



Blood Brother Betrayed (Sexton Blood Brothers)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Disowned and disinherited a year ago,

I am struggling in a way that I had sadly anticipated.

When I get a chance for a little payback teaching one of my high school bullies a lesson, I take it.

Mostly because it came with a lot of money.

That should have been a sign –

The situation was a trap,

And I was foolish enough to fall for it.

Imprisoned with one of my least favorite people,

I know I can't leave.

For everything he did when we were younger,

He doesn't deserve the beatings and torture.

Resolved to make sure he escapes,

I start to see him in a new light.

He's still breathtakingly handsome,

But more importantly, he's changed.

Am I trapped in the pain of my youth,

Or can I let go of the past and find a new future.

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Determined to Set Things Right

Willow woke to a pounding headache and feeling that she needed to get to a bathroom quickly. With a groan, she sat up, and immediately started retching. Vaguely aware that she was in an unfamiliar room, she leaned over and began to vomit.

From somewhere nearby, a voice asked, “Are you okay?”

Shaking her head, Willow couldn’t stop herself as she was sick for what felt like forever.

She felt like the room was spinning when the door was flung open, and a couple of big men dressed like orderlies entered. They didn’t say a word as they grabbed her by the arms and started hauling her toward the door. Her feet didn’t even reach the floor as they dragged her through the door. Willow saw a few people in hazmat suits enter the room as they pulled her out but she didn’t see what they were doing as the door slammed shut behind them.

Feeling unwell, Willow sagged in the men’s grasp, and soon, her feet were dragging on the floor. The jostling made her feel so much worse. When she threw up this time, it ended up getting on one of the men’s legs and shoes. He immediately let go of her. Too weak to hold herself up, Willow’s body sagged into the other man. At 5 foot 7, she wasn’t tiny, so when she put her weight on him, the man stumbled against the wall, dropping her as he did.

The man immediately regained his balance and strode angrily toward his companion

and pushed him. As ill as she felt, Willow looked up and knew that they weren't concerned about what might happen to her as the fight escalated. The other man pushed the first one back, which was quickly followed by one of them taking a swing at the other. Scurrying back before she ended up getting trampled, she allowed herself to fade just enough to pass through the wall nearby. It was an impossible escape and something that she had long been taught she shouldn't do. Her family had told her that her abilities were something to be ashamed of, so she had always been careful not to show anyone else what she could do.

As she lost sight of the two men and emerged in another room, Willow let gravity drag her down. She lay her face on the cold floor, exhaustion overtaking her for a moment.

You can't stay here, Willow. You have to get moving because at some point, they will start looking for you.

She put her hands on the floor and pushed, but her arms shook, and she almost crumpled to the floor.

You've dealt with worse than this. But if you don't get moving, it's probably going to get a lot worse.

This time, she managed to get on all fours, although it took a lot of her strength. Pushing against the floor, she ended up sitting with her knees bent and her legs under her. As she tried to catch her breath and gain some control over her muscles, Willow looked around the room.

She soon regretted that.

Strange implements and tools hung on the wall, and there were several drains near metallic gurneys. Then she began to notice a distinctly unpleasant smell. Her grey

eyes took in the things around her, and Willow realized that escaping from the men had resulted in her finding a torture room.

That was all of the motivation she needed to get out. Standing would take too much effort, so she started to crawl toward the wall, heading back in the direction of the room where she had woken. When she reached the wall, Willow allowed herself to fade through it, then she continued to crawl across the floor. This time, she didn't do much more than make sure the room was empty before she continued her slow trek across the cold floor. She had no desire to figure out what the rooms were for.

Someone was talking to me when I woke up. I need to get back to him and see if he knows what's going on here.

Her mind was almost entirely focused when Willow felt the floor start to shake. She turned to look at the wall between her and the hall, and she could see shadows moving on the other side of the thin window. People were moving up and down the halls now. They must have realized she had disappeared. Thinking they would start trying to figure out where she had gone, Willow turned and moved perpendicular to the hallway and crawled away from it. After passing through a single wall, she once again lay down and rested. She knew that they would probably be looking in the rooms up and down that one hall because it was long. Logic would tell them that she was still close, probably in one of the rooms where she was dropped.

Willow dragged herself through over a dozen rooms before reaching another hallway. She was trying to get across it when her body simply didn't have the strength to keep going, and she collapsed on the floor. Once again, she heard someone trying to talk to her, but the voice was too far away and her mind was too tired to try to make out what was being said.

When the floor started to vibrate, the young woman knew that she needed to get to a hiding place, but her body simply wouldn't respond. Someone lifted her roughly off

of the floor, and she was aware of arguing, but nothing made sense. They were taking her somewhere, but she had no idea where. They actually didn't carry her too far before opening the door. She was placed on a flat surface, and then a pair of fingers touched her neck. Somewhere in her mind, Willow was aware they were taking her pulse, but she was too exhausted to react to someone touching somewhere that was vulnerable.

After a bit of poking and prodding, she realized they were taking her vitals, but they didn't stick around too long. When they left, she felt herself drifting in and out of consciousness. During the periods when she was awake, Willow tried to piece together what had happened leading up to her arrival at the strange place. All she managed to remember was something about a prank and money.

"Hey, are you all right in there?" The low voice was warm and full of concern.

When she tried to look around her for the person speaking, Willow flinched at the bright light. Placing an arm over her face, she shielded her eyes from the cruel fluorescent lights. Slowly raising her arm away from her face, she opened an eye and started to look around the place. The room was cold and clinical. It was different from the torture room, but it was definitely not a place that was meant to be comfortable. She noted this while she kept looking for the person talking to her.

Her mouth felt dry when she tried to speak. Willow ran her tongue along the roof of her mouth a couple of times, then she tried to speak. Her voice was rough as she asked, "Where are you?"

"I'm in the room next to you."

Frowning, Willow looked around her, but there were no bars or gaps that would make it so that someone could be heard. As far as she knew, the walls were solid – at least, that was her experience, as it had been draining to pass through them the way she

had.

“Seriously,” she swallowed hard, trying to wet her mouth. “I can’t see you, and I know the walls are solid. So where are you?”

“I’m in the room next to yours. You aren’t actually hearing me talk because I’m...”

Whatever he was about to say was cut off by a loud banging noise. Willow immediately focused on the door because she recognized the sound from when the men had entered the room. There was no one there.

The sound of a struggle in the room next door made it clear that the people hadn’t come for her – they were there to take the man in the cell next to hers.

“What’s happening?” Her words were whispered, and she knew that they were drowned out by whatever was happening next door. She was too weak to shout, and even if she could, drawing attention to herself was not something she wanted to do. She leaned her head back, tilting her chin up to look at the wall. Unfortunately, her abilities allowed her to pass through solid inanimate objects, not see through them. Frustration began to build as there was some shouting.

It took a while, but eventually, she heard the struggle move out into the hallway, and the shouting was painful. Squeezing her eyes shut and covering her ears, Willow was reminded that she had a headache, and the noise was not helping. The man who had been talking to her was clearly a really good fighter because he was still causing them a lot of trouble and she almost missed the sound of the door slamming shut. But they were still stronger than him, and the noise began to lessen as the people hauled him away. Willow turned and looked at the wall, wanting to help the man to escape the way she had. She didn’t want to imagine what they were planning for him.

This is your fault, Willow. All of this is your fault because you did not tell them no.

Instead, you took the money and went through with it.

Memories began to trickle back to her, but Willow wasn't ready to face them yet. It was starting to sink in that Nolan was there somewhere, trapped because she had been foolish enough to fall for something that was obviously a trap. Instead of going down the well-worn path of self-deprecation and criticism, Willow sidelined the thoughts to focus on how to get out of the situation.

Of course, she could probably literally walk out of the place on her own if she could find the exterior wall and the ground floor – she figured that the place was more than one floor. What she didn't know was if they were above ground or below it. She couldn't just walk out of the place if they were several floors up because the drop would probably kill her. And she couldn't walk through solid earth, meaning she couldn't just pass through the outer wall without knowing where she was. A map of the facility was necessary to plan her escape.

More importantly, though, she knew that she was not the only one to get dragged into the place. The people who had paid her were after Nolan, and she remembered that they had injected him with something. A light groan escaped her as she worried that they may have just killed him.

No, that doesn't make sense. Why would they inject him and abduct you? His family has far more power and wealth, so he would make a much better mark for a ransom. What doesn't make sense is why they took me at all.

She gritted her teeth. They probably don't know that I've been disowned. Oh, so foolish. They were able to get two rich kids at one time because I was an easy win. They aren't going to leave me alive when my parents refuse to pay.

The thought of her parents caring actually drew a hoarse laugh from her. Thinking of that pair as her parents was laughable now, and the idea that her life might rely on

them paying for her ransom made her feel a moment of hopelessness.

I'm not trapped here. I don't need their money to escape this, and I sure as hell don't need them to care about me to survive. They said I wouldn't last a year on my own, but I did.

That train of thought died as she realized that the only reason she had hope for the future was because strangers had promised her so much money. It would have been enough to move somewhere new and start over. Instead, they had taken her, too, and now they had some kind of plan for her.

She briefly considered that they may have seen her use her abilities. The problem with that was that they had grabbed her before she had done anything freakish. Before she had blasted a car into the road, they couldn't have known she wasn't normal.

Ah, I'm at a loose end, aren't I? There's a record of them paying me that first time. They deposited \$10,000 directly into my account, and that would have created a trail. Unless ... they want to take their money back. They must know that I closed that account, so the only way to get their money back is by taking me, too. A weak smile tugged at the corners of her lips. They must have been furious when they realized that I closed that account, so they couldn't take back the money.

It was a bright spot in an otherwise horrible situation.

She covered her eyes with her arm and let her mind go back to the events before her abduction. She replayed the events at the café like a film, and shame washed over her as she remembered how she had planted the bug and the way Nolan had apologized and insisted on making things right. She remembered how she had fled, ending in them being trapped in an alley. She recalled the screams and cries of the people on the street and feared that her actions may have caused the death of innocent people.

“No, no, no. I have to fix this. I have to find Nolan, and then I have to find the other people trapped in this place and get all of them out. I can at least do that to try to make up for what I’ve done. I’m going to make this right. And then I’m going to get out of here and finally start a new life where I don’t have to worry about the past.”

She had no idea how she was going to do that because she had no idea how bad things were. What she did know was that she wasn’t going to stop until she was successful. She had failed too many times in her twenty-four years of life. Now was the time to prove that she wasn’t just a screw-up, that she could set a goal, and then not stop until the task was actually done.

With her mind made up to undo the damage she had done, Willow drifted off to sleep. It wasn’t exactly a peaceful sleep, but at least she didn’t have the usual nagging feeling that she was making things worse or doing everything wrong.

Instead, the prisoner felt that she had a goal and a purpose. Whatever happened, she wasn’t going to fail this time.

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A Stereotypical Villain

A door slammed, stirring her from a dreamless sleep. Something told her to keep her eyes closed, so Willow kept her breathing slow and steady, making it look like she was still asleep. Straining her ears, she listened for the sound of people moving around or talking. When she didn't hear anything, the young woman had to fight the urge to open her eyes and look.

After a few seconds, she heard muffled talking and movement nearby. However, it wasn't in her room.

They must have brought the guy back. When they leave, I need to check on him and try to help if I can. Maybe he knows where we are and what's happening. Hopefully, he isn't too hurt because I really don't know much about first aid and healing.

That thought made her shiver – Willow had always had a hard time with wounds and blood. It had been her first great failure, as her parents had wanted her to be a doctor. When she wasn't able to handle working as a volunteer at the hospital, they had decided she needed to become a lawyer. Her actual skills and desires were never taken into account. All that mattered was making the family look good and building better connections to improve their standing. Ironically, had she been able to power through the gore, it would have been beneficial in her current situation.

When the door slammed again, Willow began counting in her mind, just in case they came into her room next. She didn't even reach ten when she felt the air shift in the room and heard the sound of metal hitting the wall. It was almost as if the people in this place had no ability to open the doors without slamming them. As they had done

before, people began poking and prodding her, and Willow wondered how much time had passed. Had it been a day since they had last been in the room, or just a few hours? What were they hoping to learn by checking her vitals? Were they looking for something else during these visits because she couldn't see any medical need for some of the things they were doing? For example, they opened her mouth and pushed it open as wide as possible, then crammed an instrument into it. The only thing she could think of was that they were measuring her mouth. They pulled out her tongue, stretching it to the point of pain, then released it.

All of this strange exploration of her was followed by them running tools over her body. It was becoming increasingly difficult to act like she was asleep, especially when they attached nodes to her and started sending electrical currents through her body. Sadly, Willow learned a long time ago how to keep herself under control, acting in a way that was entirely opposite to how she was feeling. Physical torture in her old home was just a part of her life. Even though some of the things they were doing were new, Willow knew how to keep from reacting to whatever was happening. And in this case, she had no desire to let them know that she was awake.

The fact that she wasn't waking did seem to cause concern, and someone mentioned bringing the doctor to the room. That didn't stop the others from whatever they were doing, and nothing changed for a few minutes.

A slight breeze moved through the room, letting Willow know that the doctor had finally arrived. However, she didn't think that this one was there to take care of her health. Even before the man spoke, Willow got the sense that he was not the kind of person who cared about the Hippocratic oath. He spoke with a very condescending tone to the people who had previously been testing her, and their replies were very deferential.

“Why did you call me here?”

“She isn’t responding to anything, but her vitals are fine. Is it possible that the chemicals adversely affected her?”

“The chemicals are designed to cause an adverse effect,” he said curtly.

“Yes, sir, but…”

“Doctor,” he said, spitting out the word harshly, leaving the impression that this was not the first time the man had not been properly addressed.

“Yes, Doctor.”

Willow imagined that the response was from an underling, and the way his voice wavered would have inspired sympathy if not for the fact that they were treating her like a test subject. “What I meant to say was perhaps it did something worse than just knock her out. Is it possible that it could have caused brain damage? She didn’t even open her eyes when we used the Edison on her.”

“Ah,” she felt a cold finger push on her cheek, roughly shoving the skin into her teeth. It was all Willow could do to keep from turning her head and biting the finger as it ground her cheek against the bone. “Hmm. It is a possible result. We still have so much to learn with these things that we may be rendering them useless before I get a chance to really experiment on them.”

The finger was finally removed from her face, and he began asking questions of the group about what they had done and what the results were. Willow didn’t entirely understand what they were talking about after they stopped talking about the usual vital signs. All of that was pretty normal, although her blood pressure was lower than it should have been. Once they covered that, they started talking about things they had tried that failed to stimulate any kind of reaction. Unlike their previous discussion, Willow knew that the reactions they were looking for went beyond simply

waking her or messing with her biorhythms. No, they were talking about things like not getting any kind of aura, electrical stimulation, or physical reaction that went beyond what a normal human would do under similar situations.

