’s smile faded. “I didn’t even know some of them very well…but Rafael was my friend. And Jed…Jed was Penelope’s cousin and she’s taking it really hard.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. It’s a good thing she has you all to help her through it.” Emma said.
Hope nodded. “I’m sorry about Dorian. I know how much he meant to you.”

Emma smiled sadly. “Thank you. He is missed.”

“After the war was over...when I couldn’t find Josie and Lizzie....” Hope’s eyes glazed over with fresh tears. “I’ve never felt so broken in my life. It was worse than losing my parents….it was like a part of me was missing. But not just missing...ripped out of me. And honestly, I don’t even want to think about what would have happened if they really were gone.”

Emma touched Hope’s hand in comfort.

“If you thought my dad was evil…” She swallowed hard and her eyes met Emma’s. “I was ready to burn the whole world to the ground. Everyone and everything. I would have…”

“But you didn’t...what stopped you?”

“Josie.” Hope blinked the tears out of her eyes. “She made me promise that I wouldn’t become something I’m not. That I wouldn’t turn our love into my...villain origin story.” She scoffed at herself. “And in that moment...as much as I wanted to destroy everything for taking her away from me...I couldn’t. Because Josie would have hated me for it.” She sighed and rolled her eyes.

“Actually, she probably still would have found a way to forgive me. But I didn’t...I didn’t want to risk seeing her disappointment...her pain...if I did those things.”

“I don’t think you give yourself enough credit.” Emma told her calmly. “You keep talking about how big of a monster you are. About all the worst things you’ve done and how that is what should have shaped you. But you still somehow fail to see how good you are. How much good you do for so many of us.”

Hope was silent, but only because she didn’t know how to respond.

“You think you’re pretending to be something you’re not...for Josie? And you’re scared that she’ll eventually see the real you and hate you for it?”

Hope nodded hesitantly.

“What if...she has always seen the real you all along. The good and the bad...and loves you anyway.”

Hope frowned. “She already said that.”

“And you don’t believe her?”

Hope thought about it. “I guess….I thought it was too good to be true. But…” She paused. Then her eyes widened. “I didn’t just want to be good for her. I wanted to be good for me. If I had killed people...gone on a murder spree...I would have hated myself. Because I do know that I’m better than that.”

“See, you’re better than you know.”

Hope smiled. “I got to talk to my dad.” She admitted quietly. “When I disappeared with Penelope and the twins...they took us to the underworld. I got to say goodbye.”

Emma’s eyes widened slightly. “I...wow, that’s huge.”

Hope nodded. “He said he was proud of me. That he loved me. And he said that the Necromancer
lied...about him not being at peace. He is at peace. And he gets to watch over me, and he’s glad that I’m as happy as I am.”

“That’s really wonderful, Hope.”

“I just….” Hope’s eyes filled with tears again. She hated being on this emotional roller coaster, but every feeling was too much. “I have so much on my mind and I don’t know how to process all of it...or any of it, really. I hate that we lost people. I hate that I only got to see my dad for a short time....but, my pack survived. We’re all okay. And I really, honestly, can’t bring myself to care about anything beyond that. And it worries me, because it feels selfish in the grand scheme of things.”

“You have a right to feel however you feel. Those feelings are yours and they’re valid.” Emma reassured her. “It’s okay to be grateful and even happy about winning, despite the losses. And it’s okay to be excited about the people you care about surviving it. That doesn’t mean you don’t feel bad about those we lost. I’d rather you focus on the good anyway, Hope, you deserve to be happy. Especially after all you’ve just been through. And no one will begrudge you for it.”

Hope sighed and removed her hand from Emma’s so that she could run it anxiously through her hair. “I know I should take the time to celebrate our win...but part of me is still waiting for the other shoe to drop.” She admitted quietly. “Like...I didn’t suffer enough yet...to deserve to be as happy as I am.”

Emma’s entire demeanor softened. “Oh, Hope.” She tugged the girl toward her and wrapped her in her arms. “I’m sorry that your life has been so much...darkness and sorrow. Life...I...you don’t have to earn your happiness. Or deserve to be loved by the people around you. Your very existence is a miracle. And maybe that’s why you’ve been through so much. But...happiness should never be something that is on a sliding scale based on what you’ve done to earn it or keep it. It just...you deserve so many great things, Hope. And now that all the chaos is over...I really just hope you’re able to live your life...normally. To enjoy the small things. To revel in the joy of first love.”

“I…” She swallowed thickly. “I hope so, too.”

Emma pulled away and looked at Hope with intention. “Someone told me this before and I think it bares repeating. ‘Never get so comfortable in pain that you forget happiness is still an option.’”

Hope stared at her.

“Some people...when they shatter, they have to put themselves back together...piece by piece. And when they finish...they realize that they aren’t the same shape they used to be. They are different. Sometimes, completely so. But they are also whole, and stronger and that can only occur if they allowed themselves to set inside their own pain. To heal and finally let go.” Emma smiled at her with pride. “You’ve done that, Hope. You did the hard part. And you may find that no matter how hard you try...you will never be able to fit into your old life anymore. But that’s also okay. Because I think you’d agree with me, that your new life is pretty great. So let yourself say goodbye to the past...let go of it all. And embrace the future that awaits you. I’ve seen it...I’ve seen you when you live in the moment. And it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever known.”

Hope cried freely as she let Emma hold her again. “Thank you.”

Hope allowed herself time to process. To recover. And then she left Emma’s room feeling lighter than she had when she walked in.

When she exited the room, she saw Keelin, Caroline and Freya walk through the front door with baby Elijah. Hope’s entire face lit up when she saw them and she rushed to them and immediately
took Elijah out of her Aunt Keelin’s grasp.

“How was Elena?” Hope asked as she kissed Elijah’s cheeks and made cooing sounds at him.

“She’s glad we stopped the apocalypse, and can’t wait for our Valentine’s party, and she loved watching the little guy.” Caroline answered excitedly.

Hope was happy that Ms. Forbes got to see her best friend and catch up without all the impending doom looming over their heads.

“Do you mind if I take Elijah up to meet the girls?” Hope asked.

Freya smiled softly at her. “Of course. I’m sure they could all use a good distraction. How are they?”

Hope nodded. “As good as you’d expect. Better maybe. I don’t know. Penelope’s having a hard time.”

Keelin nodded in understanding. “You’ve all been through a lot lately. It will be nice to try and get back to normal for once.”

Hope’s eyes lit up. “Josie and I have a date tomorrow.” Then she blushed as her eyes met Caroline’s.

Caroline smiled back. “I’m happy for you. What do you have planned?”

“Josie’s planning it. She told me to just show up.” Her blush deepened and a small smile took root on her lips. “It’s my first date...I’m actually really excited.”

Caroline and Freya’s eyes widened and they smiled at her.

“Rebekah and I will stop by tomorrow to help you get ready. I’m so happy for you.” Freya told her.

Hope’s smile widened. “Really? You don’t have to…”

Freya softened. “Your mom would love to be here for this part...but since she can’t be...Rebekah and I will be honored. All we’ve ever wanted was for you to be happy, and anyone within a five mile radius can see the way you light up around Josie Saltzman.”

Hope groaned when Caroline laughed out loud. The blonde raised her hands in surrender.

“Hey! As you already know, I wholeheartedly approve of you. I see the way you treat her and the way she is better and stronger and happier around you. It’s all I’ve ever wanted for my little girl.” Caroline touched Hope’s shoulder. “You’ve allowed Josie to be who we all always knew she was. And she and Lizzie took on a freaking god! I’ve honestly never been so proud in my life.” She frowned. “I was terrified out of my mind for a while there...but it all worked out in the end.”

“It did.”

Hope took her leave from the adults and happily brought Elijah up to the twins’ room, which is were they were waiting for her. Penelope, as usual, was with them.

As soon as she walked into the room, she was attacked by Lizzie and Josie and Elijah was basically ripped from her arms as they fought over who would hold him first. Lizzie won and twirled him around excitedly while Josie continued to fawn over him.

“At least you know she’ll make a halfway decent Aunt.” Penelope stated from beside her. “She has a lot to live up to with the Mikaelson clan.”
Hope grinned. “I think she’ll be the best Aunt. A perfect mix between Rebekah and Freya. Kind, badass and nurturing...mixed with acidic wit, a tough exterior covering a gooey center...and she is blonde, so…”

Penelope rolled her eyes good-naturedly. “Then which aunt would I get to be?”

Hope stared at her and opened and closed her mouth for a moment. Then she sighed.

“Are we really talking about kids already? I’m literally having my first ever date tomorrow.” Hope redirected.

Penelope shrugged. “Tell me you don’t plan on marrying that girl.”

Hope’s eyes met Josie’s across the room and the brunette smiled adorably at her in a way that Hope’s entire body was on fire.

“Yeah. That’s what I thought.” Penelope chuckled beside her.

They watched as Lizzie handed Elijah over to an eager Josie. Hope smiled as she watched Josie and Lizzie and later, Penelope interact with her little cousin. They were all so perfect with him and he absolutely ate up all the attention. They took turns holding him, and rocking him in their arms. Penelope actually looked so adorably nervous to hold him at first but when she warmed up to it, she had the softest smile on her face.

“Thank you for bringing him up here. We all needed it, especially Penelope.” Josie whispered as she walked up to Hope and hugged her from behind. She rested her chin on Hope’s shoulder. “Have I told you yet today, how much I love you?”

Hope turned in her arms and wrapped her own arms around Josie. She waited for her girlfriend to adjust to the new position, as her arms snaked more securely around Hope’s waist.

“I will never object to you saying it again.” Hope smiled at her.

Josie smiled back then playfully rolled her eyes. “You’re lucky I never get sick of saying it.”

Hope’s smile turned into a dark smirk. “I’m still waiting.”

Josie huffed dramatically before descending into giggles. “I love you, Hope Mikaelson, more than life itself. I need you more than the air I breathe.” She lowered her voice to a husky whisper. “And I want you in all the ways you could ever imagine.”

Hope swallowed thickly as her eyes darkened. “I can imagine lots of things.”

Josie claimed her lips in a hard, passionate kiss before pulling away far too soon. Her own eyes had darkened. “I look forward to making all of your dreams come true...especially the non-PG rated ones.”

Hope laughed. “I’m pretty sure my dreams stopped being PG a while ago.”

Then Hope thought about it. And realized that many of her dreams still were very family friendly...or at least recent ones. Because they involved having a family with her. Just being near Josie. Cuddling together. Laughing together. She had already started to envision a life with Josie. The simple, domestic kind. And those fantasies were just as meaningful and exciting to her as any of her sex dreams had been. More so, really. Because she really did want absolutely everything with Josie.

“I love you, too.” Hope said when she pulled back, after Josie rested her forehead against Hope’s. “I will also never get tired of saying it. I love you more than you could ever imagine. And what you did for me yesterday...letting me have that closure...and you know, also not dying on me.” She leaned up on her tiptoes to peck Josie chastely. “I just want you to know...that I did what I promised. I kept it together. I didn’t become a monster. But when I thought I lost you…”

Josie’s arms tightened around her. “Hey...it’s okay. I’m okay. I’m here.”

“I know.”

“And it was wrong of me to make you promise that. I just wanted you to not lose sight of who you were. I wanted you to be okay.”