“Hmm,” the doctor said and began drumming his fingers near her head. “I wonder if some of their abilities don’t present when they aren’t awake. Marcus, you were there when she was taken. Tell me again what happened.”

Someone cleared their throat, and then started speaking. “I was in the alley, Doctor, when it happened. There was a flash of light, and all of us were knocked down. However, I don’t think that it came from her. I think the man she was told to target was behind what happened there. She just seemed shocked, and from what I could see, she pretty much just froze.”

“I saw the data collected by the Mora family before their facility was destroyed, so I can assure you that they have incredibly protective abilities that keep them alive. When they are unleashed on the world, they pose a significant risk to everyone. So, no, I don’t accept your theory that it was Woodward because it sounds exactly like how one of these creatures would react to a difficult situation.” He made a sniffing noise that almost made Willow cringe. The doctor couldn’t have made it any more obvious that he was an insufferable fool if he tried. “So, tell me about what happened next.”

“Well, sir, I mean, Doctor, I wasn’t in a good position to see what happened next. Perhaps you should talk with Kim or Todd since they actually caught her.”

“Someone has gotten far too confident. I don’t need you telling me what I need to do when you have no idea what gaps I’m trying to fill.” There was a noise that punctured this before the doctor continued to speak, “I’ve already talked to them. All I want now is your recounting of events.”

“I’m so sorry, sir.”

The sound of skin contacting skin echoed around the room. “Doctor!” The second time, it was clear the doctor had slapped Marcus and had drawn a cry from him. When it happened a third time, Willow heard someone starting to cry. “Anyone else want to disrespect me?” The anger was clear in his voice, and it was met with murmurs of apology. “All of you, get out. Marcus, go to the room and wait.”

No one else spoke as a slight breeze went through the room. It was almost unsettling because it meant the people leaving were too afraid to bash the door against the wall. Willow made sure to keep her breathing the same as she listened to people filtering out of the room.

Even after the door shut, she didn’t feel comfortable looking around her. She noted two things after everyone left. First, the door was likely made of something heavier than the walls because of the sound it made when it closed. That was something to remember for when she escaped – passing through doors would likely require greater concentration. Second, they had not taken any of their supplies with them because they left far too quickly. When they had been testing her, Willow heard the distinct sound of something trundling around on wheels. This sound was absent when the room cleared.

Willow waited, keeping her breathing and movement constant. After a while, a voice spoke near her ear, “Come on, wake up. I won’t wait forever.”

A finger pulled up on one of her eyelids, but she managed to keep her eye from focusing. There was a fuzzy-looking figure looking down at her, his face framed with a dark color. She realized that was his hair, although she wasn’t sure of the color since she was working to keep him from realizing she was awake. To her shock, he flicked her open eye.

“Come on, you worthless creature. I know you must be faking it.”

It was perhaps the first time that Willow appreciated the horrible home life she had. Her parents may not have messed with her eyes like this, but they had tormented her in many similar ways, which allowed her to keep from reacting at all.

The doctor did make a few more attempts to stir her, but they were far less shocking. This was enough to convince him that she was, in fact, unconscious. That led to something that was invaluable and terrifying. He decided to start talking to her, believing that she wouldn't remember anything.

“I have no idea where they found you, but I'm very glad they did. It's been a few months since the last one died, and it's put a real damper on my research. You are young and hopefully healthier than the last few. How old are you?” He walked across the room, and then Willow heard paper flipping. There was something in his tone that didn't sound right, but Willow couldn't see what he was doing as he studied his notes.

When he spoke again, there was a cruelty to his voice, “Surprising that you look so ... poor. Oh, how the mighty have fallen. What happened? Did Mommy and Daddy realize what you were and discard you?” The words were followed by a cruel laugh. “What did you have to do to end up discarded by the ladder-climbing Addlers, huh? Was it drugs and gambling? Did you swear your love to someone they didn't approve of? Oh, did you get pregnant out of wedlock? Because if that's the case, I will definitely – oh, no. You definitely aren't pregnant. That's a shame since I could have really used an infant for my tests. And I would take great relish in watching you suffer.”

Willow had no idea why he seemed to be singling her out as if he actually knew her. Soon enough, the doctor resumed the same cold, impersonal tone that he'd used with his underlings. He walked around asking her more questions, then answered some of

them as he looked over what she imagined was a file about her. Although he was still walking around her, the man had stopped touching her. The more he spoke, the lower her opinion of him became. The fool was acting like he was in a bad action movie or something, skulking around the room and monologuing at her. Even though he had verified that she wasn't awake, it didn't mean that she couldn't hear him and potentially register what he was saying. Research has long recommended that people speak to their loved ones when they are unconscious in case they hear. The apparent lack of concern that she might hear him wasn't a deterrent, leaving the impression that he wanted her to know what was coming. From that, she inferred that he didn't think that she had a chance to escape from the facility.

Finally, the air around her shifted, and an organic stench drew close to her. The surface under her shook a little, and his breath wafted unpleasantly under her nose. For a second, she was afraid he was going to kiss her or something equally distasteful.

Instead, the doctor spoke right next to her ear. "You can't sleep forever. Eventually, you'll wake up, and then I'll get a chance to study you. With the Mora family out of the way, we have no competition. It's been far too long since I was able to work, and these incompetent people don't seem to be able to properly keep me supplied with test subjects. Once you wake up, I'll finally get back to work. Hopefully, you'll be able to handle what I have in mind. I have so many theories bottled up over the last few months of waiting."

The surface moved a little, and the smell dissipated. "I suppose I shall just have to run some tests to see if you are brain dead. That will make my work a lot more challenging, and it may make it impossible to tell what you are capable of doing. It will be disappointing after having to wait so long. I suppose I shall need to make the incompetents pay for having used too much of my mixture to knock you out." He sighed. "I suppose I'll need to put together some tools to see if your brain is still working properly. That will tell me what I need to know so I don't have to keep

waiting.”

His footsteps moved across the room, and the air shifted when he opened the door. Even after it slammed shut, Willow refrained from stirring. The doctor seemed like the kind of man who would stand at the window and watch to see if she reacted. Relaxing a little more, she tried to feel the reverberations of someone walking down the hallway away from her.

It was there, faint, but still, she could feel that he was leaving. That didn't mean that she felt comfortable getting up just yet. She hadn't really had a chance to explore the room, so it was possible that he would be able to see her moving around the room if he decided to turn and monitor her from a distance. It was equally possible that there were cameras or other indicators that were monitoring her activity.

That would certainly make it harder for her to explore.

There was a much bigger problem that she needed to face. While she felt she would be able to escape without too much trouble, the idea that they had experimented on people was upsetting. That one sentence kept echoing in her mind – And we are out of test subjects since the last one died . How many people had they killed? And did it mean that there were other people like her? People who also had some abnormal abilities?

And if so, did it mean that she might have a real family out there?

There was a lot for her to consider, but she was also very aware that she needed to get moving soon. The doctor told her that he was going to collect some supplies and then would return.

She was just starting to form a plan when there was a familiar slamming sound. Thinking she may have taken too long, Willow worried about what she should do.

Then she realized that the air in her room hadn't changed.

The person in the room next to her was being returned.

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Something in Common

Willow waited until she felt people walking away from them before finally opening her eyes. Concerned that someone could be watching from a room elsewhere – and very aware that people had appeared not long after she had woken up the last time – she stayed still and scanned the room for cameras. When she realized that there was a wall beside her and just above her head, Willow moved her arm just enough to touch the wall next to her side. Once she was connected, she could tell where the electrical components were and which direction they were heading. Following that, she found the outlets along the wall. She managed to confirm all of the connections, and there were no monitoring devices along that wall. She closed her eyes, then raised her arm to touch the wall at her head. That assessment had the same results.

Opening her eyes again, she scanned the ceiling for cameras or implements that might alert people that she was awake. She also made sure to pay attention to reverberations that would indicate people were coming back down the hall. When she didn't detect either monitoring tools or people coming her way, she finally sat up. Willow looked down at the metal surface and saw straps dangling down the side. It was like the gurney she had noticed in one of the rooms when she had been crawling through the facility. There weren't the same instruments around it, though. The room was actually fairly empty. There was a trolley that was empty and a small area that she thought might be a restroom. There was nothing else in the room.

Next, she looked at the door. It had a window that people could look through to check on her and a small slit near the bottom. She guessed the slit was for food, and that suggested that the door only opened when people entered. There were no other windows or openings.

But I heard someone talking to me. How did he talk to me? He was trying to explain that, wasn't he?

Before touching the floor, which she thought might have a trigger that would alert people that weight had shifted in the room, Willow decided to try to talk to the other prisoner.

"Hello? Are you there?"

There was no response.

"Are you okay over there?" The words mimicked what he had asked her after she had woken up. Again, there was no response.

Now she had to make a choice. It seemed fairly likely that the floor had specially made plates that would register movement. That would explain why people had reacted to her getting sick. Her eyes moved down to look at the spot where she thought there should be evidence of that event. There was nothing. It seemed that the people in the hazmat suits had done a good job of getting rid of her.

Before touching the floor, she looked around the room one more time. There was no sign of any kind of monitoring devices on the walls or in the ceiling, leaving her deciding that touching the floor would almost certainly trigger a response.

Willow removed her shoes and held them in one hand. Taking a deep breath and closing her eyes, she lowered herself to the floor. When her feet touched the cold surface, she began trying to sense any type of plate or trigger. There was nothing. She opened her eyes and looked down at the floor.

If it wasn't a weight trigger, how did they know that I was awake and that they needed to clean up in there? She shut her eyes again and let her senses move further

along the floor. Sure enough, there was a very small trigger, and it was going off at that moment.

Her eyes flew open, and she knew that she didn't have long before they came into the room. In the back of her mind, she wondered how the trigger hadn't gone off when she had been crawling through the rooms. But it was hardly the focus of her thoughts since she knew that people would be marching toward her.

She turned and quickly moved toward the room where she knew the man had been left. Stepping up to the wall, she began to fade through, and it clicked in her mind. As long as she stayed in that state, the floor probably couldn't pick up her presence. Praying that she was right, Willow walked through the wall.

It was like entering an entirely different place. There was more in the room than in hers, including a toilet, a small table, a comfortable-looking chair, and a lamp. It was more like a small hotel room than a place where prisoners were kept.

This must be where Nolan is being held. Of course, even when he's been abducted, he's treated so much better than everyone else.

She looked down and noticed the rug on the floor. Since she hadn't allowed herself to fully materialize in the room, she hadn't felt the change. It was possible that this room didn't have a trigger, but she wasn't about to test that theory and set it off.

Annoyance began to rise in her as she looked at the comfortable-looking corner with the comfy chair, lamp, and ... a small bookcase. A part of her was curious as to what books were on it, but she knew it didn't matter. The room was dimmer as if they didn't want his eyes to be uncomfortable.

She closed her eyes and looked away for a moment.

Then she heard it. The people rushed to her room. Moving quickly, she hid near the door. If they were to check the window, they wouldn't be able to see her. There was screaming and the sound of something being thrown around the room.

The doctor came back, she smirked. Guess you'll be waiting a lot longer for your next victim. If I have any say, you'll never have another chance to torment people who are different.

When she heard a commotion just outside the door, Willow moved over to hide behind the chair. It was incredibly uncomfortable as she had to hold herself in a state where she was actually in the chair because there wasn't enough space behind it. Naturally, people looked toward the chair after they entered, but she was well hidden. If they had dropped to the ground and looked under the chair, they would have seen her, but of course, no one would think of that. No normal person would be able to hide there, so they would never think to look for her there.

They walked around the room, and then quickly left. As the last couple of people left, one of them muttered to the other, "There is no way she could have gotten into any other room. Why are we being forced to look through them?"

His words were cut off when the door slammed, but the sound of his screams let her know that the doctor had heard the guy's complaints. She gritted her teeth because that meant that there would probably be people standing just outside the room. Unable to remain in the mixed state, she stood up and stepped forward. Carefully sitting on the chair, she hoped that no one would enter the room again. The only good thing about the people having been in the room was that she was able to add her own weight to the floor as they were leaving. All she could do once she was fully present in the room was wait to see if people re-entered the room.

While waiting, her eyes moved around the room, taking in more details. This time she noticed something that looked more like a bed. And there was a form under a blanket

on it.

That must be Nolan. If it is, that should make it easier to get out of here because I won't have to look for him. It's a shame that he was the one expressing concern, though. The odds of him actually listening to me are slim. I guess the best I can do is tell him what I've done and let him decide what he wants to do. He's probably not going to trust me after he knows, but he isn't likely to listen to me even if he doesn't know. Best to come clean and let him make an informed decision.

Some of the resentment was bubbling up and the memories of high school were making her rethink helping him. Nolan had always made it clear that he was superior to the other privileged kids in their school. His parents were incredibly wealthy and had deep roots in the community. In a school full of kids from wealthy families, he was still considered vastly superior to nearly everyone else. Neither of his brothers had the same attitude, as far as Willow could tell. She had just had the misfortune of being in the same grade level as the snobby son.

Apparently, even the abductors held him in higher regard as he had a much nicer room than she had. She couldn't help but feel he would have an even worse opinion of her now that she had been disowned.

Well, you wouldn't have to deal with his condescending attitude if you didn't let money convince you to bug him.

The thought shut down her negative emotions toward Nolan, mostly because it was much easier to blame herself. And she wasn't entirely wrong to do that since her actions were the reason they were in the current situation. At the very least, she had made it easier for them to take both of them.

Judging by what the doctor had said, they had other reasons for taking her beyond a ransom or to tie up some loose ends. Based on what her would-be tormentor had said,

it didn't even sound like they cared who her family was.

How did they know I was different? I never made my abilities known to anyone besides my parents and a couple of servants. And those people were entirely loyal to the family. That's the only reason they knew. So ... how could anyone know?

As she pondered this, Willow looked at the figure on the bed. If they had taken her because she was abnormal, did that mean that Nolan had other abilities? The thought was bizarre and not something she would have suspected back in high school. Then again, looking back, it made sense on some levels. He managed to break a number of records in sports and academics, excelling well beyond what his two older brothers had done. Perhaps he was able to manipulate things or somehow had an advantage that normal people didn't have. She quickly shook her head. For all of his faults, it seemed impossible to think he had abilities that would make him more agile or clever than everyone else. She had seen him working hard at school, in the library, and at the computer long after everyone else had left. He continued studying rather than going home.

Nolan was a lot of things, but Willow didn't believe he was a cheater.

His family's money and power gave him advantages, but he was a really hard worker. The standards he had for others always seemed below the standards he had for himself.

As she considered these possibilities, Willow watched the figure under the blanket sleep. Not quite ready to talk to the guy who had taunted and belittled her when she was younger, she looked around the room again. She remembered the sound of fighting coming from this room and looked for signs of that. There weren't any. Nothing was knocked over or appeared to be out of place. She had been fading in and out of consciousness, so it was possible that people had already cleaned up after the fight. Judging by how clean the place was, as well as how spotless the floor was in

her room, this seemed likely.

Did they send in people in special suits for him, too? Or was it just for me?

She was yanked back to the present when she heard a voice outside the room directing people to the elevators to search for her on different floors. Willow strained her ears to hear what they were saying. It was good to know they were in the building. As far as she had seen, there weren't windows, not that that indicated much. She had seen rooms that were cells, a torture room, and now a luxurious room that was still in a prison. Given the state that the other prisoner was in, it didn't seem that they had spared any punishment and had potentially tortured him.

Unfortunately, she couldn't hear well enough to determine where in the building she was.

As the people in the hallway seemed to be heading in different directions, Willow decided she needed to face what she had done. She flinched at the memory.

If only I had done something differently. I should have told him about the bug or warned him that people were after him. If I had, things might have turned out differently. But I did what was easiest. And now I'm being punished for that. I need to apologize before people come back and drag him away again.

Resolved to move forward, she silently approached the bed. Then she heard a soft groan, which made her stop and steel herself for what would happen next.

When she got close enough, Willow stifled the gasp at the sight of his face. Until that moment, she would not have believed it was impossible to feel sorry for Nolan Woodward. Now, she felt both incredibly guilty and upset because he had been badly beaten. Horrified, she turned away and glared at the door, almost hoping that someone would come in so that she could pay them back for what they had done. It

didn't matter if they had actually been a part of the attack – what mattered was that she felt that everyone who worked there was guilty. Nor did it matter that it was Nolan who was hurt – not even he deserved to be tortured. But what was really getting to her was the fact that she had had a hand in it.

This wasn't supposed to happen. It was supposed to be a prank. Now it looks like they are trying to kill him.

There was no point in getting angry. If anyone were to come into the room, she didn't know how long she would be able to last. Her abilities could inflict harm but resorting to violence was not something she liked to do. And there was another reason to keep her abilities secret – it gave her a distinct advantage when it came to escaping. She figured it was only a matter of time before they realized what her ability was, and Willow wanted to cling to that advantage for as long as possible.

Deciding the best thing she could do at that moment was to tend to Nolan, Willow went to the sink and filled a small basin with water, then grabbed a washcloth from a shelf, shaking her head at how even as a prisoner, Nolan was treated better than others. However, she was thankful for that since it meant she could actually start to tend to his wounds, even if she had an adverse reaction to blood and gore. She had learned some first aid basics, and Willow was hoping that would be enough to help until she could get him to safety.

She placed the basin down near the bed and soaked the washcloth, then twisted it to squeeze out the excess water. As carefully as she could, Willow began to wipe away the blood on Nolan's face.

Suddenly, a hand shot up and grabbed her wrist, and pain shot up her arm. She cried out, knocking the basin over as a pair of cold blue eyes glared at her.

“What are you doing?” Nolan's cold voice was everything that she remembered from

her past, and she tried to pull away from him, but his grip was like a vice, and trying to escape made the pain worse.

“Please let go,” she said, the pain in her wrist almost as bad as the fear she felt confronting the person who bullied her in high school.

His eyes moved to her wrist, and he let go. Willow crouched down, hugging her wrist to her chest, fearing it might be broken. Too afraid to look at it, she barely heard him talking to her as she turned and ran out of the room.

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Just Scratching the Surface

She only ran as far as her room, knowing that it was unlikely the doctor and his goons would return to it. That's why Willow was startled by a voice that sounded close to her.

“Are you okay?”

Willow gripped her wrist as she spun around to find the source of the voice. No one was there. It was just like earlier, but she hadn't had the chance to ask Nolan how he'd manage to speak to her from the other room.

Now, she didn't really care. All she wanted was to get away from him. Nolan had never physically hurt her before, so the fact that he might have broken her wrist was shocking. It triggered the same reaction she'd had when she was younger – she ran. Unfortunately, she had forgotten that there were people actively looking for her. Some of them had been directed to go to other floors. She left her room and started phasing through other cold rooms, most of them empty. She only stopped when she ran into a large slab of metal. Stumbling over it, she stretched out her hands to catch herself, and this time she heard a snapping sound as her hand hit the surface. Unable to stop herself, Willow let out a cry of pain. Her grey eyes opened wide as she realized she was in another torture room and the metal object was a cabinet of some kind. Tools clanged around inside of it. In her shock and pain, she fully materialized.

To her horror, an alarm sounded, leaving her no time to really consider her situation. The blaring sound made her want to cover her ears, but Willow knew better than to try. Her wrist was useless, so trying to use it for anything was out of the question. She

looked around, trying to figure out where the alarms were, but soon it didn't matter – she could hear people rushing in her direction. Turning back the way she had come, Willow ran through several rooms, crouching as she heard the people drawing closer. She moved close to the wall near the hall so that anyone who looked in would not see her moving along in the opposite direction.

When she heard the people pass the room she was in, Willow continued through three more rooms, then stopped. Hurrying to the door, she stood to the side and crouched down. Cradling her wrist, she rocked a little on the balls of her feet and panted.

Her heart pounded as a voice spoke to her in a calming tone, "Please calm down."

Startled, Willow tried to find the source of the voice. When she didn't see anyone, the young woman felt certain that there were electronics somewhere hidden in the room. Someone was playing her.

Then the voice spoke again, "Please get back against the wall and try to relax your breathing. They are probably going to be heading back this way soon, and they are going to be looking for you. Stay out of sight because they don't know that you are the person who set off the alarm. They suspect it is you, but don't let them confirm that by letting them find you now."

Willow's eyes darted around the room, looking for the source of the voice. "Who are you?"

"The guy from the café. I bumped into you and got you into this mess. I promise I'll get you out of here; it'll just take some time." Then there was a melodic laugh that didn't sound quite right, but she didn't have time to consider it as the voice continued. "I don't have your gift ... unless you have the ability to get me out of here at the same time?"

There was a note of hope in the voice, but Willow shook her head. “I don’t know. But how are you talking to me?”

This was met with a few seconds of silence, then he responded, “I’m sorry I didn’t get to explain it earlier, but I’m using more direct methods. Given your ... unique abilities, I’m able to talk to you directly.”

Can you hear what I’m thinking?

Willow desperately hoped he couldn’t. She certainly didn’t want Nolan to have access to her thoughts because she didn’t think he needed any more reason to belittle her. When he didn’t say anything, she whispered, “So you ... I don’t understand.”

“How much do you know about yourself and your abilities?”

Shrinking against the wall, Willow didn’t really want to tell him what she had learned over the years, but she also had no idea how much he could figure out on his own. He had already seen her use force to push cars, and now he had witnessed her literally running through the wall of his room. At this point, he basically knew about as much as she did about what she could do. Whispering, Willow said, “If you mean do I know that I’m a freak, yeah, I know. Don’t need you to tell me that.”

This response was met with silence. When she heard him again, his voice was much softer. “You aren’t a freak. Whoever told you that was horrible and not someone worth listening to.”

Unable to help it, Willow scoffed. She wanted to tell him that he was one of the people to call her that back in high school, even though she had always kept herself under control back then. Instead, she sat down, drawing her knees up to her chest. Her good arm wrapped around her legs, while the arm with the broken wrist rested between her legs and her body. She did not say anything in response to his words, at

least not anything that would help the current situation.

When she didn't answer, Nolan said, "I'll make sure to take you somewhere safe after getting you out of here. For now, I just need to know how much you know about your ... heritage." His words were chosen in a way that left the impression that he was withholding information even while saying he would help her.

With a sigh, she said, "You don't have to pretend you think differently of me. It's why my parents have been looking for a way to get rid of me. As soon as they found out that I was a freak, they wanted to get rid of me, even going so far as to tell me that I was adopted. Whenever I did something that upset them, they would tell me that I was not really a part of their family. At least that was one constant over my life," she said with thick sarcasm in her voice. "If they aren't my real parents, then I don't have a clue about my heritage."

"Who are your parents?"

"It doesn't matter. If they are my biological parents, they've disowned me, so I don't have access to the seedier aspects of my heritage. If they did adopt me, I can't access the paperwork, so there's no way to tell who my biological family is."

"I understand that it's a sore subject, but who your parents are is really important."

"I don't see how it's going to help anything right now. Because I don't see how talking about family is going to help get me out of here. If they are willing to torture you, a member of the Woodward family, a nobody like me has no chance of escaping by a paid ransom or promise of power."

This was enough to shut him up for a few moments. When he started trying to talk to her again, Willow decided to ignore him. She focused on paying attention to where the people were. When she couldn't sense them near the door, she stood up and

quickly checked to see if anyone was looking down the hall. After confirming that there was no one paying attention so far from the room where she had heard the alarm, she darted across the hall and into another sterile-looking room. Then she kept running through several rooms that were perpendicular to the hallway she just crossed.

While she was in pain, Willow was in better shape as she moved through the rooms the second time. She had been fortunate enough not to encounter anything that stopped her the first time, but she wasn't taking exactly the same path. After going through a couple of rooms, she slowed down and started paying attention to the layout and items in each room. Some were like her cell, cold and mostly devoid of anything beyond an uncomfortable bed, a mostly empty trolley, and a place to use the bathroom. Other rooms looked more like chemistry labs or places where experiments were done – not torture kind of experiments. None of them made her feel nearly so unsettled as the room she thought of as a torture room. None of them were nearly as nice as Nolan's, either. After a while, she walked through them cautiously but with a more assessing eye. She figured whatever she could learn about the place would likely help her get out safely.

What she didn't want to think about was returning to Nolan.

As she moved farther away, she occasionally heard Nolan trying to talk to her, but years of being berated and belittled by her family had made it easy for her to tune out people, even if he was somehow speaking into her mind. She was too busy exploring to better understand her current situation. That was one thing that she knew how to do, and she was incredibly adept at exploring, even without her abilities.

She had traveled cautiously through over a dozen rooms when one room caught her attention. Willow stepped into a space that was reminiscent of the school nurse's room or doctor's office. After making sure it was clear, the young woman began going through the cabinets. Initially, she tried to check them without opening the

doors, but it was harder to see the items without a light. Willow slowly opened one door, her eyes roving around the room in case there was a hidden alarm attached to the doors. When nothing happened, she turned her attention to the contents. It took a while, but eventually, she found a wrap for her wrist.

Sitting on the floor, Willow tried to prepare herself to bandage her dominant hand. As someone who had a weak stomach when it came to blood and broken bones, this particular situation was a nightmare. She looked down at her wrist, and immediately she looked away from it, her stomach threatening to revolt at the sight.

“That’s quite impressive.”

The voice once again startled her, and Willow hit her wrist on her knees. Talking a little too loudly, she said, “Stop doing that, Nolan! Every time you do that, you startle me, and this is hard enough without you breaking my concentration.”

When he didn’t immediately respond, the young woman thought that she might have gotten him to leave her alone until she was ready to deal with him. She let her head fall back gently against the wall while she breathed through her mouth to prepare for what she needed to do.

“I really think we need to talk.”

Willow balled up her good hand. “Seriously, Nolan, right now, I don’t want to deal with you.” This time she was going to force him to talk because she didn’t want him to interrupt her when she was actually wrapping a broken wrist. Speaking to the room, she pointed out, “You broke my wrist, and I’ve found some supplies to try to take care of it. If you don’t mind, I don’t want you startling me or breaking my concentration. Medicine is not my field, so this is tough enough without you making things worse.”

“What do you mean by taking care of it?”

Annoyance crept into her voice as she said, “I’m going to wrap it so that I don’t keep hurting it further.”

“How can it be worse than being broken?”

“I’m not a medical professional, but I’m pretty sure that falling on it and hitting it against things has made the break worse.”

“Instead of causing yourself more pain, you could just return to me.”

Shaking her head, Willow told him, “You broke it. Why should I believe that you can tend to it?”

“Because I can do more than just wrap it up. I can actually fix the bone.”

This time, Willow was the one to be silent.

“Are you still there? Please tell me what you are thinking.”

Biting her lip, she wasn’t sure what to say. “How do you plan to fix the bone? I looked around the room, and it was much nicer than the rest of them, but there wasn’t much in the way of medical supplies. There sure wasn’t the material for a cast or something that would set and stabilize it.”

“Like you, I’m not a medical professional, so I don’t know how to use human medicine to treat it. What I mean is that I can actually heal the bone, even if you’ve made it worse. It will be like the break didn’t happen.”

“How?”

“That’s like asking you how you are able to move through walls.”

Willow mouthed a few words but didn’t speak as she tried to figure out what she wanted to say. Finally, she decided not to try to explain something that she was simply able to do. “That’s not even remotely the same thing.”

“It’s one of my abilities. Actually, healing is a pretty common ability for my kind.”

“You’re kind? Do you mean men? Athletes?” What she was thinking was obscenely rich people, but she didn’t say that aloud.

“This isn’t a conversation to have over a mental link.”

“How do I know you aren’t going to hurt me again? You could just be luring me back to the room for ... some nefarious reason.” Willow knew that he wasn’t planning something like that, but in her current vulnerable state, she really didn’t want to be near him. Not until she had some time to calm down.

His words were calm as he explained, “I only hurt you because I thought you were one of the people who abducted us. I’m really sorry about what I did. If I had known it was you touching me, not one of them, I wouldn’t have grabbed you like that. And, you have to admit, I wasn’t in the best shape when you were here, and having a wet cloth dabbed on an open wound wasn’t the best way to wake. I was startled and just reacted.”

Willow tilted her head to the side, “Don’t you mean you aren’t in the best shape? Or are you that good at healing?”

“It’s an innate ability. Even if I’m unconscious, my body repairs itself quickly. It’s what makes it incredibly difficult to kill my kind. Not that you would be able to tell if you were to see me in my current state since I’m trying to keep my abilities secret.”

“What do you mean I couldn’t tell? Are you walking around with a lot of blood on you?” She was about to argue that it would be pretty clear he wasn’t still hurt, but when Willow considered the state he was in when she saw him, she knew that someone needed to look pretty close to see that the wounds were healed. Just a look at him had turned her stomach. If he hadn’t cleaned off the blood, she could imagine people wouldn’t be able to see the wounds were actually healed.

And given his reaction to her, she very much doubted that anyone else would be able to get close enough to tell.

She could imagine him shrugging as he replied, “Having a bit of dried blood on me is far from the worst thing to contend with. Besides, I don’t plan to be here for long, so I’ll be able to clean the blood up soon enough.”

“What makes you think you can get out of this place? It’s a maze of hallways and rooms. And you’ve admitted that you can’t just walk out like I can.”

“This place is ... based on an old design that is well known in my field of work.”

A memory clicked in her mind, and Willow realized that the place was probably familiar to him. Without thinking about what she was saying, Willow muttered, “You mean it’s something that your family helped design.”