Hope frowned. “I could never be okay without you.”

“I know.” Josie kissed her forehead. “Same. It’s a good thing we’re both immortal. Because I don’t plan on losing you. Ever.”

Hope studied her. “You faced a god...you beat a god...for us.”

Josie grinned proudly. “I did. But I had help.”

“You and Lizzie continue to amaze me.” Hope told her with fascination, then shook her head. “I’m so glad we’re on the same side.”

“Remember when we sparred each other though....it was hot.” Josie teased.

“It was. And then Lizzie blew the cage doors off their hinges. See...no one would dare come between the Saltzman twins.”

“It’s a good thing Lizzie adores you.”

Hope nodded seriously. “I definitely count that as a win.”

“Lizzie is the greatest person you could ever know...but she only shows that side to a few chosen people. I wish more people got to see how special and amazing she is. I wish she let herself believe it too.” Josie admitted quietly.

“She’s starting to. I can see it. She’s letting more people in. And she’s really allowing herself to be who she was always meant to be...without the merge hanging over your head. I think those nightmares she used to have really messed with her. She hid it well.” Hope watched Penelope and Lizzie laugh together as they fawned over Elijah. “I’m really happy I get to be one of them that sees who she really is. And I will dedicate my life to making sure others see her, too.” Then she grinned at Josie. “Even if I have to charm another necklace and give it to her on her next birthday.”

Josie smiled. “I wouldn’t be opposed to that. She really was jealous that I got something and she didn’t. Not in the petty way, though, more like the hurt way. She tries to pretend that she’s above it all, but we both know better. She really just wanted you to like her. To be her friend. At first it was because I wanted you to be, but then she wanted it for herself as well.”

Hope turned to watch Lizzie again. Penelope was holding Elijah and it looked like she was singing softly to him. Hope listened closely so she could verify and smiled when she did. Lizzie had a large
smile on her face as she watched and then she started to sing along with Penelope. Hope grabbed her phone out of her back pocket and snapped a quick picture.

She turned to Josie with a raised brow. “Blackmail for later.”

Josie grinned. “Or you could just print it out and frame it for both of them. I think they’d actually appreciate it.”

Hope shook her head with a smile and rolled her eyes. “They aren’t even fun to pick on anymore. They’re too soft.”

Josie laughed out loud, but said nothing. Penelope and Lizzie turned toward them with questioning gazes.

Josie shrugged. “Apparently, Hope misses you guys picking on her.”

Hope blushed and shook her head. “I did not say that.”

Penelope smirked and handed Elijah over to Lizzie as she sauntered toward Hope. Hope stared at her with wide eyes before glancing at Josie.

“You’ll pay for this.” She muttered, even though she was not at all upset.

“Have you decided what you’ll wear for your date yet?” Penelope asked as she looked Hope up and down.

“My aunts are taking me out tomorrow.” Hope admitted.

Penelope’s smirk darkened as did her eyes. “Make sure it’s something with easy access.”

Hope’s whole body heated up and when she glanced at Josie she saw her face was tinted pink as well.

“And just so you know...Lizzie and I are helping Josie get ready...so she will be smokin.’” Penelope glanced at Josie with appreciation. “Not that she isn’t always.”

Hope’s belly fluttered with anticipation. She stood up straighter and leveled her gaze on Penelope. “If you think that what you’re doing is going to fluster me...you have no idea what I have planned after the date.” She lowered her voice and growled. “I may have made a few promises I intend to keep.”

Josie pulled Hope away from Penelope as she stuttered out a response. “Okay….that was...fun.” Josie glanced at Hope and swallowed harshly as her eyes darkened. “I think that Elijah’s in really good hands right now….why don’t we….go to your room?”

Hope knew better than to argue. As she grabbed Josie’s hand and walked out the door, she heard Penelope’s voice follow them.

“I expect lots of pictures!” She yelled before cackling at their retreating forms.

“You just had to encourage her.” Josie smirked as she shook her head.

“You started it! You didn’t have to tell her what I said. Especially because that wasn’t what I said.” Hope pouted.

Josie rolled her eyes. “Come on, like you didn’t love it.”
Hope bit her lip and smiled. “I did.” She faced Josie as they got to her door. “Is that okay with you?”

Josie pressed Hope into the door and closed the distance between them. She took charge as her
tongue explored Hope’s mouth with fervor. Eventually Hope’s mind caught up with her body and
she tugged at Josie’s waist to pull her closer. Then she let her hands wander around Josie’s back and
settle just above her butt. As she continued to kiss her girlfriend, she let one hand fall down on
Josie’s butt and squeeze her tentatively. When Josie moaned into her mouth, Hope smiled into the
kiss.

They separated after several minutes to catch their breaths. As they breathed deeply and erratically,
they stared at each other with adoration.

“I love you.” Hope breathed out.

“I love you, too.” Josie smiled. “And to answer your question, of course I’m okay with it. More than
okay.”

Hope opened her bedroom door and led her girlfriend inside. They settled on the bed and made out
ferociously. When they were winded; their eyes black with lust while Josie still had hints of the
marks that Hope left on her neck, Hope quickly pulled out her phone and snapped a few pictures.
Some were far more risque than others.

Josie studied Hope as she went through the photos she had taken.

“We’re hot.” Hope commented. “You’re...I don’t even have words.”

She turned her phone over and showed Josie the picture she had been staring at. Josie’s eyes
widened.

“I’m beautiful.” Josie breathed out.

Hope’s eyes narrowed at her, then they widened too. “Of course you are. This is how everyone else
sees you.” She closed her eyes and chewed on her bottom lip. “Well, hopefully not everyone,
because you’re revealing a bit too much skin and the sexed up pout you have on your face shouldn’t
be something everyone gets to see.”

Josie chuckled at that.

“But yeah, you’re gorgeous Josie. Sexy even.” She handed her phone over to Josie for the girl to
scan through all the pictures she had taken. “I’m so lucky you’re mine.”

Josie blushed at the combination of words and looking through the photos. “You have to send these
to me.”

“Oh, believe me. I planned on it. I’m even making that first one my lockscreen. No, my wallpaper.”
She shook her head. “Both.”

Josie turned the phone over to show Hope the picture she had been looking at. It was one where
Josie was kissing Hope’s neck as Hope smirked at the camera.

“I’m guessing this one is for Penelope?” Josie asked with a raised eyebrow and a smirk of her own.

Hope shook her head. “I’m sending them all to Penelope. She demanded lots of pictures.”

Josie’s eyes widened. “You’ll break her!”
Hope laughed. “Then I’ll wait to send them when she’s in the room with us. So I can see the damage that we inflict.”

“You are horrible.”

“She won’t be complaining.”


“She started it!” Hope pouted.

Josie climbed off the bed. “You are a literal child.” She pulled Hope up with her and kissed her with abandon. “Speaking of, let’s go make sure your little cousin is still alive.”

“He’s fine. They love him.” Hope whined because she didn’t want to leave this room, to leave Josie.

“Tomorrow evening…and night, I promise, you’ll have me all to yourself.” Josie told her as if she could read her mind.

“Good. Because there are a few promises I intend to keep.” Hope stated with a pointed gaze that traveled up and down Josie’s body.

xxxxxxx

Later that evening, after Hope’s aunts left the school to return to the hotel room they had been renting, Penelope, Josie, Hope and Lizzie had all assembled in Hope’s room as per usual.

“Elijah is so cute. Thank you for sharing him with us.” Lizzie said as they settled in for the evening.

“Are you kidding? He loved the attention.” Hope smiled at her.

A comfortable silence overtook the room. The four girls were ready for bed so eventually, they shut the lights off. Hope waited for them to be enveloped in darkness before she pulled her phone out and sent the pictures she took that afternoon to Penelope.

She heard the phone buzz on the other side of the room and waited with baited breath as Penelope groaned and reached over to grab her phone. When the room illuminated with the light from Penelope’s phone, Hope tightened her grip on Josie’s body.

“Fuck me….” Penelope whimpered in the dark.

“What? What is it?” Lizzie asked with concern as she turned the light back on.

Penelope hid her phone and her darkened gaze fell on Josie and Hope.

“Are you okay?” Hope asked sweetly.

Penelope coughed and closed her eyes. “Fine.” She growled. “I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?” Lizzie wondered sincerely.
“Yup. My Alpha is just an asshole.” Penelope stated with a smirk. “But I am not one to be outdone.”

Hope’s eyes widened.

“See... you started it.” Josie whispered so only she could hear.

“You guys are so weird.” Lizzie groaned as she shut the light back off. “I don’t even want to know anymore. Forget I asked.”

A few minutes later, Hope’s phone buzzed and she frowned as she unlocked it and saw that Penelope had sent her a picture as well. When she opened it up, her whole face turned red and a rush of pleasure shot down to her core.

Josie turned the phone so she could see what Hope was looking at. It was a picture of Josie in only a bra and panties. There were hickies all over her body and Penelope was sitting behind Josie, also only in a bra and panties. Penelope’s hand cupped one of Josie’s breasts while the other held the phone out in front of them to take the picture. Both girls stared directly into the camera with eyes so dark they looked black.

“Oh, I still have that picture.” Josie smiled happily as she whispered into Hope’s ear.

Hope bit her lip and closed her eyes. She tried to calm her breathing. She prayed there weren’t more photos like this one because she likely would spontaneously combust if she saw them. But she also desperately wanted to see more. To see them all.

Hope’s phone lit up again with another message from Penelope. She held her breath as she opened the message. No picture. Just a text. She exhaled in relief. But also in disappointment.

Did Josie just say she kept that picture?

Hope smiled at Penelope’s vulnerability. She had always acted tough about the breakup. As if it hadn’t mattered to her. As if she knew that she deserved it for what she had done. But now that Hope had gotten to know her, she knew how much of a lie that all was. Penelope had been gutted by what she had done. She had broken her own heart while breaking Josie’s. And she had absolutely never stopped loving Josie. That much had always been certain. Hope was glad that Penelope had finally let them all in. Because just like Lizzie, she was a really wonderful person who she was glad to get to know properly.

Yes.

Are there more photos?

Asking for... reasons

Penelope chuckled from the other side of the room.
Reasons, huh?
But no, not more like this.
I have an entire camera roll of pictures of Josie though
If your interested

Hope stared at the text. Why wouldn’t she be interested?

*I am definitely interested.*
*I wouldn’t mind a few of you as well.*

She glanced at Josie to make sure that she hadn’t said anything that Josie wouldn’t approve of. Josie grabbed the phone and typed out a message to Penelope herself.

*Make sure you send that one we took of the two of us on our first date.*

*You don’t have that one anymore?*

*I...I do. Yes. I kept them all.*

Hope could hear Penelope’s sharp intake of breath and smiled to herself.

*I’ll send them all.*

They stopped texting after that. But Hope went to sleep that night with a smile on her face. And when she eventually woke up the next morning, she had 100 new pictures from Penelope. And she planned to take her time sifting through each one with adoration and affection.

xxxxxxxxx
That afternoon, they had a memorial service for the people they had lost. Hope and the twins tried to
be there for Penelope the best they could, but it was obvious that she was taking it really hard. Hope
knew that Penelope was grateful for them, and that she was happy to have found a family of her
own...their pack. But that didn’t diminish the love she felt for her true blood family. Jed was all she
had left that linked her to who she used to be. Who she was before this school, before Josie, before
the pack. Jed had been Penelope’s person. And Hope understood how hard losing blood family truly
was. She couldn’t imagine how it would have been if it had been the only family she had left as well.