This again caused him to go silent. When he spoke, Nolan said, “Please come back so we can talk.”

“I’m really not sure that’s a good idea.”

“I swear, I’m not going to hurt you.”

“You already did.”

There was a hint of annoyance as he replied, “I mean, I’m not going to intentionally hurt you. If you really knew me, you would know that I am not that kind of person.”

Willow scoffed before she could stop herself. “Sure. I’ve heard that before.”

“Not from me, you haven’t.”

It took a lot to keep her thoughts to herself, but the young woman also knew that it wouldn’t make any sense to fight with him. It hurt to think that he had been so cruel to her, but it apparently hadn’t meant anything because he didn’t even recognize or remember her. Taking a deep breath, she decided to offer up something that he couldn’t argue with. “The guys who responded to the alarm are still over there. I’m currently somewhere that is pretty empty and I don’t plan to move right now.”

“That ... is a very reasonable decision and not one I can really argue with well. So...” at that point, she could hear him clearing his throat or his thoughts; Willow wasn’t exactly sure how it worked. “Do you mind if we keep talking until the coast is clear?”

This was something she didn’t expect, so before she had a chance to really consider it, she automatically said, “Sure.”

“Great. I am really sorry for getting you involved in all of this. If I would have known this would happen, I wouldn’t have followed you from the café.”

“Ah, it’s all right.” Willow cringed as the guilt started to kick in. How would she tell him that the reason they were in this situation was because of her stupidity? Now that she felt like she was temporarily safe from the doctor and his underlings, she had time to reflect on her role. Hearing him apologize to her made Willow feel horrible.

There was a laughing tone as he said, “You must be on overload now to be so blasé.”

“I think, given our current situation, the blame isn’t really the problem. We can deal with that later.” After saying it, she couldn’t help but tell herself that she would make it right.

“Well, that’s very kind of you to say. Most people would be enraged in this situation.”

Feeling uncomfortable, Willow asked, “Are you saying that you would feel like that in my position?”

He paused, then said, “I’m not sure. Probably. I mean, I didn’t plan for this to happen, obviously, but I think that getting dragged into something like this ... emotional reactions really aren’t rational. And considering your unique abilities, you are in even worse danger than me if they realize what you are. If not for me, you wouldn’t be here, and you wouldn’t be in so much danger.”

Willow closed her eyes as she pulled her legs up and rested her good arm over her knees. She placed her forehead on her uninjured arm, the guilt eating at her. “Don’t worry about it. We can discuss everything later when we get out of here.”

“That’s a very generous attitude. If I were a suspicious person, I would be asking more questions now.”

She had no idea how to respond to that, so she simply said, “I’m exhausted, but I know that I’m not going to get any sleep.”

“When you come here, I’ll protect you so you can get some real rest. It’s the least I can do.”

“I can’t do that to you. I’m sure they’ll be looking for me soon enough, and considering your room is next to mine, I’ve no doubt they’ll think you had something

to do with my disappearance.”

“You might be right about that. Even though they came into my room, it would make sense for us to work together,” Nolan said. They were both quiet, and she wanted to wait to hear what he had to say. When he spoke, Nolan put her on edge. “Can you be honest with me?”

Afraid he would ask her something that would incriminate her, she was hesitant in her answer. “It depends on what you ask.”

“Do you know how your ability works? And please be honest in your answer.”

“Didn’t we already cover this?”

“I recall you dodging the question by asking me about my abilities.”

Feeling defeated, she finally admitted, “Not really. I suppose it’s because it’s an innate ability, too. If you know a lot of people who can heal like magic, there are probably other people out there like me who can walk through stuff.” She paused. “Did you just stumble upon your abilities without knowing anything?”

She thought she heard him chuckle as he replied, “Not at all. But my situation is a lot different because I was raised by my family.”

“But you said that it was something your body just did on its own. So why does it matter that you were with your family?”

“My body was able to heal itself, but my family explained it to me before I even knew that it was not something that most people could do.”

“How did your family know that you could heal yourself?”

“It’s mostly an expectation because the vast majority of shifters can heal themselves. And a large percentage of us are able to heal others, too, something that my family did have to tell me since that wasn’t something I was likely to realize. Everyone around me could heal until they finally decided I needed to attend school with other students.”

It was a lot, but one thing caught her attention. Willow narrowed her eyes. “Did you just say shifters?”

“Ah, yes. Sorry. As I said, this really isn’t a conversation we should be having like this. There’s a lot that I can tell you, but from what I’ve been told, it’s really not a good idea to have someone like you isolated when you start to learn about yourself.”

Willow peeked up over her arm, “Why?”

“Because it can have a very adverse effect. One woman pretty much destroyed an entire facility when she was pushed too far.”

Her mouth fell open a little, and she couldn’t help but mouth the words he said. “She ... destroyed a facility?”

“Yes. That’s why I think it is best that you come to me – when you are ready – then we will talk. If something happens, I’m in a pretty good position to keep you safe, both from the people here and from yourself.”

“Are you in a good position to keep me safe?” Willow knew that Nolan was confident, but this seemed delusional. “You are a prisoner.”

“I have other skills than healing.”

Willow scowled at the wall, “Yeah, you can talk directly to my mind.”

“Well, that’s just something my family can do. It’s why we look at most types of tech as unnecessary. There are more disadvantages to us having them than advantages.”

“Can you talk to anyone like this?”

“No. But again, this is getting into territory that I don’t want to discuss from afar.”

Willow put her head back down, the pain in her wrist starting to make thinking difficult. “I wish I could just go home.”

“If you really wanted to, you could.”

“I’m not going to just leave you here.”

There was a pause before he asked, “Why not?”

“They beat you unconscious. You may think that I’m in greater danger, but I don’t think that’s true.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because you aren’t human. If they figure that out, you will definitely be in danger. And I know that they torture people to death here. With your healing ability, it just means that it will be drawn out that much longer.”

“That’s not your problem, though. You could get out of here and get the medical attention you need. As you pointed out, you don’t have to be here, so if you really want to go, just go. It will be much safer for you to escape instead of putting yourself in unnecessary danger.”

It was the strangest thing, being urged to leave by Nolan Woodward and feeling too

guilty to do it.

With a frustrated grunt, Willow placed her good hand on the floor and stumbled her way into a standing position while trying to cradle her wrist.

“What’s happening? Are you okay?”

“I’m going to see if you can actually fix this thing because it’s really hurting.”

“Why don’t you just leave? You can go to a hospital and have your wrist fixed. These people don’t have your name, so it’s not like they will be able to track you.”

Willow closed her eyes and hung her head. Her wrist was hurting, but that’s not what was bothering her – she knew that the people definitely had her name. They knew far too much about her. They set all of this up. Even if she wanted to leave, they could easily find her and drag her back if they didn’t just kill her.

The last one died ...

The thought went through her mind, and Willow knew that staying was a huge risk. However, she couldn’t just leave. She had no idea what he meant about being a shifter, but Nolan had made it clear that he wasn’t particularly afraid in this situation. He clearly didn’t realize just how dangerous their situation was. It seemed to Willow that he was playing down the risk to himself while telling her that she was in terrible danger.

There really wasn’t any decision to be made – Willow wasn’t in a situation where she could just leave.

Hopefully, he’s right about being able to help because I’m not going to survive for a day if I leave here. Or I’ll be right back here, and they’ll figure out what I can do.

Then I won't be able to escape.

Not about to voice that to her high school bully, all Willow said was, "I'm not going to just leave you here. For all I know, you are still hurt and just want to make me feel less guilty so that I'll leave."

There was a melodic laugh, and then Nolan said, "Okay. If you can get back here safely, I'll be waiting."

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A Surprisingly Pleasant Conversation

The trip back seemed to take no time at all. She had to be careful of people walking past in the hallway, but Willow kept a part of her attention on feeling for vibrations. When she could tell that someone was walking down the hall toward her, she would stop and wait near the wall out of sight until they walked past and she could feel them continuing to walk away.

The fact that there was no real excitement as she returned was a welcome change from how things had been since she woke. It was almost a break because she was finally in a position where she had some control. She was acting, not just reacting. At the same time, she had to remain focused on what was happening around her so that she didn't get caught. It required her to be focused on the world around her instead of the pain in her wrist or the guilt in her gut.

When she reached the hallway near Nolan's room she stopped. Nolan had been quiet, and it was a bit unsettling. She bit her lip and whispered, "Are you still there?"

"Yes, I'm here and waiting."

She relaxed, and that's when Willow realized just how anxious she had gotten since they last spoke. In her mind, she had begun to create so many different scenarios, with the worst being a fear that they had taken him again. Placing her good hand on her chest, she smiled and said, "Okay, I'm close by, but I need to see if there's anyone in the hall who may see me crossing over."

"Are you able to do that safely?"

“Yes. Well, mostly. My ability lets me be within an object and in the open air at the same time. I suppose you didn’t see it when I was in your room, but that’s how I hid when they entered. But I really don’t like doing it because it’s unbelievably uncomfortable. I’ve never been able to hold it for long, either, although I don’t know if it’s because of the discomfort or something else. When it comes to checking the halls, I prefer the discomfort to being seen and chased again. Twice is enough for one year, let alone a single day.”

This got a bit of a laugh. “I can understand that. I much prefer to be a cat.”

Willow wrinkled her nose. “I don’t want to be a cat, either. I prefer something more normal.”

“Normal, like walking through walls?” There was a hint of a smile in his tone.

She giggled, then stuck out her tongue. “You know what I mean.”

“Yes, I do. But it got you to smile, so it was worth it.” When he said that, Willow smiled a little wider. Nolan quickly turned his attention back to their current situation. “Do you know how the alarm was triggered?”

The smile disappeared, and Willow hung her head. The whole thing had been her fault because she had panicked. “I ran into a metal counter or bin. Something like that. It’s how I made my wrist worse when I tried to catch myself after stumbling into it.”

“Don’t beat yourself up about that. You just had a natural reaction.”

“I should have been more careful.”

“You were hurting and afraid. No one can blame you for that.”

Willow wasn't sure how to respond to that. The idea that Nolan was actually trying to make her feel better was so bizarre. At the same time, it made her feel a little lighter. "I guess. Anyway, I'll check, and hopefully, I'll be with you in a few minutes."

"Sounds good. Best of luck, and I hope to see you and your pretty gray eyes soon."

Willow's mouth dropped open a little, and for a second, she completely forgot about the pain in her wrist and her current situation. It flitted through her mind that he might be trying to flirt with her, but she quickly shut that down because there was no chance someone like Nolan would flirt with someone like her.

He pities you and probably feels guilty about breaking your wrist. Once he finds out that you are the reason he's here, all of the niceties will stop, and he'll be just as cruel and hurtful as he was when we were teens. And you'll deserve it.

Willow let out a sigh.

"Everything okay?"

"What?" She looked up. "Oh, yes. Just ... tired."

"Understandable. Okay. I'll stop bothering you. Just heard the sigh and worried that it meant you weren't able to make it yet. Or that they found you and knocked you out again."

"No, nothing like that. Just trying to prepare."

"Well, you said it was uncomfortable, so that makes sense."

"Yeah. Anyway, I'll let you know when I have an update. Until then, please just sit tight, and I'll be there as soon as I can."

“Yes ma’am. I’ll be waiting for you with bated breath and a heartfelt apology.”

“Really, Nolan, that’s not necessary. As you said, you didn’t know who was touching you, and since they were probably torturing you before you lost consciousness, there was no way for you to know that it was me.”

“You are quite a generous woman, aren’t you?”

“No. Just a logical one. Now, I need to go and focus. I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Right. Sorry. I guess I’m just eager to talk to you. But I’m making it take longer before I see you again. Be careful.”

There was something in her mind that sounded almost like losing a signal. Willow wondered if he would react if she spoke again.

Just get going and get to him. Procrastinating will just make it that much harder to admit what I did. Get moving and get it over with. Deal with the fallout when it happens.

Following a deep breath, Willow placed one hand on the wall, then leaned into it with her face. Once she felt the air on the other side, she turned and looked to the left. There were people a long way off, and she thought they were probably standing guard over the room where she had been. Looking right, she didn’t see anyone. She wanted to put a little more distance between her and the goons to the left, so Willow headed over to the other wall along the other hall, the one where she had been dragged after she initially woke. Carefully phasing through, she looked to the right and saw no one. Without waiting, she walked quickly across the hallway and into the room directly across from Nolan. She had learned to enter new rooms much more carefully, and she was glad that she had been more cautious.

The doctor stood at a countertop, his back to her.

Slowly, she backed up and out of the room. As soon as she was in the open air of the hallway, Willow turned and ran into Nolan's room. As soon as she was safely in the soft lights, she crouched down, her wrist cradled against her chest.

"What's wrong? What happened? Are you okay?"

Willow looked up at him, and despite being alone, she whispered to him, "The doctor is in the room right across the hallway."

"The ... doctor?"

She shivered as she explained her encounter with the creepy man.

Nolan's expression shifted from concerned to unreadable. "I know who you are talking about."

"Did he torture you, too?"

Nolan shook his head, but then he held out a hand. "Your wrist looks really bad. Please let me fix it."

She shook her head, "I ... need to talk to you first."

His hand lowered a little. "Okay."

Willow stood up and moved away from him, not wanting to be close in case he reacted with anger. "It's my fault you are here."

He put his hands on his knees and pushed himself up to his full height, a small smile

on his face. “No, it’s not your fault I’m here. That’s why I need to explain.”

She held up a hand. “Please, don’t interrupt. I know that you like to be in control and, as a natural leader, you are used to being the one who does the talking, but what I have to tell you is difficult enough without interruptions.”

“I don’t know how you would know that, but I can assure you this isn’t ...”

She frowned, “Please, Nolan, just listen.”

He tipped his head to the side. “You dropping this,” he held up his hand with the little bug in it, “in my pocket isn’t the reason why I’m here.”

Willow’s eyes widened. “You knew?”

“You aren’t exactly skilled when it comes to pickpocketing.”

Her eyes widened. “I wasn’t trying to steal!”

“No, you weren’t. But pickpocketing is the skill you need to drop something discreetly into someone’s pocket. It’s every bit as important as removing something from someone’s pocket.”

“Then ... how long have you known?”

“I received some intel about a person who needed help and that I needed to go to the café.”

“You ... knew even before I bugged you?”

He smiled. “I didn’t know who needed help, but I knew that the woman needed a

shifter's help to get out of danger.”

“But I wasn't the ... target ...” What Willow thought she knew was suddenly far less certain. “You were the target, right?”

Nolan pursed his lips. “I was, but only because they knew we were looking for you. I was specifically in the city for you.”

Willow stared at him. “I don't understand.”

He walked over and gently took the elbow of her uninjured arm. The subtle smell of juniper and earth helped to set her at ease. After moving his hand over the window, Nolan led her back to the comfortable chair and had her sit. Willow was too stunned to fight him as he made sure she was settled. Then he got down on his knees and gingerly took her forearm and hand in his own. A warmth began to spread through her as he moved a hand along her arm.

Finally, he began to talk. “You aren't a shifter, but you have shifter blood. Probably dragon shifter's blood since you have such a unique gift.” His gorgeous eyes looked up at her. For the first time in her life, she saw concern and sorrow in them. “You aren't human, but you aren't shifter. To most humans, you would probably appear to be a witch.”

Willow gave him a look. “I'm not a witch.”

He smiled back at her. “No, you are a woman from a shifter line. Most shifters are men.”

“So, there aren't any women?”

“There are. It is just a small percentage of types with female shifters, mostly

mammals.”

“What?”

“Like wolves and bears. There are women shifters, as well as men. Anyway, for most other shifter types, the women are born without the ability to shift but with a much stronger set of abilities. And they are often abandoned, especially the farther removed from the shifter male they are.” He watched her carefully as he said this last part. “If your parents discouraged your abilities, it’s almost certain they weren’t your real family.”

Willow stared at him. She had never been sure if her parents were saying she was adopted just to hurt her or if it was true. “So, you think that my parents were being honest? I’m adopted?”

“More than likely. Not that gifted women are treated well by their actual family. The blood is usually so diluted, and the appearance of gifted women is increasingly rare, so humans tend to be scared of their children once they start presenting signs of their bloodlines. I mean, you know how humans are. They don’t tend to like people who are different.”

Willow blinked a few times, the irony not lost on her. The very person who had treated her poorly for being different was now apparently using it as a way of shaming others who did the same thing. But she stayed silent, as much because he was currently holding her arm so that she couldn’t leave as because she was learning a lot. More importantly, what he was saying made a lot of sense as she looked back at everything that had happened to her.

“I apologize. Humans have always been a bit of a sore spot for me, which I’m sure you can understand,” he smiled up at her, causing her heart to skip a beat. “Anyway, I was in the city looking for you because I received word from Elliot about someone

being tracked.”

She frowned, “Who’s Elliot?”

“He’s a Sexton. An old shifter family who has been instrumental in getting rid of facilities like this one. They destroyed a few places over the years. The last one that Elliot destroyed was in ... Southeast Asia, I think. Anyway, he’s been collecting data about people like you who are being tracked.”

Her mouth felt dry. “Someone’s been tracking me?”

“Yes. I don’t know that much about what information they had on you, just that you were in this city and they were trying to make contact with you. So, I made sure to let it be known that I was also trying to find you. Clearly, the plan worked up until you ran away. I had not anticipated that.”

“Why didn’t you just talk to me in the café?”

“Would you have listened if I had? I mean, you were so on edge, I was afraid you would leave without even approaching me.”

“I couldn’t even tell you noticed me.”

“I was monitoring you from my phone. Elliot got me into their system so that I could see when you made your move. I hoped to get you out of there and to a safe place. Being charming usually works to get women to listen to me, so I was not prepared for you to just turn and run. Got to say, that got my attention.”

She slumped, “I have never wanted your attention.”

He looked up from his work but didn’t say anything. When she didn’t say anything

else, Nolan seemed to have lost his train of thought. After a bit, he asked, “Do you have any questions for me?”

“I don’t even know where to start.”

He looked up at her and flashed a smile. “I get that. We can get you situated somewhere safe, then you can ask as many questions as you want.”

She gave a quick nod. The warmth was beginning to cool when she said, “I know you said it wasn’t my fault, but I’m still sorry. They were willing to give me a lot of money, and I hoped to use that to get out of here and start over. I should have known it wasn’t going to work the way I hoped.”

“It feels like nothing ever works out like it should. I understand.”

Willow frowned. “I have a hard time believing you’ve had any real difficulty. I mean, your family is rich and powerful. You have everything a person could want.”

“I know that I must seem ungrateful, like some spoiled rich kid, but the experience isn’t quite the same as the appearance.”

“I can understand that, too. Keeping up appearances is the only thing that matters to some families.”

“Indeed. Although, I can say that was not my family. They care deeply and want to do the right thing. They just aren’t necessarily good at assessing things and going about it the right way.” He stood up. “How does it feel?”

Willow looked down at her wrist, afraid of how it might look. Her wrist looked perfectly normal and as if nothing had happened. She moved it around, and there was no pain.

“How ...?”

Nolan smiled at her. “How do you walk through walls?”

Her eyes dropped back to her wrist as she kept moving it back and forth and in rotation. “Thank you. I don’t ... it’s like it was never broken.”

“It was my fault it happened, so it was my responsibility to fix it.”

She looked up at him. Nolan had grown several inches since she last saw him. This close, she knew that he was over six feet tall, and he looked –

Shaking her head, Willow said with feeling, “Seriously, thank you so much. No one has ever done anything so kind.”

His smile dropped a little. “That is sad. Surely you’ve had lovers who took care of you.”

With a scoff, she replied, “They always wanted my parents’ money. I was a meal ticket or a mark. They never actually cared.”

He nodded, stepped back, and offered her his hand. Willow took it, and he pulled her into a standing position in front of him. His eyes bore into hers, and she was aware that her heart was racing. She looked back at her wrist and moved it around to distract herself from her nervousness at being so close to Nolan.

“Now the real question,” his voice was clear as if everything up to that point was just conversation – now he was serious. Willow looked up into his impossibly blue eyes. The smile was gone. Her heart rate sped up as he asked, “How do you know who I am?”

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Years of Regret

Willow stepped back and fell back into the seat.

“Careful,” he said, some of the concern returning.

She shook her head. “I ... do you really not remember me at all?”

He looked down at her, his eyelids occasionally blinking and covering the startling blue of his eyes. Once, she thought she saw a set of eyelids move in from the sides, but Willow couldn't believe she had really seen that. Being under his gaze was far more uncomfortable than anything she had experienced with the goons or the doctor. She stood up and moved to the door. “Shouldn't we be getting out of here? That should be the priority.”

“I'm ... You mean we've met?”

Willow began rubbing her forehead with her fingers and thumb. “You know what? It's probably for the best that you don't remember me. I don't exactly have good memories about you, and if you not recognizing me means that you'll keep treating me well, then ...”

“If I hurt you, I want to make it right. Otherwise, how are we going to trust each other?”

Willow looked at him for a moment. “We've been trusting each other so far. Why should that change now?”

He took a deep breath. “You clearly have a negative view of me, so it’s possible that you would be more than happy to make sure I’m in a worse position before leaving. What guarantee do I have that you aren’t still trying to turn me over to them? And for you, why would you trust me given your negative view of me?”

“All I want right now is to get out of here. While I could do that on my own, they know who I am. They have my name, and they will find me. That was made abundantly clear to me. So, there is my motivation to make sure I get you out of here.”

He just shrugged at her.

She sagged and said in a defeated tone, “I know that you have power and money. And apparently you aren’t even human.” Willow looked up at him, her hair hanging down on the right side of her face. “I know that you have the ability to protect me. With nowhere else to turn, I don’t have any choice but to trust you, even though you tormented me in high school.”

There was a flash of recognition in his eyes, and his lips opened a little before he spoke. “Oh my. You’re Willow Addler!” His voice was far too loud, and she immediately put a hand over his mouth to shut him up.

Nolan tried to speak, but she shushed him. “We need to get out of here, Nolan. You shouting and drawing those assholes here isn’t going to help either of us. Whatever else you want to say can wait. Since bumping into you in the café, I’ve been leaning toward believing that you’ve changed into a decent person. I hope you are still the intelligent guy you were, so please don’t kill that hope.”

His eyes shone, and Nolan pulled her hand from his mouth. “I’m so sorry, Willow. I know I was a horrible, nasty brat back in high school. I’m not that person anymore.”

“That’s great, but not really relevant.” Willow was trying to feel anything that would indicate people were heading toward them. After repeatedly using her ability so much after having repressed it most of her life, she was starting to feel exhausted. Or perhaps it was the high level of stress and emotions she had experienced. Suddenly, she just felt so tired.

He pulled her into a tight hug. “I’m so, so sorry. I can understand why you would be willing to do me harm.”

Her body froze at the feel of his warmth and well-toned body. “It’s fine,” she said, not sure what to do as her body tensed up. Her face was pushed against his chest, and she could hear his heartbeat. “And I wasn’t trying to do you harm. I was told it was just supposed to be a prank.” She laughed but choked a little as she tried not to cry. “Funny because I really should have known that it was a setup. I barely managed to get a law degree, and that just proved that my parents’ money was responsible for most of it. I couldn’t even set a successful trap despite having the education that should have told me it was illegal.”

He placed a hand on her head. “I don’t know what’s happened to you, but don’t blame yourself. These people know how to hit pressure points to get what they want. And they know that your kind rarely has much support. If that plan hadn’t worked, they would have found another way.”

“Why are you being so nice to me when it’s my fault you are here?”

“I told you that I’m not here because of you. I’m here because of decisions I made.”

“You couldn’t have known what they told me to do, right?”

“No, I didn’t know what they were planning, but I knew they were after you. My only goal was to protect you, and I failed. I’m the one to blame for our current

predicament, not you.”

The compassion her former bully was showing her was more than any member of her family ever had. Fighting back the urge to sob, all she could think to say was, “I’m so sorry.”

He rocked her a little while she started crying. “It’s okay, Willow. It’s okay. There’s no reason for you to apologize. What I don’t understand is why money was enough to get you to agree? Your parents have more than enough to help you.”

Her voice was almost pleading as another tear rolled down her cheek and into his shirt. “Can’t we just go? I don’t want to talk about it.”

Nolan stepped away from her but held onto her upper arms. She could see his jaw tighten as he looked at her with concern. “Now that I know who you are, I am far more concerned about your history and why you are in such an awful position.”

Shaking his hands off her arms, she took a step away from him and scowled. “I really don’t think you should have any interest in me now. Thank you for forgiving me for what I did, but I’m not sure how to feel about you. You made school a living hell for me, but you seem like a different person now. And none of that is relevant right now while we are trapped in a maze-like facility full of people wanting to torture us.”

Nolan drew a hand down his face. “I understand. That’s entirely fair. But truly, I am sorry for the way I treated you. You didn’t deserve it.”

She felt the tears start to well up in her eyes again. “Can we please just figure out how to get out of here?”

“Yes, of course. But I really think that you need to sleep first. When I was healing your wrist, I could tell that you had nearly overexerted yourself. Your energy levels

are very low, and I'm afraid once we leave here, you won't be able to rest for a while."

"I just want to leave."

"I understand. Being trapped here with someone you loath can't feel good, but I need to make sure that you are stable before we leave."

"What – what do you mean by stable?"

"You haven't really had a chance to explore and test your powers, so you can do serious damage to others – and more importantly yourself – if you push too far. I told you that someone like you destroyed a facility. The only reason she survived was because there was another dragon shifter nearby to help stabilize her. She ... from what I was told, got so angry that she exploded nearly everything she touched. That could have eventually consumed her."

Willow couldn't help but give a feeble laugh. "I don't think that we have to worry about me exploding in anger."

"No. Given your abilities, I think that you are at risk of disappearing entirely."

She looked at him, not sure if she heard him right. "What do you mean?"

"It's just a guess, but because you can essentially disappear and phase through objects, I can see you pushing it to the point that you just disappear."

Her heart began to race. "You think that my power makes me disappear?"

"No. Not if you are careful about how you use it." He approached her and guided her to the bed. Carefully pushing her down, Nolan got her to sit down, then he sat beside

her. Watching her, he continued trying to explain. “The people who work in this kind of facility like to push people like you to their limits.”

What the doctor had said clicked in Willow’s mind. “They push us until we die.”

“Yes. That’s why you are in much more danger here than I am. That’s why it’s very important to let you rest and regain your energy. If we push to get you out of here in your current state, I’m afraid you won’t survive.”

Willow looked down at her hands. The memory of her broken wrist still seemed unreal because there was no sign of it now. “How am I supposed to rest? I can’t go back to the room where I was, and most of these rooms have a trigger that makes it relay information back to ... somewhere. I don’t know.”

“How do you know?”

“I can sense it on the floors. When I connect with an inanimate object, I can figure out what’s in it.”

“Just inanimate objects?”

She looked over at him, the weary expression still reflecting a bit of a smile. “I don’t really want to try to move through things that are still alive.”

“Some people would say that rocks.”

Willow reached up with her now fully healed wrist and pushed him. Nolan laughed, then beamed at her. “I get it. It’s pretty normal to be good at just one thing. I couldn’t heal rocks and stone so it makes sense that your abilities don’t translate to walking through people and trees. And even if you can, I understand you not wanting to risk it. That just goes to show that you are a good person.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“No. I’m being serious. A lot of people would use your gift to their advantage. Seriously, you could have walked into a bank or anywhere and just walked out with enough money to be okay. You didn’t. I’ve known people who would have experimented with living creatures to see if they could benefit from it. Your restraint is admirable.”

“I’m sure my parents – and a lot of other people – would point to it being a sign that I’m stupid or ...”

He placed a hand over hers. “That’s only because they aren’t good people. Their assessment of you is based on self-interest. I suppose it’s lucky you did end up with a rich family who saw your power as embarrassing.”

“I don’t see how that’s lucky. They really used it against me.”

“If they had been poor, they would have used you to steal. That would have not only gotten you a police record, it would have made you more obvious to people like this.” He moved a hand to indicate the people outside the room.

Willow looked up and noticed the window. She hopped up. “I can’t be here out in the open.”

Nolan grabbed her hand and pulled her back to the bed. “It’s fine. I’ve manipulated the window. If they look in, they’ll just see a bleeding prisoner on the bed.”

This stunned her. “You can create illusions, too?”

“They don’t last long. Just an hour or two.”

“Oh, just a temporary illusion, nothing big.” She flopped down on the bed. “This has been so exhausting.”

“I understand. That’s why I think you should lie down and get some sleep.”

Willow’s eyes went to the door. “I think I’m going to need an hour or two. And I doubt it would help either of us if they saw me on the bed.”

“All you have to do is get under the blanket, and they won’t be able to tell the difference.”

“Seriously?” She looked at him askance. “There is a significant difference between our sizes. Anyone with half a brain could tell that it wasn’t you.”

“There is one more thing we could try.”

“And what’s that?”

“I can sleep on the bed, too. It’s not big, but if we are both on our sides, they won’t be able to tell you are here, too.”

Willow wanted to argue, to say that was a terrible idea, but she was too tired to fight. “Do you promise not to do anything?”

He looked hurt. “I’m not going to try anything with you, Willow.”

She was startled by his choice of words. “Oh,” she sniffed a weak laugh. “Of course, you aren’t interested in me like that. Thanks for reminding me. No, I meant you aren’t going to try to prank me or something.”