At least Penelope assisting with the date preparation was a really good distraction. Hope went out to
town after the service with her aunts. Rebekah had been over the moon at the invite and in
anticipation that this was her niece’s first date.

“I can’t believe this was something I thought I wouldn’t get to experience. Not that you couldn’t find
a date...just that you’d include me in the process.” Rebekah said as she handed outfit after outfit to
Hope. “This is a big right of passage for anyone. But to share it with your mate...to have Josie be
your first date...that is truly spectacular. It’s like...fate.”

Hope smiled at her before she admitted shyly. “I thought I’d be too excited to be nervous, but I really
am nervous now.”

“Nervous? She’s already your girlfriend. You’ve already...did things, I assume. This date won’t
change anything...except maybe make the two of you even closer...if that’s even possible.” Freya
told her. “For the record, I think it’s sweet that she even wanted to plan this for you. You’ve already
been a couple for a while now, she didn’t have to go all out the way I assume she is.”

Hope shrugged. “I think she still feels bad about stealing my virginity.” Her eyes widened and she
clamped her mouth shut.

“She, what now?” Freya asked sternly.

Hope rolled her eyes. “I didn’t mean it the way it sounded. Those were actually Penelope’s words,
sort of. We had a really amazing time together....and yes, it had been my first time. But she was
wonderful and it was special, and I loved everything about it.”


“No, I want to hear about it!” Rebekah frowned. “Not like the details. But I want you to share this
with us, if you want to.”

“It’s just...I hadn’t even thought about the fact that it was my first time and I should have told her as
much. I just remember thinking how amazing I felt and how much I loved her. And how I knew she
loved me just as much. It was perfect, you know.” Hope explained. “But Josie felt bad when she
realized that it was my first time. I think she thought she rushed me or something. Which was so far
from the truth.”

Freya nodded her head.

“So...she felt like she didn’t give you what you deserved then...so she’s really making up for it
now...with this date?” Rebekah asked to clarify.

“Part of it. But I think she’s also excited to just do normal dating stuff rather than save the world
craziness all the time. It’s nice to act like normal teenagers sometimes.” Hope told them.

“I understand that.” Rebekah said. “When I first got to Mystic Falls, I was bound and determined to
have the normal high school experience for the first time ever. I even joined the cheerleading squad.”
Hope smiled at the memory. She had heard the story countless times. She also knew that Caroline and her Aunt Rebekah weren’t always on the greatest of terms.

“Is it weird for you….that the love of my life is Caroline’s daughter?” Hope wondered out loud.

Rebekah shrugged. “I told you before that it’s fitting, since you are Niklaus’ daughter and Caroline was his one that got away. But it’s more than that. I’ve seen you with Josie. How she makes you feel. How you make her feel. If any two people ever deserved a happy ending, it’s the two of you. And she really is a great person, you did well, Hope.”

Hope smiled at her aunt and did her best to hug her even though her arms were filled with clothes.

“I better start trying these on.” She said as she pulled away.

“Yeah, can’t be late for your first date.” Freya told her happily as she took half of the clothes from her and prodded at her till they reached the dressing room.

“Any particular look you’re going for? We’ve got everything here.” Freya asked.

Hope pulled out her phone and sent a quick text to Penelope. She knew she’d likely regret it, but she needed to know what to wear so she sort of matched Josie.

“Apparently, Josie’s favorite look is a tuxedo top with...maybe a skirt bottom?” Hope said as she deciphered Penelope’s text. “She’s wearing a blue dress. So I guess I could do a black tux, white shirt. Blue bow tie and blue skirt. Would that be okay?”

She was nervous now. She really wanted to look good for Josie.

Rebekah studied her. “How about...red. You wear a red skirt and red tie. Maybe even a little red stripe on the tux? Red looks really good on you.”

Hope thought it over, then nodded her head. “Okay, that sounds good.” She grabbed all the clothes from Freya. “I guess we can put most of these back. Why don’t I do that and you two grab what I need.”

They met back up twenty minutes later. Hope tried on the outfit that they handed her. She snapped a photo of herself in it and sent it to Penelope.

JoJo’s going to die.

You look beautiful.

Hope smiled at that.

Thanks!

She opened the door and stepped out of the dressing room. She smiled when her aunts’ jaws
dropped.

“Baby girl, you look fantastic.” Freya told her as she hugged her fiercely.

“I love it.” Rebekah told her excitedly. “So will your hot girlfriend,”

Hope chuckled at that as a blush covered her cheeks. “I really hope so.”

“Oh sweetie, she has eyes.” Freya said. “And plus, she’s already in love with you. You’re golden.”

Hope smiled because she really hoped so. She was so excited for the date.

xxxxxxxxxx

Hope nervously paced around her bedroom, much to her aunts’ amusement.

“She literally just texted to tell you she was coming. You don’t have to keep checking your phone.” Rebekah teased.

Before she could reply, there was a knock on her door.

Hope took a steadying breath and shot a worried glance at her aunts.

“Are you sure I look okay?”

Freya smiled sweetly at her. “You look great. Josie will love it.”

“And she already loves you. You don’t have to freak out.” Rebekah added.

“And I can hear you all.” Josie told them from behind the closed door. “Hope, please open the door. I can’t wait to see you.”

All worry drained from Hope’s face as she smiled at Josie’s words and walked over to open the door. The sight of Josie in a light blue dress with some of her hair pulled back took her breath away. Or rather, she forgot how to breath entirely.


Hope fought to keep herself from blushing, but to no avail. She bit her lip and shook her head with embarrassment. Not at the compliment, but at the failure to properly compliment her girlfriend.

“Gorgeous!” She blurted out and then ducked her head. “I mean, you look gorgeous. As always, but especially today. Now.” She frowned and groaned loudly. “I am really bad at this.”

Josie giggled cutely, then she leaned in and kissed the frown off Hope’s lips. “You’re doing wonderful.” When she pulled away, she handed Hope a bouquet of flowers that Hope failed to notice at first. “These are for you.”

Hope’s eyes lit up. “Thank you.”
She took the flowers and inspected them. There were several red roses, a few white ones. A couple of daisies and some that looked like a kind of lily.

“What are these?” She asked.

“Those are Stargazer lilies, they’re my favorite. I hoped that you liked them too.”

“I do. They’re pretty.”

Freya and Rebekah walked up behind Hope.

“Why don’t we find a vase for your flowers, and the two of you head out on your date.” Rebekah said with a smile.

Hope nodded and handed to bouquet of flowers to her aunt. Then reached over to take Josie’s hand in hers and the two of them walked down the hallway together.

“Where are we going?” Hope wondered as the reached the stairs.

“To the clubhouse. I hope that’s okay.” Josie told her.

Hope smiled. “I think it’s perfect.”

They walked into the woods and toward their destination in a comfortable silence. Both with eager anticipation for the date.

When they reached the clubhouse, Josie stopped. So Hope followed suit.

“So...you wanted to have an ordinary life for a while, and I thought….I wanted to do something special for you, but I didn’t use any magic at all. Tonight it will just be you and me. Two normal, teenage girls who just happen to be madly in love. How does that sound?” Josie asked nervously.

Hope reached out with her free hand and placed it delicately on Josie’s cheek. She wanted to do her best to still Josie’s nervous movements. To calm her fears.

“I think it’s perfect. And really, you already gave me flowers and kissed me. As far as I am concerned, this is the best date ever.”

Josie rolled her eyes. “It’s your first date ever. I want it to be super special.”

“And it is. I’m here with you, aren’t I?” She raised an eyebrow daring Josie to argue.

“Okay. But you have to close your eyes, I want it to be a surprise.”

So Hope did as she was told. She closed her eyes and even let Josie walk behind her, hands over Hope’s eyes just in case, and lead them the rest of the way into the clubhouse. Josie removed her hands from Hope’s face, but Hope kept her eyes closed until she was told she could open them. Then Josie leaned into her and pressed her lips against the shell of Hope’s ear, the contact made Hope shiver.

“Ok. You can open them now.” Josie whispered against Hope’s ear.

Hope inhaled shakily and released her breath as she opened her eyes. The room was dimly lit with candles and also some white christmas lights hanging from the ceiling and scattered on the walls. It created such an intimate ambiance. Hope took it all in carefully. There was a picnic basket in the center of the room with a large cooler beside it. A blanket was laid out on the ground in front of
them. She even spotted Josie’s guitar.

“This is perfect. I love it all.” She glanced at Josie with wide eyes. “Are you going to play for me?”

Josie shrugged. “If you’re lucky.”

Then her indifference turned into a shy smile. Hope smiled back. She walked over to the picnic items and noticed a top hat sitting on the blanket.

“What that for?” She wondered.

“Penelope insisted you wear it after she saw what you were going to be wearing.” Josie explained. “Although, she didn’t share the pictures with me. Only Lizzie. They both approved though. And I have to say, so do I.”

Hope put the hat on her head and smirked when she watched Josie’s eyes immediately darken.

“So...you like it, then?”

Josie swallowed thickly. “I do. A lot.”

Josie sat down beside Hope and opened the cooler first. “I had to use dry ice...because you know...no magic.” She pulled out a milkshake and handed it to Hope. “It’s your favorite. Just how you like it.”

Hope smiled and kissed Josie’s cheek in thanks before happily sipping on her milkshake.

“I packed all of your favorites actually. Everything I ever heard you mention that you liked.”

She opened up the picnic basket and started emptying the contents of that as well as those in the cooler. Hope stared at all of the items in awe. Josie had been basically taking notes during their entire childhood. Not only were there food and drink items. But there was a sketchbook and colored pencils. A small canvas with an easel and some paint. Josie even plugged her phone into a dock that was attached to speakers. And soon, Hope’s favorite jazz song played softly in the background.

“I also have a book of poetry. And…”

Before Josie could finish, Hope tackled her to the ground. She smothered her with kisses. And at first, she started out playfully, but slowly she made the kisses more deliberate. More passionate. And soon, they were engaged in a very heated makeout session on the blanket in the middle of the clubhouse while light from the candles danced off the walls of the darkened room.

Regrettably, Hope pulled away, but she remained close to Josie. Hovering over her body as she took in the tremendous view of her girlfriend; whose lipstick had smeared and whose chest heaved from the exertion of kissing.

“I don’t know what I did to get so lucky.” Hope breathed out barely above a whisper.

Josie smiled at her and tucked some stray hair strands behind Hope’s ears. “You loved me back.”

They kissed again. But only for a short time. Hope still had a milkshake to drink and wanted to enjoy every minute of the entire date Josie had planned for her. Kissing and making love and worshiping her girlfriend’s body would just have to wait until a little later.

They chatted amicably about anything and everything while they ate. Afterwords, Hope grabbed the canvas and easel and started to paint Josie. It wasn’t like she’d ever forget this night. But she did
want something special to commemorate it.

“You know...I used to worry that I was incapable of letting anyone in enough to love them. That something in me was broken—or maybe just lost perhaps. With everything and everyone I’ve lost, I was scared to let anyone else in. Somewhere along the way, the only thing that scared me more than loving you was not letting you know how much you meant to me. And loving you...it has been wonderful. It transformed me. It changed me....but being loved by you...Josie...nothing in my life prepared me for this. I…” She didn’t even know that the tears had formed until she felt Josie wiping them away. “I don’t know why I’m even crying. I’m the happiest I have ever been.”

“Sometimes happiness is just as overwhelming as anything else.” Josie said as she kissed at the tear tracks on Hope’s cheeks. “And for the record, I feel the same way. Loving you is fantastic...but being loved by you....it is everything. You are my everything.”

Josie held Hope as she finished the painting. She didn’t need her girlfriend to pose for her--she had every curve, every smile, and every detail of Josie memorized. So she painted by memory. And as her paintbrush danced across the canvas, Josie rooted herself more firmly in her heart. Always and Forever.

“I want to sing to you now.” Josie announced as Hope finished her painting. “I don’t ever sing for anyone, even Lizzie. So if I’m bad, please don’t be offended.”

“Josie…”

Josie ignored her and grabbed the guitar. As she tuned it briefly, most likely just to stall for time, Hope continued to watch her.

“Okay...here goes nothing….?” Josie breathed out and started to strum a few chords.

“I knew I loved you before I met you.
I think I dreamed you into life…”

Hope listened transfixed as Josie performed just for her. And her voice was beautiful. The song choice was perfect. And the performance was brilliant. Once again, Hope was crying. She still couldn’t believe that this girl loved her back. That she got to spend forever with her. Because her dad had been right, even forever wouldn’t be long enough. Not even close.

They wrapped up the date shortly afterwards. They even picked up all the items and carried everything back to Hope’s room. When they had changed for the evening, and climbed into bed together, Hope wrapped Josie in her arms and kissed her soundly.

“Thank you for giving me the best day of my life.” Hope told her as she stared at Josie with unadulterated love.

Josie smiled back proudly. “Thank you for letting me. I’m really glad that you made the first move.”

Hope laughed out loud. “So you’re admitting it now?”

“Only because I loved you for so long, I probably would have continued to just love you from a distance if you hadn’t decided to finally let me in. So yeah, I guess in a way, you did make the first
Hope climbed on top of her and straddled her. “I think we’ve talked enough for the night...I do believe I have a promise I intend to keep.” She kissed her way down Josie’s body before settling into position. “You ready to let me show you just how much I love you?”
Always and Forever

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Hope encouraged Josie to raise her hips so she could better remove her PJ bottoms and panties. Josie eagerly assisted her in the process. When they were out of her way, Hope kissed her way up Josie’s legs. She started with her right ankle, then her calf and onto the inside of Josie’s right thigh. By the time she got there, she could easily smell the arousal that pooled at her girlfriend’s core. The scent brought her own lust front and center, but Hope had no plans to stop worshipping her mate’s body.

Slowly, she moved back down, and repeated the process on Josie’s left leg. Since Josie was already squirming with anticipation, she decided to speed up the movements---but only slightly. Eventually, she settled in between Josie’s legs and looked up to meet her darkened eyes.

“I plan to be here for a while, just so you know.” She smirked playfully as her voice dropped to a sultry tone.

“I don’t think you’ll ever hear me complain.” Josie said as she reached down to wrap her hands in Hope’s hair.

Hope lowered her face and placed a gentle kiss on Josie’s center. She planned to take her time; but when Josie shoved Hope further into her, Hope couldn’t resist anymore. She devoured her. Ravished her. She alternated between harsh thrusts with her tongue into Josie’s core and then gently through the slick, wet folds that led her to Josie’s clit. She took her time sucking and nipping and working her tongue and lips over the bundle of nerves that caused Josie to shudder with desire.

She kept her mouth on Josie as her girlfriend rode out her first, and then her second orgasm. It was the most amazing experience in her short lifetime. Watching her girlfriend fall apart for her. Because of her. To have Josie so thoroughly want and desire her. But it still didn’t compare to the taste of her. The feel of Josie all around her. Being inside her in such a way. Sharing such a intimate moment with her. It tripled the love she felt for her. And she reveled in the fact that tonight was only the beginning. That they still had forever.

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Hope kissed her way back up Josie’s body. She sucked on, nibbled and bit at every inch of Josie that was exposed to her. But with Josie’s shirt still on, and her breast blocked from view, Hope grew impatient. They both immediately shed the rest of their clothes, and then Hope took her time on each of Josie’s breasts. She focused on each hardened nipple. Then when she made it up to Josie’s neck, she marked her. She marked her everywhere. Even though the marks didn’t stay long at all, it didn’t dissuade Hope in the least. Instead, it became a challenge.

Finally, she hovered over Josie’s body and lowered herself into her. Their lips met and Josie moaned in Hope’s mouth when she tasted herself all over her tongue. Hope put everything she had into the kiss. She needed Josie to feel what she felt. To understand just how deep Hope’s love went for her. And as the kiss grew more heated, more passionate, Hope’s hands wandered back down Josie’s body. Together, their fingers entered each other and they moved in and out in tandem. They made love in every sense of the word. And then they came together.

Hope shook with pleasure and moaned loudly into the empty room before attaching her mouth to Josie’s neck and biting her. Hard. Deeply. Josie’s answering moan as she continued to move her fingers inside of Hope, before curling them--brought Hope quickly near the edge again.
“I love you.” Hope said over and over as she cried into Josie’s neck when she came at last.

Josie must have felt the hot tears against her skin, because she slightly pushed Hope away so she could look her in the eye.

“Baby, are you okay?” Josie whispered quietly.

She wrapped both arms around Hope and held her to her chest as Hope wept.

“I am...I...” She kissed Josie’s soft skin and wrapped her arms around her. “I’ve never been happier. I didn’t think it was possible. I don’t even...I’m sorry I’m crying.”

“Hey...never apologize for how you feel. Remember what I told you about crying?”

“I know.” Hope smiled at her. “And I fell even harder for you because of it.”

“I love you, too.” Josie told her, as if she realized she hadn’t said it back this time.

“Tonight...this... you are perfect.” Hope told her before claiming her lips again.

When they finally parted once more, Josie kissed Hope’s temple. “Are you ready for me to return the favor?”

Hope shook her head. “No. I don’t need you to tonight. Can we just...I just want to be held by you.”

“I can do that.” Josie smiled into her and held her tighter.

They fell asleep naked and wrapped up in each other. And it was perfect.

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The next several days went by without incident. It was the most normal Hope had ever remembered feeling. No monster attacks. No real drama. Just normal school stuff, like homework. And planning for a school dance. Caroline had been in full on party planning mode, which meant that Lizzie had been almost entire absent the last few days. She was excited and nervous and right in her element. Hope was glad that Lizzie was so happy about the impending party, and she was even excited about it herself.

But Lizzie being gone most evenings, meant that Hope spent a lot of time with just Josie and Penelope--which was more than fine with her. Although, what made Hope happiest was that every night Lizzie would join them and the four of them would change into wolves and run together. Hope loved their time together. She got to teach them more about their wolf side. They were eager to learn to hunt and Hope was more than happy to teach her.

Besides learning more about their wolf side, Hope’s pack also spent some time learning more about their connection while Keelin was still in town. And they even worked with Freya on their powers so that they could continue to test their limits. Hope was continuously amazed at how strong they all were, especially together. She couldn’t believe how she got so lucky to have a pack. To have friends. To have her girl.

Hope was cuddled between Josie and Penelope while they were watching a movie together. Her mind wandered to all the good things in her life. It was unbelievable to her how much her life had
changed lately. Her thoughts were interrupted when Lizzie came running through the door.

“He asked me!” She announced excitedly. “MG asked if I would be his date to the Valentine’s Day
dance.”

“Really?!” Josie climbed off the bed and hugged her. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Yeah, tell us all about it.” Hope said as she patted the empty place beside her that Josie had just
vacated.

Lizzie practically jumped on the bed with enthusiasm and Josie sat beside her with a soft smile as she
watched her sister happily.

“Well, he came down to help with the decorations for tomorrow’s party and we started talking. I
flirted hardcore. And he flirted back. And I may have let him know that I was still looking for a
date…” Lizzie retold the story with a megawatt smile on her face.

Hope didn’t remember ever seeing the blonde so happy and it looked good on her. She deserved it.

“He said that he’d be happy to fill the spot...and before he could say anything else, I told him yes.
But I made sure that he knew it wasn’t going to be as just friends.” Lizzie continued. “He smiled at
me and then...he knelt down and was all romantic and he asked me officially to be my date. It was so
cute and sweet. And he stuttered a little and even tried to recite a poem. It was adorable and perfect.
So I kissed him. He’s a really good kisser!”

Penelope whistled loudly and smirked at Lizzie. “You sure know how to get what you want, don’t
you Saltzman?”

“Well, I feel like I was patient enough...I waited like nine days longer than I normally would have
just to make sure that he was the one who asked me. I mean, I turned down a ton of people in the
meantime, but he didn’t know that. He was offering as a friend, because he cared about me enough
to respect my wishes...because he thought I didn’t want more from him than that.”

“That’s great, Lizzie. He is really a great guy, and he adores you. For you...not for who you pretend
to be for everyone else.” Hope told her.

Lizzie smiled at her shyly and even blushed a bit. “Thank you, Hope. That means a lot. And he...I
know I overlooked him before, but he always was kind to me. And thoughtful. I wish I wasn’t
always so selfish or superficial.”

“Hey...don’t do that. You’re a really awesome person, Lizzie. Stop underestimating yourself. We’ve
all made mistakes. You don’t have to keep reliving yours. You changed. You deserve a good guy.
And MG really is the best.” Penelope complimented her.

“Thanks!” Lizzie reached across Hope and grabbed Penelope’s hand. “Now that Hope and Josie are
all gross and coupled up...and I finally saw what was right in front of me....it’s time for you to be
happy, Penelope.”

Penelope’s eyes scanned Hope and Josie before she ducked her head shyly. “Yeah, well...not
everyone is as lucky, I guess.”

Hope’s eyes met Josie’s. Then she pulled Penelope close to her. “Hey...you need to give yourself
more credit...I think your turn is coming.”

Penelope locked eyes with Hope in a heated staring contest, but she didn’t reply back.
“Good! Now that that’s settled. What movie are we watching?” Lizzie asked as she cuddled between Josie and Hope.

“Why don’t you choose?” Hope offered as she tilted the computer toward Lizzie.

The blonde smiled and quickly chose a predictable romantic comedy, and Hope smiled at the domesticity of it all.

The next day, Penelope helped Lizzie and Caroline finish up with decorations so that they could give Josie and Hope the morning together. It was their first Valentine’s Day together as a couple. And even though Hope didn’t have a lot planned, she did have something special she wanted to share with Josie. She knew she had no reason to be, but Hope was still a nervous wreck about it.

They made out for a few minutes as soon as they were alone, but eventually Hope pulled away from the kiss and rested her forehead on Josie’s.

“As much as I love this...I have something I’ve been waiting to give you.” Hope said as she climbed off the bed and walked over to her desk.

She pulled out the homemade Valentine from her top drawer and handed it to Josie shyly.

“Happy Valentine’s Day.” Hope told her with a soft smile.