“No. I’ve never been one to prank people. I’m not going to turn you over to the

people of the facility. I'm not going to do anything to harm you. While you are in my care, I will protect you and make sure that you get a chance to have the kind of life you deserve, not whatever hell you've been living."

"Do you promise?"

He smiled. "I promise that you will wake refreshed and ready to go. Now lie down."

Willow had no desire to argue. Even if she had wanted to, she didn't have the energy. "Okay."

She lied down and moved close to the wall, her face just a few inches away from it. Nolan lay down behind her, then pulled the cover over them both.

"Good night, Willow." He kissed the back of her head. "And just so you know, you've always been too good for me. I always knew you were out of my league."

She snorted, then mumbled, "You don't need to lie. I remember everything you ever said to me when we were young."

His voice sounded hurt as he replied, "You were always gorgeous, and that made you unapproachable. And I've spent years regretting the way I treated you."

When she opened her mouth to respond, he placed a hand on her head. "Sleep."

Whatever she was about to say slipped away as she drifted off into a dreamless slumber.

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Well, He Did Tell Me

This time, when she woke, Willow felt well-rested and comfortable. The warmth at her back was soothing, so she moved back a little into it. When she felt something firm, she tried to remember why she would have ended up in bed with someone. The soft smell of juniper reached her nose, and she let out a comforting mumble.

“You smell really good.”

“Hmm. Oh.” The bed vibrated a little as the man laughed. “Thank you, Willow. Are you ready?”

“Five more minutes.” She rolled over and pressed her face into a very firm chest. Poking it, she giggled. “That’s not pillow material.” It didn’t take long before she fell asleep to the man laughing again. The last thing she remembered was an arm moving around her back as she snuggled into the chest she had just criticized as not snuggly enough.

“Willow, we probably should think about getting ready to leave now.”

The quiet voice stirred her from her slumber, and Willow said, “Five more minutes.”

There was a low, rumbling chuckle. “You said that a couple of hours ago. As much as I would love to let you sleep, they are starting to stir out there. There’s no telling when they will enter. If nothing else, I’m sure they want to try to torture me to see if they can get me to break and give them money.”

The warmth disappeared, and the bed shifted a little. Willow opened her eyes and tried to clear the haze from them. That's when she registered the room, and the memories of what happened before she went to sleep hit her at the same time. She shot up in bed and started scrambling to stand up.

"Whoa, whoa. We need to get out of here but don't need to leave immediately. Let's come up with a plan."

"What if they come for you? I can't let them torture you again."

"It's okay. I can heal myself. Besides ..."

"No! I have to get you out of here. I have to!"

He placed a hand on her shoulder, and Willow immediately relaxed. "I'll be fine. I do not intend to leave you again until you are safe and ready to move on with your life. And no, you won't need to worry about money because I'll make sure you have what you need."

"I ... don't know how I feel about that."

"If it does anything to compensate for how I treated you, I'll take it."

She wanted to say that money won't fix anything, but Willow knew he was honestly trying to make amends. There was no reason to make him feel guiltier than he did. Unlike her parents, time had changed him, making him a better person.

"Okay. So, do you have a plan in mind?" She bit her lip, unsure if she should be asking or if that was her cue to dive into her plan.

"I haven't come up with anything specific, but I do know the layout of the place. The

triggers on the floor are something that my family hadn't considered necessary. Then again, we weren't planning on making a place to torture and kill people, so, of course, that wasn't a part of our design."

"What were you planning to do with such a large building?"

"It was supposed to be a building for government offices. I would wager that they removed all of the nicer rooms, like the courtyard at the center, which would have allowed for windows in all rooms."

"Ah. Wow. That does sound like it could be a nice workplace. Kind of like a donut, but as a big square building."

He smiled. "So not at all like a donut."

She laughed. "I can't think of anything else to compare it to. Most shapes don't cut out the center."

"Do you like donuts?"

Willow licked her lower lip. "You are making me hungry, so please forget I mentioned them."

"Ah, right. You probably need food, huh? That should probably be our first consideration."

"No. It's easier to phase through without food in my stomach."

His brows knit together. "Does the food disrupt the process?"

"Not really. I don't know how to explain it, but I think it has something to do with my

body digesting food and trying to fit through other stuff. I don't know, though. I haven't exactly had a chance to study it."

"That's fair. If you want a safe place to learn more, I can offer that to you wherever you go. It's best that you understand your powers to keep them under control."

"So, I don't accidentally kill myself. I know; I remember what you said."

"That's an extreme example. Most of the time, it's more a matter of not pushing yourself too far. It's kind of like avoiding burnout or physical exhaustion. Not all of you have physical abilities, which has been invaluable in helping find more of you."

"Do you mean like being able to talk to people through their minds?"

"Not exactly. One of the Sextons is married to a woman who can see different potential futures. That's how Elliot could track you down – she could see you and figure out where you were."

"So, she knew who I was?"

"I'm not sure how it works." He picked up a few items and slipped them into his coat pockets. "I've never met Alina since she prefers to stay on the Sexton's property."

"Is that like a prison?"

"No. It's a safe haven for people like you and her. And with her growing family of dragon shifters, I'm not surprised she prefers to keep them in one place. From my understanding of her abilities, she doesn't know names or many details. What she sees is just enough to determine where someone needs to be to get a specific result. However, Elliot says she must be careful because seeing the future gives her headaches."

Willow looked at him strangely. “Her ability gives her headaches? How long does that take to happen?”

“According to Elliot, just a few seconds is enough. If she goes for an hour or two, she’ll have a migraine for a day or two.”

“That sounds horrible!”

“That's why we listen when she gives us information. It’s always important, and we know what it costs her to get the details she has.”

“I think I prefer my ability.”

Nolan smiled. “Me, too, especially in this situation.” He looked toward the door, drawing her attention to it. Suddenly, she could feel the vibrations on the floor and knew that people were coming.

“We have to leave.”

Her companion looked at her. “How do you know they are coming here?”

“It’s just a feeling, but I don’t want to wait around to see if it is ...”

The movement stopped just outside the door. Reacting instinctually, Willow raised her hand and forced the door shut just as someone began to push it open. Then she threw her arms around Nolan and thought about sinking through the floor.

She didn’t hear anything as the world seemed to fall away. Holding on tightly to Nolan, she saw the floor approaching them quickly. To her surprise, Nolan knocked her arms away, then grabbed her and twisted her body so that she was on top of him a second later when they hit the ground. He grunted and let go of her.

“I was not expecting that.” He was a bit breathy.

Willow scrambled off of him and looked at the floor. “The trigger’s going off. We have to get out of here.”

She held up her hand, trying to blast the door off its hinges. Nothing happened.

“You can pull me through the floor with you. What about running through the walls?”

Shaking her head, Willow’s eyes were darting around the room. “I think it’s only within a certain ... space around me. I didn’t even know that I could bring you through with me. It was all just instinct.”

“That’s handy. If you want to experiment with me, I’m—”

The look of disbelief on her face shut him up. “You don’t seem to understand Nolan; we have to ...”

She heard the people just outside the door to this new room, and Nolan heard them, too, because he turned to look. Again, she threw her arms around him and dropped them through the floor. And he, again, held her and made sure she was cushioned when they hit.

“It’s really not my favorite way of getting out of here, especially since this is an underground facility.”

This was not what Willow wanted to hear. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“We didn’t have any time to plan. And now I don’t suppose we will. Come on.” He grabbed her hand and then ran toward the door. They crashed through it almost as if it

were made of cardboard. Stunned, Willow looked back at the door as Nolan dragged her around a corner and down another seemingly endless corridor.

“Why are there so many freaking corridors?”

His voice rushed past her as they seemed to be picking up speed. “It’s meant to be a large building that can house dozens of offices. Of course, it’s also supposed to be above ground, not some kind of illegal underground testing place.”

“How do you know we’re underground?”

“The pressure.”

Willow didn’t know what he meant, but they were moving so fast that she found it too hard to talk and run. Even with regular exercise, her body could not run at this speed for long. Given the hallway's size, it would take a while to get to the other end.

“Hold on.” Nolan released her hand, and she ran past him. Without warning, her feet lifted off the floor, and it felt like she was running at an impossible speed.

“I can’t feel if people are coming!” She shouted over the sound of air moving around them, not sure if he would even hear her.

As if they heard her, a group of staff members showed up at the other end of the corridor. When she realized they had guns, Willow didn’t stop to think what she was doing. As they stopped and started aiming, she wrapped her arms around Nolan’s neck and focused on extending her powers around him. The first shot rang out as they disappeared through the floor.

Expecting things to happen like they had the last couple of times, Willow was not expecting the change in how Nolan felt. The soft skin around his neck began to feel

leathery and coarse. Her body seemed to move from a position in his arms to more like a sitting side saddle. She looked down to see shiny black scales. Following that, her gaze trailed over to the sides where two impressive wings were folded against the rounded body.

“Holy ...” she nearly toppled off of him. Her hand grabbed hold of the base of the wing. This got a loud grunt, and Willow realized that she had just grabbed a joint and placed a lot of pressure on it. Releasing it, she tried to shift the position of her body so that she was in a more appropriate riding position. Laying her body against the smooth scales, she closed her eyes.

Any doubt about what he had told her was gone, replaced by the realization that Nolan could function as a dragon. It was impossible and strange, but at the same time, it made perfect sense.

Of course, he can be a powerful mythical creature. No wonder he acted so superior to everyone. Knowing what he is, it's impossible to argue with that assessment. Shockingly, he didn't absolutely level the high school, given how unhappy he was there.

The hallways had seemed so unnecessarily large before—now they felt too small because Nolan took up nearly the whole thing, and his wings were flush against his body. They quickly cleared the rest of the corridor, although she couldn't really watch the progress. He was moving too quickly for her to breathe if she were facing forward. When one of his shoulders lowered, Willow had to grip him tightly, as the action nearly threw her off his back.

Then he slammed into the corner of the hallway, shaking the entire structure. The wall crumbled under the force, and she was aware of debris moving around her as Nolan turned the corner. Gripping his back tightly, she could see his tail swinging behind them, its spike leaving huge gouges in the walls and ceiling.

As they tore down the next corridor, she heard a dinging sound, and she knew an elevator was nearby. Narrowing her eyes, she looked ahead of her as much as possible. The lights were clear, and she knew exactly where the people were going to appear. Nolan was moving too quickly, and they passed the elevator before it opened. Holding out a hand, she blasted the doors, denting them and making it all but impossible to get them to open again.

Still, he didn't slow.

Shouting, she asked, "Where are we going?"

There was no immediate response, but less than a minute later, she felt the sleek body begin to shift. The gorgeous black scales started to change colors, and her body began to move unpredictably.

Suddenly, she was holding Nolan's neck as tightly as she could.

"Air," he wheezed.

"Oh! I'm so sorry!" She let go, nearly toppling out of his arms as she tried to make sure she wasn't cutting off his oxygen.

He grunted but managed to keep a hold of her. Lifting her body a little, Nolan moved a shoulder low again, barreling through a door at the end of the corridor.

Impossibly quickly, he ran up a set of stairs. Willow didn't initially realize that he was on stairs because his movements were so smooth, more like gliding. Floor after floor flew passed as he raced up the stairs. The constant turning sensation made her feel ill, so she buried her head in his neck to try to keep from being affected by the feeling of going in an upward spiral.

To her surprise, Nolan slowed down and stopped. They were still a few floors from the top, but he carefully placed her on the floor.

“Here’s where I need to get you somewhere safe.”

“Where are we?”

“We have to get a few things before we can leave.”

“Oh!” Willow had all but forgotten about the fact that there could be other people hiding in the facility. “Right, we need to do a full-on jailbreak. How can I help?”

“They don’t have any other prisoners. Most of this place is wasted space. The people who run this company always get too far ahead of themselves, and this facility is mostly empty. And soon it won’t exist anymore.”

“I don’t want to kill anyone! Not even the doctor.”

He had a pained look, and it was apparent she had offended him. “I’m not going to kill them. Once we are out, I’m sending an anonymous tip to the Feds. They will shut this place down; then, my family will destroy it once it is cleared out.”

“Why?”

“For many reasons, but there is no good reason to leave a place like this standing. It’s nearly twenty floors underground and can only lead to disaster.”

“How can you possibly know that?”

“Alina said. And she has never been wrong in the years I’ve worked with the Sextons.”

“Oh.” Willow bit her lip. “You talk about her a lot. Are you ...” She wasn’t sure she should finish that sentence.

“Am I ... what?”

“Never mind.” Willow shook her head.

Nolan wasn’t about to let it go that easily. “Were you about to ask if I’m in love with her?”

Willow flushed. She had no idea why that question popped into her mind, but she knew she had no good reason to ask it. “It’s not important. We have something important we need to do, and standing here talking about your love life will hardly help us.”

He smiled and shook his head. “At this point, I’m going to find a safe room for you to stay because I don’t know how long this will take. I’ll bring you some food so you don’t go hungry.”

“Can’t I just eat when we get out of here?”

“I don’t know how long that will take. It could be days.”

“What? You never said anything about staying here!”

Before he could respond, the door swung open, nearly knocking her over the railing. Nolan grabbed her as several people grabbed him. He pulled her to him as the goons began to beat him.

Willow tried slipping through the stairs, but her abilities didn’t work. Looking down, she realized that the material was probably the same as what her parents used to keep

her trapped.

How could they possibly have known?

Nolan whispered in her ear, “Run. Get somewhere safe. I swear I’ll find you again.”

She could feel how brutally they were hitting him as his body shook and jolted against her. “I can’t leave you.”

“I’ll be fine. You won’t. Please, trust me.”

She looked up into his eyes. The impossibly blue color shook slightly, and she realized this was as close to pleading as he could manage. “I won’t leave you.”

Willow had no idea why, but she kissed his cheek as he let go of her. As she turned and ran through the wall, she felt horrible.

She was doing exactly what she had promised she wouldn’t do – she was leaving him behind to suffer. Tears stung her eyes as she thought of the way he looked at her, and she imagined him turning back into the dragon.

I will find a safe room and wait for him to contact me. Then, we will continue to take down these horrible people.

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So Close

After running through a few rooms, Willow slowed, the memory of slamming into a metal cabinet and setting off alarms still fresh in her mind. Once she slowed down and started paying attention, she got a completely different feeling from this new floor. It was much more like a typical office, although there were no windows, and there was a distinctly oppressive feel to the place.

Perhaps that's what he meant by the pressure. I didn't notice it, but given that he's not human, maybe he's more sensitive to changes in pressure.

As she thought that Willow noticed that there was some built up pressure in her ears. She swallowed a few times to pop them, wondering if Nolan had been so fast moving up the stairs that it had the same effect as taking off in a plane. It added another layer to the man that made her want to run back to help him. Just as she could have left him to try to escape on her own, he could have left her behind and gotten out on his own. Instead, his reaction was to literally shift and carry her to a point where they were close to escaping.