Josie’s eyes widened. “You made me a card? I thought you bought the Star Wars ones?”

“I did. But only because I was trying to find a particular card that happened to not be in the box anyway. So I drew it for you.”

Josie looked away from Hope and down at the card in her hand. Hope had drawn C3PO and R2D2 and wrote “You’re the droid I’ve been looking for.” It was sketched delicately and then glued to a pink heart Hope had cut out of construction paper. She even kissed the back of it with her favorite bright red lipstick just to be extra. Because she was in love. And she was hopeless.

“I...this is amazing.” Josie stared at it with wide eyes. “You know how much I love Star Wars, so you drew me my own card? This is...I don’t even have words.”

Hope sat beside her...then reached under her bed and pulled out her secret box of her favorite keepsakes.

“I didn’t just draw you Star Wars because you love it...I drew you that particular one because it was the first card you ever gave me.” She explained to her as she grabbed the card off the top of the stack and showed it to Josie. “I kept them all. But this was always my favorite. You stole my heart that day, Josie. And I didn’t even know it. You had no idea what it meant to me...that you...it was the first thing anyone had ever given me. Other than my family. And at the time, I had felt abandoned by my family. I felt alone and lost here. I didn’t think I’d fit in. I watched you and Lizzie rule the school...or I assumed you did. I see that now. But I started watching you after that. I really tried to get up the courage to talk to you. To even just say thank you. And honestly, I had never even watched Star Wars before so I had no clue what this card even meant. But it didn’t matter. You cared enough to give me a card. And it mattered to me. And when I finally realized where it came from, I watched the entire thing a dozen times.”

“I can’t believe you kept them all.” Josie breathed out in awe.

“Of course I did.” Hope bit her lip nervously. “They were from you.”
“I kept every picture you slipped under my door, too.” Josie told her. “And you remember the beginning of the school year last year, when we had to write Haikus in English class? We had to pair up and I don’t even know how I ended up in your class, but you took pity on me and were my partner.”

“Please. I didn’t want to work with anyone else.”

“I kept the poem we wrote together.” Josie admitted.

Hope rolled her eyes and smiled. “So did I. God, we were both so clueless.”

“Not me. I knew I had a crush on you. I just thought you were straight and I was happy to maybe just be your friend.”

“Well then, I was the idiot. Especially, because I realize now how gay that Haiku actually was.”

Josie laughed out loud. Hope dug through her box and pulled out the wrinkled up paper that she had memorized ages ago.

“Beautiful green eyes
She wears her heart on her sleeve
Doesn’t know her worth”

“We earned an A for that.” Josie told her as if Hope hadn’t remembered. “Honestly...it was after we read it in class that Penelope came up to me and officially asked me out for the first time. We’d made out a few times before...in private. But I think she realized that I was willing to be out after that poem, and she took the chance on me.”

“Penelope was in that class, too.” Hope said with astonishment. “I have been blind to so much in my life. I’m sorry it took me so long to see what was right in front of me.”

“Hey, we made it. Right? That’s all that matters.” Josie said as she pulled Hope into her for a kiss that quickly turned passionate.

Eventually, Josie pulled away. “I love you.”

Hope took a deep breath and exhaled shakily. Then they kissed again.

“I can’t wait to dance with you and show you off to the whole school.” Hope said possessively as she pulled away. “I love you so much, I wish you could understand.”

“I do.” Josie pressed her hand to Hope’s heart. “I can feel it. I feel you. If that makes sense. I can feel how you feel about me.”

Hope smiled and rested her hand over Josie’s. “It makes sense. I feel it, too.”

Hope wrapped Josie in her arms. Josie collapsed into her and hugged her back just as tightly.

“Anything else you want to confess to me now that we’re sharing all of our secrets?” Josie asked as her hot breath made Hope shudder.
“No, I think that’s it. You know me more than anyone ever has.” She told her as she pulled away slightly to look at Josie with sincerity. “Sometimes I still wonder how I haven’t scared you away yet.”

“Why? Because you’re a tribrid? Get in line. You’re not the only one.” Josie teased which caused Hope to laugh. “We’ve both had a rough time of it, especially lately.”

“That’s the understatement of the millennium.”

Josie smiled. “It is. But the way I see it, I think we paid our dues. We went through all of that so that when we finally found our way together, we’d appreciate what we had. We would cherish each other. And we would never take each other for granted because we know what losing a part of ourselves feels like.”

Hope stared at Josie with wide eyes. “I never thought of it that way. I actually...when I was talking to Emma a couple of weeks ago, I told her that I didn’t think I earned my happiness yet.”

“Oh, Hope…” Josie kissed her temple. “You deserve all the good things. So many things.”

“I’m actually beginning to believe that.” Hope admitted.

“I promise to make sure you get there.” Josie told her.

Lizzie and Penelope burst through the door.

“T minus three hours before showtime. I need to get ready. And I need your help.” Lizzie announced as Penelope stood behind her looking at them regrettably.

“I tried to keep her away.” Penelope told them.

“Yeah, but you guys can have sex all night. I already promised to sleep in my own room. I want to share this day with you.” Lizzie said as she paced around the room anxiously.

“Oh, sweetie. Are you asking to me my Valentine?” Hope smirked. “Because you’re not my type.”

Lizzie blanched. “Shut up.”

Penelope laughed out loud and Josie giggled.

“Kidding. Well, not about the not my type thing. But let’s get you ready for your date. MG deserves the best.” Hope told her kindly.

Lizzie’s face lit up again. “And I am the best!”

“You are.” Josie agreed and Penelope nodded.

“I love you guys.” Lizzie said as she walked out of the room and toward her own.

Everyone knew enough to follow her. They all got ready together. Lizzie tried to make a big deal about Hope and Josie getting ready separately to surprise each other, but they decided they would rather spend the day together than separate for stupid and archaic reasons.

They walked down the hallway as the pack of well dressed tribrids that they were. MG was waiting for them by the staircase. His eyes found Lizzie’s as they approached.

“You look gorgeous.” He said as he bowed and extended a single rose toward her.
Lizzie took it happily and hugged him. Then she kissed his cheek and let him hold her hand as they walked together down the stairs.

“Well...looks like he really does only have eyes for her.” Penelope commented. “I look hot and he didn’t even spare a glance at me.”

Hope stared at her. “Did you want him to?”

Penelope smirked at shook her head. “It would have been nice, but I don’t need his validation to know my worth.”

Hope smiled at her. “You do look amazing. But you already know that.”

Penelope’s smile turned soft.

“You both look beautiful.” Josie told them. “Can we go dance now?”

“Nope. Not just yet.” Penelope told her before dismissing herself and running to her room. She came back with a two, long stem roses. “I know it’s Valentine’s Day and you have each other, but I really appreciate you letting me crash your day.”

She gave them each a rose. “And Josie, you look beautiful, too. You’re always the best of us.”

Josie smiled at her as she accepted the rose. She pulled Penelope into a hug and kissed her cheek.

“Hope and I have a card for you. We’ll give it to you later. But thank you.” Josie told her as she pulled away.

Hope duplicated Josie’s actions. After they brought their roses to Hope’s room and put them away for safe keeping; the three of them descended the stairs together. Penelope had helped with the decorating a little so she knew what to expect. But Hope was blown away by the detail that Lizzie and Caroline put into the event. She shouldn’t have underestimated them, but she was still impressed.

“Wow. Lizzie really outdid herself this time.” Josie exhaled proudly. “I’m so proud of her.”

Hope led her girls to the dance floor were Lizzie, MG and Kaleb owned the room. She was also not at all surprised that her Aunt Rebekah was dancing already. Caroline, Bonnie and Elena were out there as well, which made Josie scream with glee. She ran to them when she saw them and hugged Bonnie and Elena with pure joy. Hope watched them contentedly before her eyes drifted to her aunt.

“Go, dance with her. She’ll love it.” Penelope told her as she joined Lizzie and the boys.

Hope smiled at her and took Penelope’s advice. She wandered over to Rebekah.

“Hey…” Hope greeted her.

“Hey! Your girlfriends look great.” Rebekah told her with a smirk before pulling her into a hug.

“And you look really happy.”

“I am.” Hope replied with honesty.

“I’m glad, little wolf.” Rebekah said as she pulled out of the hug. “Now, dance with me!”

So Hope did. Soon, everyone was dancing together and Hope was laughing and having a great time. She looked around the room and the sight of everyone she cared about the most in the world overwhelmed her. She couldn’t believe this was her life. She had friends and a family. She had a
girlfriend and a pack. She had this school. These people. Her entire life was in this room.

Soon, the music slowed down and her eyes met Josie’s.

“Can I have this dance?” Hope actually curtsied as she stupidly extended her hand to her girlfriend.

But the look on Josie’s face made it all worth it. They held each other as they swayed back and forth and let the music take them away. Hope stared into Josie’s eyes as they danced.

“I love you.” She told her.

“I know.” Josie smirked but then kissed her thoroughly.

“Get a room!” Lizzie teased from beside them.

“No. No, don’t get a room. You can’t…” Caroline’s eyes widened. “I...I need a drink.”

She walked away.

“I’ll go check on her.” Rebekah said as she followed close behind.

“Sorry.” Lizzie whispered when she saw the horror that crossed their mother’s face.

“She’ll be fine.” Bonnie assured her.

“Alaric might not be.” Elena admitted.

“Preach!” Penelope yelled with a smirk. “He knows you aren’t a virgin and he’ll still freak.”

Bonnie and Elena covered their ears dramatically.

“Things I never needed to know.” Bonnie groaned.

“Yeah, well, I have kids who are about to be teenagers. How do you think I feel?” Elena said. “I love you, Josie, but not enough to stay and hear all about...stuff I never wanted to know.”

Bonnie nodded and the two of them walked away.

Hope and her friends danced the rest of the night. She danced with Lizzie once, while Penelope and Josie danced together.

“Tonight has been perfect. MG is such a gentleman.” Lizzie told her as they swayed slowly back and forth.

“I’m glad that you took a chance on him.”

“What? No, I’m glad he was able to see past what I wanted everyone else to see. Just like you, Josie and Penelope...he sees the real me. I don’t think I need to tell you how good it feels to be seen.”

Hope shook her head. “It’s the best thing ever.”

Lizzie raised a teasing eyebrow. “Well, not the best thing…”

Hope laughed. “You’re right. Not the best thing.”

“Look! Dad is talking to Emma. Do you think...I mean, I want him to be happy. I think...I’m really good at matchmaking as you are aware...should we help him out?”
“Umm, why don’t we let them work it out for themselves. I think Emma and Dorian had a thing or almost had a thing. She deserves time to grieve and move on naturally.”

Lizzie nodded. “But if he’s anything like me or Josie...he will take forever to make a move. And he will probably fail to see the amazing person standing right in front of him.”

“True. But you and Josie both got there in the end. Isn’t that what’s important?”

“You are amazing.”

“As are you.”

Lizzie smiled. “How about my mom? Any candidates for her?”


“Your Aunt Rebekah is pretty awesome...she may not be single...but poly is for everyone, right?” Lizzie added.

Hope’s eyes widened. “Lizzie, no.”

Lizzie grinned at her in a way that didn’t bring Hope any comfort.

“Lizzie....”