Then he decided to stop. What was it that he wanted to do before getting out of here? Is it worth it? And how does he know that there isn't anyone else here? He seems to know so much about this place, and I don't really understand how or why they have so much information and haven't stopped it. They've already killed people, so why did they let that happen?

Her thoughts were on Nolan, and she wasn't sure exactly how to feel about him. With all of her attention torn between trying to figure him out and worrying about him,

Willow wasn't taking the necessary precautions or noticing the signs around her. Her misplaced comfort with simply walking through the place became a problem when she strolled through a wall and into a room where two people were sitting typing on their computers. They looked up at her as Willow stood frozen in place. This had happened before, back at her parents' house, when she had first learned that she could walk through walls. She had replayed that moment in her mind after they started reprimanding her, wondering how she could have done things differently.

Instinctively, she tried to phase through the floor, hoping they would think that they were seeing things. Just like on the stairs though, it didn't work.

When that solution didn't work, she went with one of the things she had considered – and this time she had the benefit of being unknown to the people who saw her. Willow held out her arms, as she started to slowly walk backward.

Her voice was as raspy as she could make it as she moaned, “May you be doomed for what you do. Dooooomed.”

She watched the color drain from the people's faces until she disappeared through the wall, back into the empty room next to it.

Unfortunately, the door opened just as she dropped her arms. Turning, she ran perpendicular to the room she had just left. This was not a problem she had anticipated because Willow had gotten so accustomed to just passing through rooms that it hadn't even occurred to her that there were floors that were occupied. Now that she was aware of the problem, Willow was a lot more cautious about entering rooms. Fortunately, the next room was empty, and no one was moving around outside of it. She began phasing her face through and looking to make sure rooms were empty before she entered. When she bumped into a computer, nearly knocking it over, the young woman realized that she could be doing a lot more than just aimlessly wandering.

She entered the room and moved over to one of the unlocked computers. Her attention went to the door, and she frowned. The floor was made of material that blocked her abilities, something she wanted to consider when she felt safer.

Not wanting to be interrupted, Willow looked to see if she could lock or barricade the door. When she didn't see a lock, and there wasn't anything that could be easily moved, she decided to check out what she could on the computer. Pushing the chair out of the way, she began clicking through all of the open files and tabs. When she saw something that looked important, Willow looked around for a printer and then sent the documents to it. Unfortunately, the printer in the room was not the one where the information went. Looking around, she saw a thumb drive in the other computer in the room.

Not knowing how much time she had left, she saved everything that would fit to it, then ejected it. After that, she scoured the room for more thumb drives. She filled each of them, then shoved them into her pockets.

I wonder if my coat is around here.

This did give her something to do, but she didn't want to go roaming the floor just for a coat. She had managed to go through several rooms and hadn't been able to track her own progress because there were people in over half of the rooms. Her eyes drifted down to the clock, and that's when it clicked.

Lunchtime. That means that my time moving through rooms is probably limited. I have to find somewhere to hide until I hear from Nolan. I don't want him to have to come find me, and I definitely don't want them sticking me on a different floor.

Those thoughts quickly turned to concern since she hadn't heard from him in a while. Moving strategically through the rooms, Willow walked into what looked like a locker room. There were a lot of duffel bags in the lockers, and she got an idea.

Pulling out a few of the bags, she found a new outfit and some shoes. Since she couldn't connect to the flooring, she didn't need to be barefoot. With a new outfit, including a pair of non-prescription glasses, she looked a lot different. Next, she pulled her hair back into a bun, showing off a small line of four moles on her jaw near her ear. Not sure if that would give her away – they may have noted it when she was unconscious – she tried to cover it with some foundation. It wasn't perfect, but it was enough to mostly obscure the moles.

She was about to put the glasses back on when the door opened. Not wanting to be seen, Willow hid her face by leaning over and splashing water on her face. Once the person disappeared around a row of lockers without acknowledging her, the young woman felt free to leave. For the first time, she walked into the hallway without looking around suspiciously. In her head, she couldn't help but feel like she was playing a part in a TV movie or something. If she weren't so worried about Nolan, it would have been comical. Clutching what cash she had found in the bags, she looked for the cafeteria. The smell alone let her know that she was close to it.

She managed to blend in fairly well once she found it because the people in the room weren't talking much. This suggested that they didn't really bond with their coworkers, something that she hoped would benefit her. It seemed less likely that anyone would stop to talk to her, meaning that she wasn't likely to get questioned or called out while getting food. She looked over the options and chose a sandwich that was wrapped up along with a small plate of fries. Chips would have been easier but too noisy if she wanted to find somewhere to hide.

Instead of sitting with a group, she headed out of the cafeteria and back into the hallway. There weren't many people walking along the halls, helping her to feel a bit less vulnerable. It was a bit harder to find a room, though, since the doors were all closed. She looked for signs that rooms were occupied and was at least able to see nameplates near the doors. That didn't mean that people were in the rooms, but she wasn't going to wait in a room where someone might eventually enter.

By the time she found a hallway with no nameplates, Willow was no longer sure where she was. She walked through one of the walls into a room without a sign and was relieved to see that it was an empty office. There were no computers, just a couple of desks that seemed to be waiting for employees to be hired.

Taking a seat on one of the chairs, she quickly consumed the food she had bought. She didn't much care if the trash wasn't picked up, but Willow decided not to throw anything away in case they could use it to collect her DNA. Wading it up, she placed it on the desk in front of her, then considered her current situation.

She had kept her thoughts occupied for as long as possible – now that she had nothing else to do, Willow was really worried about Nolan. There hadn't been a sound from him, and that was unsettling.

Perhaps my meandering has put me out of range for his ability.

It was the only thing she wanted to consider since the alternatives were much worse.

Hoping that he was just waiting for her to try to contact him, Willow spoke softly, "Nolan, can you hear me?"

There was no response.

"Nolan?"

The silence was entirely unsettling. As much as she wanted to find him, Willow was well aware that there was nothing she could do to help him. She stood up, thinking she might be able to get some information by striking up a conversation with someone. Then she remembered what she had in her pocket.

If I can get to a computer, I might be able to do something useful. Running around

looking for Nolan would be foolish, but I might be able to find out where he is and plan another escape.

While she wasn't an expert in tech, Willow never had a problem finding things, whether they were people or digital images.

She figured it was best to seem to be normal, so the young woman left the room, the trash held tightly in her hand. Every so often, she looked at a map to find her way back to the cafeteria to throw it away and maybe learn a bit more about the facility. Lunch was long over when she finally got back to the room, but there were still a few latecomers, and she decided to approach a couple of them.

"Excuse me." Her voice was so low they almost didn't hear her.

The initial confusion soon cleared up when they turned around and saw her.

"Oh, hello," one of the men said. Wisps of hair were brushed across his balding head, and she thought he must be in his forties or fifties.

The other man looked like a tech bro.

Bingo, she thought.

"Hello there," he said, a smarmy grin spreading across his face. "You must be new."

She forced a smile and looked down. "Guilty." This got a laugh before she said, "I'm afraid I'm a little turned around and can't find my way back to my office."

The tech bro hopped up. "I can help you get back. See you tomorrow, Chuck." He didn't look back, and Willow heard the man muttering behind them as they left. The guy walked in front of her and talked over his shoulder. "What's your name?"

“Um, Sam. Well, Samantha.”

“Ah, you're one of those women who wants to be modern, huh? You're too pretty to use a man's name. Stick with Samantha, babe. You'll be much better off for it.”

There wasn't much to say, so she replied, “Okay.”

Then he launched into a long spiel about something that she didn't understand until they reached the IT section.

“Oops,” the man chuckled. “Looks like I brought you back to my place. Why don't you come in and I'll show you around.”

“You don't have to share an office?”

“Not someone as important as me. Come on and I'll show where the real power of Apex Inc. rests.”

For the next couple of hours, Willow was able to mostly sit back and let the man tell her a lot about the systems, including security. She asked about a row of laptops, and he told her how he had set them all up on his own, getting ready for a large group of new hires for some project. As he rambled on about other areas, Willow kept him talking about things near the laptops, and while he was busy pointing things out and enjoying his own voice, she slid one of the laptops into a company bag. She lifted it and kept the bag tucked behind her and out of sight as he continued to show her around the large IT area. Since he droned on and on for hours, there was no chance that she would be able to remember everything. She took mental notes on the things she knew would be important. It was clear when he was done because the guy got far too close to her and started trying to touch her.

Her eyes caught the time on one of the computer screens, and she let out a gasp. “I'm

so sorry, but I have to get going! I have a meeting that started a few minutes ago!”

“Here, I’ll walk you back, and then maybe you can give me your number, and I can get your thoughts on this place.”

“Thanks, but I really need to get right to the meeting room, so I’ll probably have to run.” She opened the door, and when it looked like he was going to follow, she said, “I really appreciate the help and I would hate to take up any more of your time. I know where I am now, so I might be able to make it. See you tomorrow.” She held the bag in front of her so that he wouldn’t notice that she had managed to swipe it.

She hurried out the door. As soon as she was in the hall, Willow began running, then took the first corner she encountered as the man called after her. It was funny, but he hadn’t bothered to learn anything about her beyond her first name, not even the fake job. He had been perfect.

It was just after 4 o’clock, and she hoped that people had already left for the day so that she could hole up in an office for a bit. The IT guy had told her all about the security guards and systems on the floor, and it was a lot easier to get around than the floor below her.

When she found an empty office with the computers turned off, Willow ducked into it and started trying to reach Nolan.

“Nolan, what’s going on?”

There was a faint reply, and it sounded like he was mumbling.

“Are you okay?”

The words seemed largely incoherent, but eventually one word was clear.

“Leave.”

Then the link seemed to disappear.

“No, no, no. I’m not just going to leave you here. You didn’t leave me, so I’m not going to leave you.”

Knowing that she wasn’t going to be able to use her powers, Willow took a deep breath and steeled herself to return to the lower levels.

Willow’s outfit looked like normal office wear, but it wasn’t going to work once she got to the lower levels. Sitting down at one of the computers, she used a backdoor entrance to the computer. It was hardly a serious hack since she had learned to use it when she was still a child, and her parents denied her access to computers to finish her reports. The fact that it still worked was disconcerting on a larger scale, but for what she needed, it was perfect.

The problem was that she didn’t know the software at all, so finding anything was difficult. She also noted that what was available on this computer was different from the other two that she had used.

It’s got to be about departments and access. I have no idea how to wade through all of this, and there’s probably a good chance that this person doesn’t have access to what I need anyway. I almost wish I could go back to the IT guy.

She stopped typing and then shook her head.

I’m not desperate, and I’m sure I’ll think of something.

Unable to find anything of value, she decided to download whatever she could. Sure enough, there were thumb drives in this new office as well. As strange as it was,

Willow didn't dwell on it too long. She had no idea what would be useful, so she filled up as many as she could. When the drive was full, she ejected it and shoved it into the laptop bag. She also added the drives that were in her pockets, and by the time Willow finished filling all of the drives she could find, the pockets of the bag were bulging.

There was nothing left for her to do but to find Nolan and try to get out of the facility. She didn't have much of a plan, but she knew that he was back on a floor that was not open to all staff. That meant her only option for her next task was to return to the lower levels.

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Not Without You

After spending more than an hour poking around the computer for any information she might be able to use, she at least found a map of the current floor. Willow committed it to memory while waiting for most of the staff to head home. When she felt it was time to move, she slung the bag with all of the gadgets into a position next to her leg. Afraid that someone might stop her from walking around with company property, she stole the long coat off of the hooks on the back of the door and hid the bag as much as possible between the coat and her upper legs. With that, she opened the door and walked confidently back to the locker room for a change of clothing. It was a long shot, but she hoped to find a lab coat or something that would make her look like she belonged on the lower floors. To her surprise, the locker room still had a number of people in it, and some of them were not happy.

“Someone stole my ...”

Willow froze as the door stood open in front of her. Turning on her heel, she walked down the hall, speeding up in case anyone noticed she was there. One look at her, and people would certainly recognize their clothing and accessories.

Worried that she might be exposed, Willow went to the staircase – the elevators did not go down to the floors she needed. It was annoying that she couldn’t just sink through the floor, but the young woman knew that she needed to move, not gripe.

As soon as she opened the door to the staircase, a pair of men turned to look at her.

“Oh! I’m so sorry,” she said with a smile. I must have gotten turned around. I’m

looking for the ladies' bathroom.”

One of the men explained the path back. She thanked him, then turned around and acted like she was following his advice.

It looks like I can't take the stairs on this floor. There has to be some way for people to get to the lower floors from here without the stairs, though.

The only solution she had was to take the elevator down two more floors and see if she could slip through them.

Once in the elevator, she had a new problem. It required a badge to get down, and the one she had didn't work to go to the lower floors. Cursing, she was about to leave when a large man called from down the hall, “Please hold it!”

Hitting the button, she moved to the side. When the man entered, she recognized him as one of the men who had ended up fighting in the hallway. Her heart rate sped up as he hit one of the buttons, and she pulled the coat closer around her. The man looked at her, “You'll just have to wait to go home, little girl. I've got important work to do.”

“Oh, I don't ...”

He turned his back mostly to her. “Save it. I don't care about your problems.”

Fortunately, the ride was short, just two floors. He stalked out of the elevator and hurried down the corridor. Stepping out, she watched him disappear.

Then she sank through the floor. Her legs buckled when she hit the next floor, and if anyone had been watching, they would have noticed her. It was another bit of luck that she had appeared in an empty corridor. The wall behind her was solid, so she thought the elevator to the lower levels was further along the floor above her.

Doesn't matter, Willow.

She stood up and walked into a room nearby. It was empty, giving her a moment of calm.

“Okay, Nolan, now I'm trapped down here, too. Tell me where you are so we can get out of here together.”

The voice was weak as it replied, “Why didn't you just leave? I'm not in any state to protect you.”

“I'm not worried about me, Nolan. Now where are you?”

“They took me to the sixth floor, thinking you were still on the floor where we used to be. They are hoping to keep us separated.”

“Oh, that's ... do you know where on the sixth floor?”

When he didn't immediately respond, she thought he might not know. “Near the middle. But it's a trap.”

“How far from the upper-level elevators are you?”

“There are about twenty-five rooms, dead center. But you can't come here because they will catch you.”

Feeling confident, Willow began to jog through the rooms, and it didn't take long until she reached a supply closet with a lot of uniforms. She found one that made her look like a member of the medical staff, and then she changed her outfit. Not wanting to lose the thumb drives, she tucked them into her slightly too-large boots.

There was nothing else to do but find Nolan. She left the room and walked toward the middle of the facility, thankful that the corridors were long instead of winding. It didn't take long to get to the center. She phased through the wall and into the center room. Getting down on her hands and knees, she pressed her face through the floor and looked into the room.