“Oh, look. The song’s over. Thanks for the dance.” She kissed Hope’s cheek and then hopped off into a direction that Hope was scared to watch.

Penelope approached her. “Since Lizzie left. Josie is going to dance with MG. So can I have this dance?”

Hope smiled at her shyness. “Of course.”

They held each other close.

“You look more upset than you should. Today is a great day.” Penelope commented.

“I’m in a great mood. Today is perfect.”

“Then why are you frowning? Do you not want to dance with me?” Penelope asked vulnerably.

“What? No!” She sighed and shook her head. “Lizzie just had the worst idea ever.”

“Really? She’s had a lot of bad ideas, what makes this one the worst?”

Hope chuckled, then sobered up immediately. “I think Lizzie is trying to hook my Aunt Rebekah, who is happily married to my Uncle Marcel, up with her mom.”

Penelope’s eyes widened. “Wow...that’s hot.”

Hope slapped at her playfully. “Stop it, you perv.”

“I can’t. You put the image in my head. They’re all hot.”

“Eww, gross.”

Penelope smirked. “Sorry. Not sorry.”
“You’re insufferable.”

“You’re beautiful.”

Hope’s mouth snapped shut and her eyes widened. “Thank you.”

Penelope rolled her eyes. “Don’t get all weird and mushy on me. I was just trying to shut you up.”

Hope nodded.

“And, you have to admit, I’m a really great distraction.”

“You are.” She closed her eyes and shook her head. “Let’s just dance.”

“Fine with me.” Penelope smiled and rested her head on Hope’s shoulder.

When the dance finished, Hope, Josie and Penelope left the dance floor to get a drink from the punch bowl and mingle with the rest of the guests. Hope made sure to make time with Freya, Keelin and Elijah. Then she checked on Rebekah and Caroline to make sure there was space for Jesus between them. When she was satisfied, she visited with her Uncle Kol and Davina. By the time the night was over, she was exhausted from the dancing, but had never felt more at peace in her life.

As she waited for Josie and Lizzie to say goodnight to each other, she glanced up at the ceiling and closed her eyes. Then she said a little prayer...or whatever it could be called, as she whispered to her dad.

“I’m more than okay, dad, And I’m happy. You don’t have to keep looking out for me. I have more people than I knew. I’m not alone anymore. Or, I guess I never really was. I see that now.” She opened her eyes and smiled at nothing at all. “I’m letting you go.”

And it was the truth. She was ready to let go of the past and move on. Her father would always be with her. But it wasn’t like an anchor anymore. Not a weight keeping her from her destiny, or holding her back. He simply just took up space in her heart and left her feeling warm and full of love. Love for more than just her family and friends. For the first time in her entire life, Hope loved herself. Fully and completely. No regrets. No need to change who she was. She wasn’t a monster in this story. She was the hero. She was the one who got the girl.

That was all anyone could ever want. To feel comfortable in their own skin. To be seen and loved as she was. When her eyes met Josie’s from across the room, she smiled at her with contentment. And when Josie smiled back and looked at her as if she hung the moon, she knew that Josie always saw her. Josie saw her and helped her to see herself. She started out this journey thinking she was going to help Josie heal...to help her find peace. But she hadn’t counted on Josie doing the same for her.

She touched her hand to her heart and blew a kiss at her girlfriend. Josie repeated the action with a blush. And as they walked across the room to meet each other, their eyes never wavered. They walked through the crowd that seemed to part just for them. And they met in the middle with a kiss.

“Thank you.” Hope whispered as she stepped away. “For loving me. For seeing me.”

Josie held her close. “You’re welcome.” She kissed her again. “Thanks for making it easy.”

“Happy Valentine’s Day.” Hope said.

“The first of many. I can’t wait to share them all with you.”
Hope smiled. “The night’s not over yet…”

“Lead the way.”

So Hope did. And she didn’t look back. Not once. The future was theirs. Always and Forever.

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Chapter End Notes

All right, for those who don't want to continue on and read Penelope and Phosie's happy ever after sexy times, the story is finished. I hope you enjoyed the ride! I had a great time writing this. I ended it with a whole lot of fluff and happiness because our favorite girls deserve it. I hope it lived up to your expectations, even though it is far shorter than the rest have been. I would have just included it all with the last chapter but didn't want to make you wait any longer than I already had for an update. This was meant to provide closure to all the characters with a little something to hope for in the future—so we can imagine how this story could go on. I don't know about you, but I always shipped Rebekah and Caroline in The Vampire Diaries. So I made a little nod to that in this.

I love you all. Thanks for taking the chance on me and this story. You have all been so wonderful and supportive and I am grateful to you.

For those continuing with the epilogue/Phosie...I will hopefully post that tomorrow night or Wednesday. I'm excited to share that with you!
Epilogue: Three is the perfect number

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Before they went to Hope’s room, they stopped by Josie’s because the brunette told Hope she had to grab something for her. When they got inside, Josie surprised Hope with a Valentine’s Day card.

“Just because we’re together now, doesn’t mean I plan to stop wooing you.” She smiled shyly as she handed the card over.

Hope’s heart sped up. It was a small gesture that meant the world to her. Especially now that they were together and that Josie knew how much these stupid(ly adorable) little cards meant to her. This one had a picture of Elsa on it which made Hope smile.

“Your love melted my frozen heart.” Hope smirked. “This is perfect….but not entirely accurate. I’m the Elsa of this story. Who…if she doesn’t get a girlfriend in the next movie I will revolt.”

Josie laughed. “I could have given you an Olaf one that said I like warm hugs. But I was trying to be romantic.”

“I’ll allow it.” Hope smiled as she pulled Josie into a kiss.

When they parted, she held her to her chest and inhaled the scent that she knew so well. Her mate. Her Josie.

“And you still have Penelope’s card in your room?” Josie wondered as she eventually pulled away.

“I do. I also finished the painting.” Hope smiled. “Tomorrow’s going to be so much fun.”

“If she says yes.” Josie replied as she bit her lip nervously.

“Please, she’s already in so deep…okay, no, I can’t finish that sentence without dirty thoughts now.” Hope shook her head and rolled her eyes at herself. “She corrupted me, you know.”

Josie rolled her eyes. “Yeah, because you didn’t take me in a shower our first time together. And you don’t have sex dreams involving the three of us.”

“She started it!”

Josie kissed her. “That can’t be your argument forever. Besides, do you hear me complaining? I mean…I’ve been having some pretty great dreams lately myself.”

Hope raised an eyebrow. “Care to share?”

Josie stepped into her and kissed her teasingly before backing away. “Or I could just show you…later…”

“So…we’re really doing this?” Hope asked excitedly.

“I know it’s what I want….are you still sure?” Josie answered.

“As sure as I’ve ever been…” She kissed Josie and wrapped her arms around her. “I love you with my entire being…but you agreed that we’re not entirely complete…not yet. We are so fucking
amazing on our own...but with Penelope…”

Josie nodded against her. “I agree. I just hope she wants this as much as we do.”

“There’s only one way to find out…” Hope trailed off before initiating another makeout session.

Eventually, they made their way back toward Hope’s room and were not at all surprised to see Penelope outside waiting for them.

“I just wanted to say goodnight...before I gave you some space…” Penelope told them as she met their eyes with her steady ones.

“Oh, we planned on watching a movie with you. We were going to wait and have sex when you were asleep.” Hope told her with a smirk and a quirk of her eyebrow.

Penelope’s eyes darkened instantly and her mouth dropped open.

“I mean, if that’s still okay with you.” Hope teased.

Penelope snapped her mouth shut and nodded wordlessly. Hope figured that she didn’t trust herself to speak, which was a good sign for the things to come.

They watched a movie cuddled up together; with Hope happily between Penelope and Josie. Just before the credits finished rolling, Josie grabbed her phone excitedly.

“I can’t believe I almost forgot!”

She typed a few things on her phone and, soon, both Penelope’s and Hope’s phones buzzed. Hope spared a questioning glance at her girlfriend before dutifully scanning through the images Josie sent her.

There were a few selfies of Josie and Penelope during their dance. They had their cheeks pressed together and smiled at the camera in most of them. A few of them Penelope looked at Josie with heart eyes that Hope could completely relate to. And one of them had Josie kissing Penelope on the cheek as the girl in question stared at the camera in a daze. The next set of photos were of Hope and Penelope dancing together. They had been focused solely on each other, she never noticed Josie had snapped a dozen photos of them. Hope’s favorite was one where they stared at each other with identical smirks on their faces. She saved them all into her phone quickly and looked up at her girlfriend.

“You’re a sneaky little shit and I love you.” She told her fondly.

“I know.” Josie smirked back.

Hope noticed Penelope still in a trance as she looked at her phone.

“You okay?” She asked with humor.

Penelope swallowed noticeably and again nodded wordlessly.

“Well, it’s getting late. We should get to bed.” Josie said. She crawled over Hope and pecked Penelope on the lips.

The other girl sat there stunned.

“You need some rest. We have a big day planned for you.” Josie told her happily.
Then she retreated back to her side of the bed.

Hope leaned in and kissed Penelope on the cheek before she whispered in her ear. “If you stay awake long enough tonight...I promise you’ll get lucky.”

Penelope choked on air and then stumbled over to the other bed in silence. After several minutes enveloped in darkness, she finally found her voice.

“Night.” She whimpered out, barely audibly.

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Part of the arousal was the exhilaration of trying to have sex without getting caught, the other part...the bigger part for Hope, was the idea that if they did wake Penelope up (or if Penelope had never gone to sleep)...that she would most definitely be watching them. And it was that part that Hope chose to focus on as she decided against discretion and just wanted to give Josie her greatest orgasm ever.

They had been making out pretty heavily when she pulled away to climb on top of her girlfriend, and straddled her. Hope quickly shed her shirt as she proceeded to rock her hips; grinding down into Josie with abandon and then she attached their lips. Hope moaned into the kiss when Josie’s hands found purchase on her bare chest and palmed each of her breasts. Josie massaged the mounds with her strong hands. Hope sped up the rhythm of her body as she adjusted herself so that she was riding Josie’s thigh with force and intention.

Then Hope’s hand wandered down Josie’s body, and into her panties. She quickly ran a finger through Josie’s slick folds before she settled on her clit and rubbed in fast, frantic circles. Josie’s loud moan was swallowed by Hope’s waiting mouth. Hope pulled away to catch her breath and allowed herself to be pulled further into Josie as the brunette caught one of her hardened nipples in her wet, hot mouth and sucked and nipped at it for all she was worth. Hope took a moment to enjoy the sensation, and glanced over at the occupied bed across the room.

Even in the dark, even from that distance, Hope could see Penelope’s eyes glow bright yellow as she watched them with intensity. Hope smirked at her and kept eye contact as she grinded harder into Josie’s thigh. It spurred her on when she noticed movement from Penelope as the girl’s hands disappeared under the blankets to presumably touch herself. Hope inhaled deeply through her nose and, just as she predicted, the scent of Penelope’s arousal (mixed with hers and Josie’s) assaulted her senses.

Knowing that Penelope was watching them, she pulled away enough to get Josie’s attention. She leaned down toward her girlfriend, and used her fingers to turn Josie’s chin to face their interloper. Hope felt Josie’s heart rate increase when she caught sight of the lust-filled gaze being directed at them. She smirked as she attached her mouth to Josie’s neck and bit down with enough force to cause a spike in arousal, not pain. Then she smoothed her hot tongue over the mark and repeated the action further down Josie’s neck, and then to her collarbone.

Josie writhed with desire, and was so close to orgasm already, but Hope was far from done with her. She pulled away and snapped her fingers to lightly illuminate the room...enough so that Penelope could properly see what she had planned next. She helped Josie remove her shirt and took her time caressing each exposed breast. As she moved her mouth down and tugged at one of the nipples with
her teeth, she turned her head enough to watch Penelope and smirked when she noticed that the girl was nearly undone herself.

She spent more time on each breast; on each nipple. Working her tongue and teeth and lips over the hardened nubs. As she did so, she moved her fingers deftly through Josie’s folds and worked her way into her. One finger first, and then she quickly added two. But she had become frustrated by the hindrance of the undergarment, so she impatiently tore the panties in half and ripped them off of her.

Then she kissed her way down Josie’s body, circling her navel with her tongue as she kept up the pace of her fingers. Josie came moments later, with Penelope following directly behind her. Hope smirked to herself at how easily they could turn Penelope on and push her over the edge, without either of them touching her. She eventually worked her way down to Josie’s core and settled herself happily between Josie’s legs. Josie spread them further apart instinctively and Hope attached her lips to her clit and sucked hard as she let her tongue explore...taste...arouse. Eventually, she moved down further and continued her assault on Josie’s core with her tongue. She entered her as fast and as deeply as she could and when she couldn’t get enough, she raised Josie’s hips off the bed and tucked the brunette’s legs over her shoulders. She buried her head in between Josie’s legs and took her time devouring her. Hope brought her almost to the edge, but didn’t let her fall...not yet...not this time.

She pulled away, and kissed her right thigh with reverence as her eyes locked with Penelope’s bright yellow ones once more. Penelope was so incredibly turned on, that just feeling it vibrate off of her made Hope nearly come. She slowly released Josie’s legs and climbed back up her. Hope kissed her deeply and smirked into the kiss knowing that Josie could taste herself on Hope’s tongue. Josie tasted fantastic, and Hope was happy to share that with her girlfriend.

As her hand traveled back down Josie’s body, it snaked in between them as she fingered Josie’s clit once more and then ground her hips into Josie. She was effectively riding her own hand and pushing it further and harder into Josie in the process. As they built their way back up to the edge, Hope pulled out of the kiss and moved her lips to Josie’s ear.

“If we can feel how turned on she is...let’s make her feel what we feel...” She purred into her ear huskily.

Josie nodded as her own eyes darkened. Both of them turned their heads to face Penelope and they came hard with so much emotion...emotion that they released into the room and transferred to Penelope in full force.

“Holy Fucking Shit!” Penelope moaned out as the most intense orgasm rocked her body.

Hope collapsed onto Josie and breathed hard against her exposed neck. Their nipples touched with each breath, only causing Hope to shudder with lust again. And she removed her hand from between them...from inside Josie, and brought it to her own lips to suck the remnants away with a satisfied groan of approval.

The room was quiet, but not unbearably so. Hope snapped her fingers again, and thrust them back into the darkness. She crawled off of Josie but pulled the girl into her to cuddle. She belatedly realized that she never had taken off her own panties, and that Josie never actually touched her. Not there. Not this time. She rolled her eyes at herself. Here, she had made fun of Penelope for being easy, but she didn’t fare much better.

Speaking of Penelope…

“Are you okay over there?” She whispered into the dark.
Penelope choked out an awkward cough before answering with a high pitched, “Fine.”

“You don’t sound fine.” Hope teased slightly. Just to lighten the mood. Just to let Penelope know that they were far more than just okay with what had happened.

“You could just come over here, sleep by us.” Josie offered thoughtfully. “After what we all shared together, it’s no use sleeping over there all by yourself.”

Silence. A pause.

“Are you sure?” Penelope asked nervously.

“Are we sure we’re all good with everything that happened….or are we sure that you can sleep over here?” Hope wondered.

“Both?” Penelope replied.

“Then, yeah, to both.” Josie told her.

It didn’t take any more convincing for Penelope to tear off her blankets and join them on the bed. Josie moved closer to Hope to make room for the other girl and Penelope crawled in beside her.

“You’re not...you’re...still naked.” She stated with darkened eyes and awe in her voice.

Josie sat up to move. “I’ll get dressed if you’re uncomfortable.”

“No!” Penelope blushed and shook her head. “I mean, it’s okay. I’m fine with it.”

Josie smiled then grabbed Penelope’s hand and pulled her closer. She threw Penelope’s hand around her and let it settle on Hope. Hope smiled at Penelope to let her know that she was fine with it, too. More than fine with it. And then she wrapped her arms around Josie and cuddled further into her.

It took a while, but all three of them eventually fell asleep.

Hope woke up from the most erotic sex dream in her life; only to realize that she was being cuddled by her naked girlfriend, and that Penelope was indeed in bed with her. Thoughts of the night before poured into her mind. If she wasn’t already turned on from the sex dream...she was a full on horn dog now. Usually when she woke up from one of those dreams, she slowly untangled herself from Josie and took a quick shower...not a cold one, but more like she turned on the water and got herself off.

But this morning, since the sun was barely rising, she didn’t feel like leaving the comfort of her bed. Or the comfort of these girls in her arms. She decided that she would try to take care of business on her own...without leaving the room this time.

She shifted over on her back, and trailed her fingers slowly down her body and into her panties. As she made a few exploratory circles over her clit, she let her eyes wander to the girls beside her. She let herself think about the things she would like to do to them. Then things she’d like to watch them do to each other. And eventually, her fingers made their way inside of her warm, wet center as she
worked to bring herself into a quick release.

As she took a stuttered breath, Josie’s eyes popped open. Hope’s eyes went wide at being caught, but instead of stopping, she deliberately kept going as she met her girlfriend’s gaze. It wasn’t until she heard Penelope’s sharp intake of breath that she realized that Josie wasn’t the only one who had woken up. Her hand stilled and she attempted to pull out the offending fingers when Josie’s hand stopped their retreat.

She bit her lip and her own eyes darkened as she stared at Hope with intensity.

“Don’t stop.” She demanded kindly.

So Hope didn’t. She kept her fingers going, and even picked up pace. Josie removed her hand from Hope’s wrist to grab Penelope’s hand and tugged it over her own body and led it over to Hope’s. Penelope scooted over on the bed, spooning a naked Josie just to get a further reach. And then without faltering on eye contact, Josie led Penelope’s hand over Hope’s stomach and pushed it into her panties.

Hope’s eyes widened as she swallowed harshly. She slowly removed her own fingers when Penelope’s replaced them.

“Go ahead.” Hope told her as she met her eyes. “Please...I’m so close.”

Penelope’s lust-filled eyes remained on Hope as she quickly went to work moving through Hope’s slickness and assaulted her throbbing bundle of nerves. She built Hope up to an orgasm in no time, before she shoved two fingers inside her and thrust in and out of her as deeply as her position could afford. She pounded into her relentlessly and as Hope came hard with a string of curse words on her lips, she continued to finger her so she could ride out the wave of pleasure.

Hope closed her eyes and tried to catch her breath. Even though Penelope’s hand had stopped moving, she kept her fingers deep inside of Hope’s center. Hope loved the way they filled her up, and knew that as soon as she removed them, she’d feel empty.

When Penelope did pull them out, she immediately brought them to her mouth and moaned at the taste that soaked them. Hope’s eyes widened in delight and further arousal. She shoved Josie flat on her back and slipped her fingers through the wetness that had already pooled between her legs. She could already feel how close Josie was having just watched what Hope experienced, so it didn’t take long for Josie to topple over the edge as well. Hope, instead of licking the arousal off her own fingers, brought her fingers to Penelope’s mouth and let the girl suck them off one by one.

Josie stared at the action, and as soon as Hope’s fingers were free, she pulled Penelope to her in a rough and hot kiss. Both girls moaned loudly into the kiss as Hope watched them with wonderment. After watching them for awhile, she couldn’t take it anymore and moved down Josie’s body to settle between her legs. As she massaged her clit with her tongue, she reached up to find Penelope’s hand and pulled it down toward her. Toward Josie’s core.

Penelope seemed to catch on quickly to what she was expected to do. So she circled Josie’s clit roughly as Hope buried her tongue further south and together they brought Josie to another orgasm. Hope made her up her girlfriend’s body and pulled Penelope into a deep and exhilarating kiss as she shoved her tongue in the girl’s mouth and let her taste Josie’s essence. Then she pulled away and gently guided Penelope’s head further down Josie’s body.

Penelope didn’t need further direction as she quickly and without warning attached her lips to Josie and ate her out with enthusiasm. Hope watched her do so for a few minutes as her own arousal came
back in full force. Then she re-directed her lips to Josie’s as she touched herself. They came at the same time and Josie looked like she was about to be spent.

“You okay…” Hope asked with concern.

“Way more than okay...just give me a minute so I can return the favor…”

Penelope smirked at Hope and they both raised an eyebrow. She climbed up her body and settled against her on the opposite side as Josie.

“We’re not quite finished with you yet…” Penelope announced as she took one of Josie’s nipples in her mouth harshly and bit down with enough force that Josie cursed and moaned and bucked her hips with pleasure.

Hope smiled at that, and she did the same with Josie’s other breast. So the two of them took their time caressing and worshiping Josie’s glorious chest as they simultaneously snaked their hands down the girl’s body and entered her at the same time. They were delicate at first, to make sure that Josie’s opening could take both of them. Then they slowly pushed in further, and stretched her out deliciously.

As they slowly worked their fingers in and out in tandem, with shallow thrusts, Hope felt her own orgasm rise again. She doubled her efforts on Josie’s nipple and then she let Penelope deal with Josie’s core while she frantically circled her girlfriend’s clit. The three of them came in unison. Josie breathed in fast and shallow breaths as she tried to compose herself. And as she did so, Hope pulled Penelope into her and kissed her soundly.

They made out until Hope needed more...until she decided that it was Penelope’s turn to enjoy the moment. She relieved herself of her own panties before she turned her attention completely on Penelope.

“Clothes off now…” She uttered as she assisted the girl with the removal of said clothes.

Hope’s not sure she ever saw someone get undressed so quickly. She pulled Penelope on top of her and without hesitation, and immediately Penelope straddled her. Hope buried her fingers deep inside of her and watched in fascination as Penelope rode her fingers with practiced ease. It took her no time at all to work herself into a trembling mess of pre-orgasmic bliss, but Hope reached up to place a hand on her shoulder and stop her movements.

“Not yet...we...I have something else planned for you.” Hope told her.

Penelope exhaled shakily as her entire body shivered with anticipation.

“Lay down.” Hope growled.

Penelope did as instructed. And Hope crawled on top of her, straddling her face. She glanced down at Penelope to make sure the girl was okay with what was about to happen. But before she could ask, Penelope gripped her hips and pulled Hope down on her face. She latched her mouth on Hope’s clit with so much eagerness, that Hope took a second or two to recover. Then she started to rock into her. Eventually, she got her rhythm right and fucked herself into Penelope’s mouth. It was nice having sex with non-humans, because she didn’t have to worry about hurting Penelope as she rode her hard and pounded her head into the mattress.

“Wow...fuck…” Josie breathed out as she watched them. But then eventually, she climbed down the bed and rested her head between Penelope’s legs and ravished her as Hope continued to grind down into her face.
Hope came first, and was going to climb off so she could watch Josie finish eating Penelope out. But Penelope had other ideas, and firmly held Hope in place as she worked her tongue so far into her that Hope fell over the edge again almost instantly. She pulled away this time, and joined Josie at the foot of the bed. She pulled Josie’s head away from Penelope and kissed her thoroughly, before taking Josie’s place at Penelope’s thrubbing center.

She used her fingers and tongue to push Penelope the rest of the way over the edge and then took her time lapping up all the juices. Hope glanced up to see Josie’s lips attached to one of Penelope’s nipples, and could see her tongue swirling around it. She reached out and grabbed Josie’s hand in hers and brought it down to Penelope. Hope watched in awe as Josie’s fingers disappeared inside of her and bit her lip to suppress another moan as she watched Josie thrust in and out.

“Harder…” She whimpered.

Josie did so.

“More…” She growled.

So instead of two fingers…Josie added three. Penelope’s hand gripped Hope’s head and tangled in her hair, then she pushed her head toward her clit. Hope sucked on it with force, and her whole body felt the intensity of the electricity that shot through each of them as Josie’s fingers buried deep inside of Penelope. All three of them felt the same hot heat of orgasm nearly shatter them. They came undone and were left breathless, together.

Josie pulled her fingers out of Penelope’s center and Hope unattached her lips from her clit. Then they climbed up Penelope’s body and weaved themselves around her before they all fell asleep out of pure exhaustion.

Hope woke up as the others started to stir. They shared awkward smiles in the daylight, but got dressed quickly in the silence. When they were all decent again, Penelope took a steadying breath and locked eyes with the girls nervously.

“I understand what last night…and this morning was, and even if it was just a one or two time thing…I want you to know that I have no regrets. It was amazing. You both are amazing. And not just in bed…but, like, as people, too.” She rambled.

“Oh, hey. No.” Josie stepped toward her to comfort her anxiousness over the situation.

Hope felt bad that Penelope had completely misread the situation so she hurried over to her desk and grabbed the homemade card she and Josie made for the other girl.

“Granted, this morning kind of just happened…but it wasn’t like we didn’t want it to. We just planned to make us all official first.” Hope said as she handed the card to Penelope.

It was three hearts made out of construction paper. One pink, one red, and one white. They were glued together with a picture of the three of them placed in the center. And underneath, in Josie’s careful and elegant scrawl, was the question they realized they should have asked last night. Before everything else happened.

“Will you be our girlfriend?” Hope and Josie asked together as Penelope read the card with shaky hands and tears in her eyes.

“I...of course. Yes!” She nodded her head vigorously and looked at the other girls with so much love and affection. But also with uncertainty. “So last night wasn’t just…”
“Last night was the first night of the rest of our lives….if you’ll have us.” Hope affirmed.

“I love you, Penelope Park. As much as I tried….I never stopped.” Josie admitted as she shyly bit her lip. “But if what I thought I felt for you before was love…then I don’t even know how to explain how much I feel for you now….”

“You complete us. You compliment us. We’re stronger together. All of us.” Hope added.

Penelope leapt at them and alternated between them as she smothered them both with kisses. “Why did you wait until we got dressed? We could already be back to the good part.”

Josie blushed and Hope ducked her head to hide hers.

“We…we have forever for that. Today, we wanted to treat our girlfriend to a date.” Josie said since she was the first to recover.

Penelope’s eyes widened. “Really? I…”

And then she started to cry again. Hope joined her and eventually so did Josie. Tears of absolute and overwhelming joy. When they recovered, Hope pulled her phone out of her pocket and snapped a few pictures of the three of them. She sent her favorite--the one with Penelope proudly displaying her Valentine’s Proposal with a huge smile on her face while Hope and Josie each kissed one of her cheeks--to Lizzie, along with the inscription, “She said yes!”

Her phone buzzed instantly with a response. Hope smiled as she read the text.

“So, Lizzie said it was about damn time. But then sent a billion heart emojis and then just as many nauseated face emojis.” Hope showed them the text.

“She’s really okay with this….with me?” Penelope’s eyes met Josie’s. “I don’t think I would survive losing you again.”

“Hey, you won’t have to. You have me.” Josie re-assured her.

“Always and forever.” Hope nodded in agreement.

They gave Penelope a few more minutes to process everything before they led her to the clubhouse. This time there wasn’t a no magic rule, so Josie waited outside with Penelope while Hope got the room ready for them. When her girlfriends entered, Hope smiled proudly at the sight of them. If she had been happy beyond measure before, nothing compared her for this feeling. This moment.

“I love you both. So much.” She breathed out with awe and adoration.

Penelope’s face lit up. “I love you, too.”

Josie hugged her from behind and kissed her neck as she whispered her own, “I love you.”

Hope could hear Penelope’s heart beat erratically. She could also feel the waves of love and happiness pour off both of her girls. It made her heart whole. It made it beat steadily as her entire being calmed. She felt at home. Aroused. And happy. But at home. The three best feelings in the world, if you asked her.

Hope snapped her fingers and music surrounded them. The room was dimmed so that the stars that Hope produced within it were visible even though it was daylight outside. Magical flowers bloomed around the room, celebrating their start of a new adventure. Penelope twirled around the room with
her eyes alight with wonder.

“This is perfect.” She stopped twirling and leveled her eyes to meet Hope’s. “Just like you.”

Hope smiled at her shyly, and extended both of her hands to each of the girls. Josie took Hope’s hand first, and Penelope followed suit. Then Hope swirled them around until they both twirled into her and she held them closely against her.

“I didn’t think being this happy was possible.” Hope said as she kissed each of them.

“I know the feeling.” Josie admitted.

Penelope nodded as she kissed each of them and fully took advantage of their proximity. When she pulled away, she took each of their hands and led them around the room as she took the time to smell and examine every flower. Hope was happy that her girlfriend was happy.

“I have something I wanted to share with you.” Josie told her after about a half an hour of comfortable silence.

Penelope paused in her movements and looked at Josie with adoration. “Really? I mean, I assumed that this date was already the surprise you both had for me.”

“I…” Josie glanced at Hope. Hope nodded at her for reassurance and support.

Then she snapped her fingers and produced Josie’s guitar in her hand. Penelope’s eyes widened.

“You...for me…?” Penelope was speechless.

Josie nodded. “I sang for Hope once, and she told me that I should share my voice with the world...and you...you guys are my world, so…”

Hope melted at the statement. She kissed Josie soundly.

“Thank you.” Hope told her. “I just...I also meant, like everyone. You are so talented and you deserve to be heard.”

“I know….but I want to start small. With just the two of you. I’ll share it with Lizzie next. And then....who knows, maybe I’ll sing at the next school talent show.”

Penelope kissed her. “I am so happy right now. This is all I ever wanted for you. I know I didn’t go about it the right way, but I always just wanted you to be seen and heard. I knew how special you were and wanted the whole world to see it, too.” She sighed and shook her head. “Had I realized how special I would feel having you only be real with me...I would have been content keeping you to myself. I’m not saying it’s right...or that I still wouldn’t have screwed things up with you...I’m just saying that I realize how wrong I was about so many things.” She kissed Josie again. “I promise to get it right this time.”

“You already have.” Josie smiled at her.

Hope took Josie’s hand in hers and squeezed it in comfort.

Josie took a deep breath and steadied herself.

“Okay, it’s now or never.” She breathed out shakily.

Josie hesitantly strummed a few chords on her guitar before her beautiful voice carried softly
throughout the room.

“The strands in your eyes that color them wonderful
Stop me and steal my breath
And emeralds from mountains that thrust toward the sky
Never revealing their depth
And tell me that we belong together
Dress it up with the trappings of love
I’ll be captivated, I’ll hang from your lips
Instead of the gallows of heartache that hang from above.”

Hope once again listened to her girlfriend transfixed. But this time, she wasn’t alone in the experience. She rested her head on Penelope’s shoulder as they held hands and swayed into each other. By the second chorus, Hope stepped away from Penelope and walked over to Josie. Then the two of them serenaded Penelope with all the love in their hearts.

After the song, the three of them ate their picnic lunch as they laughed and talked for hours. When they finished eating and talking, Hope turned the music filtering through the room up higher and bowed in front of her girlfriends.

“May I have this dance?”

They all held each other closely and swayed to the music as they let it take them to another place. Hope let her mind wander as she thought about how she got to this place. She still didn’t understand it. She still didn’t know how she was so lucky. But she wasn’t about to question it. Nothing could make her feel anything but happy ever again.

When their dance was over, Hope pulled away. “It’s time for my surprise!”

Penelope stared at her. “Seriously? This is the best date ever.”

Josie smiled. “You have no idea…”

Penelope raised an eyebrow and smirked at her. “I do have some ideas. As you recall, I have a very vivid imagination. And numerous sex toys…”

Hope’s eyes widened. “You know what...my surprise can wait. I think we should head to your room.”

Penelope laughed. “Nope. As enticing as that sounds...I want to see what your surprise is. I’m sure I’ll love it.”

Hope blushed. Then she shook her head and smiled widely. She used her magic to summon the picture she painted and presented it to Penelope.
She had painted their pack. All four of them. From memory. Because they were her favorite memories. All the best of them.

“Wow...this is amazing.” Penelope stared in awe. Then wiped a tear from her eye. “You...it’s us. Our family.”

Josie nodded. “We thought we could hang it in our room.”

Hope smiled. Their room. Because it was. It would always be theirs, because it never felt like home to Hope until they were a part of it.

“My girlfriends are the best.” Penelope kissed Hope. “Most talented.” She kissed Josie. “Hottest people in the world.” She pressed them together so Hope and Josie could kiss, and Hope smiled into the kiss.

When Hope stepped away, she glanced at Penelope. “So...about those toys…”

Penelope laughed out loud. “And here I thought I was the horny one in this relationship.”

Josie shook her head. “Oh, you have nothing on Hope. She was a wolf longer than us...I think that is the only explanation.”

Hope rolled her eyes. “Or maybe...now that I know how amazing sex is with the women I love...I just plan to enjoy it every day forever.”

Josie and Penelope stared at each other with wide eyes.

“We created a monster.” Penelope teased.

“I entirely blame you.” Josie responded with a smirk.

“Hey...if I get to have sex as a punishment, I’ll take it.” Penelope commented which wiped the smirk right off Josie’s face and replaced it with a furious blush.

“You broke her.” Hope smiled proudly.

“Oh, you have no idea. Wait till you see how she responds when I take her from behind while you us and touch yourself.”

Hope’s mouth dropped open as she released a low growl and her eyes turned yellow with need. “Okay, your room. Now.”

And they never made it back to the school so fast in their lives.

xxxxxxx

Only just the beginning of forever....

Chapter End Notes
Phosie in all their glory!!!! I really hope you thought this was worth the wait. I adore these three and wanted to give them the best possible ending ever ;)

Songs featured
Last chapter: Savage Garden-I knew I loved you
This chapter: Edwin McCain- I'll be

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!