Nolan was on the middle bed, his eyes closed. No one else was present.

"Nolan," she whispered.

"You aren't going to be able to wake me, Willow. They injected something into me so that I can't leave. Well, not for a bit. I have to work the toxins out of my system first, which will take a while."

"But ... how are you talking to me?"

"My brain is fully functional, just not my body."

Willow closed her eyes momentarily and wondered how she would get him out of there. He was too heavy to carry, and she didn't know where the elevator was to return to the higher levels.

He's on a gurney; just push him out of here.

It was a long shot, but the only thing that came to mind.

"Hey Nolan, do you know where the elevator back to the first staff floor is?"

"I don't like what you are thinking."

"Well, I don't like seeing you lying almost lifeless on the table. It's ..." she stopped

as she sensed something different about the room. “What did they inject you with?”

“I’m not sure. It’s not something I’ve encountered before.”

“Do people usually inject you with unknown toxins?”

This got a chuckle, which was at odds with how he looked on the table, his skin shiny and pale. “My parents wanted to make sure we were always safe since we have a lot of money and are somewhat well-known within a few industries.”

“That’s putting it mildly.”

There was humor in his voice when he replied, “It was just a normal experience for me. My parents exposed the three of us to a lot of substances to help build our immunity, and it has been beneficial. But this is something new.”

“I have to ask your parents if they think exposing children to dangerous substances is a good idea.”

“And I question parents who abandon their children.”

“I disappointed them too many times.”

“I wasn’t talking about the Addlers, although they are just as bad.”

Willow looked away, her heart hurting at the thought that two sets of parents gave up on her.

Nolan’s words were gentle as he told her, “It’s not your fault, Willow. Given your extraordinary abilities, I can imagine humans were too scared to deal with it. Until a few years ago, we didn’t realize how horribly your kind were treated.”

He continued talking, but Willow was no longer listening. Something about the situation was bothering her. Standing up, she let herself slowly sink through the floor, the computer bag making the passage a little more difficult at the slower speed. When she reached the floor, Willow kept herself as light as air so the alarms didn't go off. She placed her hands on his body and closed her eyes.

By that point, Nolan had stopped talking, but as soon as she touched him, he asked, "What are you doing?"

"Those bastards," she muttered, pulling her hands away from his chest. "Those horrible, miserable oxygen thieves are trying to kill you."

"What happened? What did you do?"

Willow pinched her nose and drew her hand over her mouth. "Well, I can fix this, but you'll have to move fast," she said.

"What are you talking about? I told you I can't move."

"I have a computer and a bunch of drives in this bag," she said, placing it on the bed next to his motionless body. Hopefully, that's all you need from the floor where we stopped because you will need to get me back to my apartment."

"You stole a computer?"

"Please listen, this is important. Place me on my bed or the floor near it, then look for the little compartment in the baseboard. There's a small, um, locket-looking thing. I need you to remove that and place it on my body."

"Why? What will that do?"

“Hopefully, it will work.”

Nolan’s tone was getting more concerned. “I don’t like what you are planning, Willow.”

“Oh, believe me, I’m not a fan, but unless you can somehow get rid of heavy metals, I don’t think there is much choice.”

“Heavy metals!” The alarm was evident in his voice. “Injecting those kinds of ... that’s lethal, even to shifters! What kind of heavy metals?”

“I’m not sure, and I can’t tell because it’s a mixture. Where were you taught how to expel that?”

“No, because people who want to take kids for ransom generally aren’t trying to kill them. At least not when they come after families like mine.”

“I kind of figured.” She looked around for a pen or marker. There were a couple near some files, so she shoved the files in the bag and picked up one of the pens. Willow then wrote her address on his hand. He tried to get her attention during all of it, but she wouldn’t be dissuaded from what she had decided to do.

“Willow, talk to me. What are you planning on doing?”

“There. You have my address. Get me there as quickly as you can. I think you have a few hours, but no more than five. Hopefully, that’s enough time because I don’t even know if we are close to the city.”

“I’m going to get us out of here. Just ... wait for me to work this stuff out.”

“You’ve already said you don’t have training for it, and by the time you do, it could

have done serious damage. And I know that I can handle it a lot better.”

“What do you mean you can handle it better?”

“Remember Nolan. Look for the locket in the baseboard near my bed. Put it on my chest, over my heart. I doubt that you’ll be able to reach me once it hits my system.”

“Once what hits your system?”

“The heavy metals.” Without saying anything else, she pressed his lips open a little. She leaned over and placed her mouth on his. When their lips touched, Willow began drawing the metals out of his body and into her own. It was slow at first, but after the first fifteen seconds, the metals flowed easily into her body. She tried to direct it close to her heart as much as possible. Her head began to feel fuzzy, and her breathing labored, but the young woman felt the last of it leaving his body and flowing into her own. Once she was done, Willow flopped down on Nolan’s chest, her mind and body struggling to keep the metals within a small place near her heart.

The Light of Day

The world moved around her, but she couldn't open her eyes to process it. Then, some people talked animatedly near her, but Willow knew she couldn't listen to them. All of her attention was on the one task because she trusted Nolan to get her back to her home. Her job was to hold it for as long as she could.

When she felt something touch her chest, Willow knew she could finally relax. Physically and mentally exhausted, she couldn't even open her eyes.

Willow managed to murmur, "Thank you."

The feel of something soft on her forehead was accompanied by words she couldn't quite make out. The low voices of people talking were some of the last things she heard as a pair of hands tucked her. Now that she didn't have to focus on containing metal in her body, Willow was too tired to do anything besides sleep. However, for the first time in a long time, she fell asleep feeling safe and that things would get better.

When she woke, she couldn't remember ever feeling so well rested. She sat up and immediately noticed that she was still dressed in someone else's clothing. This got her moving quickly, and she sprang out of bed and pulled off her shirt, knocking into her dresser. Seconds later, the door opened. "What's wrong?"

Nolan stopped when he saw her standing on one leg, jumping up and down, her shirt hanging off her arm. They stared at each other for a second, and then Willow saw his face flush as he turned and shut the door. He kept apologizing, even after the door

was closed.

Feeling incredibly embarrassed, she put the shirt back on and grabbed some clothing, not bothering to pay attention to what she held. She limped over to the door as quickly as she could. Peeking out, she ensured no one was paying attention so she could go to the bathroom. To her horror, three people sat in her studio apartment's living room. She only knew one of them. Nolan looked like he wanted to say something, but his face was still pink.

Standing up as straight as she could, Willow strode to the bathroom, hoping the limp wasn't entirely noticeable.

Just before she disappeared through the doorway, Nolan asked, "Is everything okay?"

She looked in his direction but found it impossible to look directly at him. "Um, yeah, I just want to get cleaned up."

"I heard a loud thump."

"Just stubbed my toe. We can talk after I get cleaned up."

She didn't wait for an answer as she hurried into the bathroom and shut the door. Usually, she kept her showers short, partly to save money, but Willow wasn't in a hurry to see Nolan or talk about what had just happened. There were going to be questions – a lot of questions – but she didn't have the answers. Everything she did came naturally, usually instinctively. Trying to explain that to Nolan and a couple of strangers seemed like a nightmare.

What if he reverts to his old self—the one who has no qualms about belittling you and making you cry?

The more she thought about it, the more uncomfortable she felt with the situation. Now, he had a lot more information to use against her. The longer she took, the less Willow wanted to leave the bathroom.

She had just finished wrapping her hair up in a towel to dry when a knock at the door startled her.

“Willow, are you okay?”

“Fine.” Her voice betrayed her, though, because it cracked. Clearing her throat, Willow tried to recover. “I’m just, you know, happy to be home. Trying to enjoy it.”

“I understand. What’s your favorite food?”

She turned her head and looked at the door in confusion. “Um, I ...” Willow’s voice trailed off, and she was unsure how to finish answering that question. “I don’t have a favorite.”

“Okay, well, is there anything you don’t like then?”

“Meat.”

“You’re a vegetarian?”

She pinched her eyes as she remembered him making fun of her back in high school after one of the people in her class asked her about it. “Yes, I’m still a vegetarian, Nolan. It was never just a phase.”

“Oh, right ...” his voice trailed off. “I’ll take care of it.”

He wasn’t interested in sticking around because his shadow disappeared from under

the door. Willow took her time finishing drying off and getting dressed. Her mind started to look for ways out of the current situation. The relief and security she felt when she fell asleep were gone, and the paranoia and apprehension returned.

At one point, she heard the front door open and close, something she hadn't experienced since Willow had never had company in her new apartment. Still, she could identify the sound and figured Nolan had ordered food.

If he did, he and the men should be preoccupied with food. That gives me a chance to slip away. I've got the cash I need, and they should have everything they need to take care of the facility. Perhaps this is my turning point, and they'll keep the ... whoever is running that place preoccupied so they won't look for me. This is my chance just to slip away and start fresh somewhere else. And he doesn't know that I changed my name. To Nolan, I'm still Willow Addler. What am I even thinking? He's not going to care about hunting me down. He's got other things to do.

Walking through the wall back to her room, Willow crept. She got on the floor, opened the baseboard's loose part, and reached into it. Pulling out everything in the tiny space, relief flooded through her as she saw that the money and almost everything else were still there. The only thing missing was the little vial on a necklace.

Willow shoved the cash in her pockets and the rest of the items into a small bag. Then she looked around the room for the vial.

I don't want to leave without that. What if I need it again?

She could leave the room and ask about it, but then she would have to answer a lot of questions.

No, I don't need it that badly. They can probably use it better since it's meant for

people like me. If they are working with a lot of them and that can help other women, that's worth leaving it behind.

Willow looked toward the hallway, wishing that things could have been different. Nolan seemed like a decent guy when things were bad.

Leave, Willow. Just leave. There's a better future out there, and holding onto the past has never done me any good.

She adjusted the bag on her shoulder as she set her resolve.

She grabbed a pair of sneakers out of her closet and slipped them on. Then she walked through the wall from her room into the hallway outside her apartment.

"Running away isn't going to fix anything. Believe me, I've tried."

The calm voice startled her, and Willow touched her chest. "You scared me," she said.

She turned, thinking that a neighbor might have seen her but not thinking that none of them would have any idea what she was doing. Or the fact that they would probably be freaking out if they saw her walking through the wall.

The man standing leaning against the wall was slightly taller than her. His curly blond hair framed a cherubic face that did not fit the intense green eyes looking at her.

"I've been told – often and with great relish – that I have that effect on people." He pushed off the wall. "I won't stop you from leaving if that's what you want. In fact," he put his hand in his coat pocket and pulled something out, "I'll even return this to you, mostly because I can't believe you would so willingly part with it. Perhaps you

don't know its worth."

He held the vial by its chain.

"My memento!" Willow took a couple of steps and held out her hand. "Thank you! If you guys were helping people like me, it was best left in your hands. But if you are willing to return it, that is one of the few things I still have from my biological family."

"Did you know them?" He dropped the trinket into her hand, but his eyes did not leave hers.

"No." She pulled her hand back to her chest. "I didn't. I only have the word of my adoptive family – well, former family is probably a better way to describe them – they said that it came with me."

"You don't know what it is?"

She shrugged, "It's what I need it to be during extreme emergencies. It's saved my life on a few occasions, but that's all I know."

He nodded. "That's a very basic understanding of it, sure."

She tilted her head to the side. "Do you know what it is?"

"Yes." He walked past her and back to the door of her apartment. Then the man had his hand on the door as he looked at her again, "Well, are you coming or going?"

Willow looked down the hall, but she couldn't just run away. She turned to the stranger again, "When I was a teenager, Nolan used to bully me. He's almost the last person I would expect to help me."

The man nodded. “Indeed. He was quite horrible when he was younger.”

“Did you know him?”

“Of course. There’s a connection between all of our families, so even if we don’t have much interaction with each other, we at least know of the others.”

“So, you only know his reputation then? And he wasn’t particularly liked within your social circle?”

“His reputation?” The man’s lips quivered as he reached up and pushed his glasses up his nose. “I’ve known him personally for several decades, and he bullied me, too.”

Willow looked at him with sympathy. “He was quite awful. How do you deal with it?”

“I have a lot of older brothers, so I didn’t notice.” He opened the door. “So, are you coming back inside?”

Without pausing, she nodded. “Yeah, I’ll come back inside. I’m Willow Forte. In case Nolan hasn’t told you.”

“He did. Come on.” The man walked back into the apartment without introducing himself.

“Well, okay,” Willow said, unsure what to make of that exchange.

She went through the open door and heard Nolan talking. “What did Alina say?”

The stranger just pointed behind himself and continued walking toward Willow’s kitchen. Nolan looked, and the surprise on his face was evident. “What happened?”

Did they find you?"

He moved over to her before she had even closed the door. Nolan placed a hand on her shoulder, then looked up and down the hall. After closing and locking the door, he seemed to fuss over her, ushering her back into her own place. "Is everything okay?"

"Fine. Yes. Sorry. Just, had a ... I felt a little ..."

The stranger stood in her kitchen, his curly hair hiding part of his face as he said, "She was running away, Nolan. You can't expect her to get over years of cruelty so quickly. She doesn't know your history like I do."

Nolan frowned at the man, but the third man spoke as he rose from her couch. He was tall and well-built, but the man moved with a grace that was more like gliding. His hair was dark and wavy, but unlike Nolan's, which seemed to shine, this man's hair was more like a shadow. He also had green eyes, but they were a much calmer green than the cherubic-looking man's, and he smiled easily.

"Hi, Willow." He approached her and held out his hand. "I'm Levi, and I will be the voice of reason among egos today."

Both Nolan and the stranger said, "Cats." The stranger then sniffed, his eyes still looking at something, and Willow thought it was probably a cell phone. "I think you just made it clear you have the biggest ego here."

"Cat?" Willow looked around. The stranger pointed at Levi but didn't say anything.

Nolan leaned over and said in a mock whisper, "He's a cat shifter."

"What?" Willow looked at him, thinking he was making fun of her again.

But Levi sighed melodramatically. “I offer to help, and this is how they treat me. I can see why you were ready to walk, Willow. But Nolan has whipped up quite a nice meal, so you should at least try that before you decide if you want to leave us all behind.”

Nolan looked down and scratched the side of his face. “I packed it up so we can go outside. After the last week or so, I figured it would be good to get some fresh air.”

“What do you mean a week?”

The stranger rotated something in his hands as he replied, “Nine days, actually. You were in the facility for nine days.”

“How is that possible? I thought it was just a couple.”

Nolan placed his hand on her shoulder. “We can talk about this at a park or something.”

“Aren’t you being a bit cavalier? It seems like you guys have managed to keep things quiet since people don’t know about ... um, shifters?” She was more asking than stating that part. Then Nolan nodded reassuringly. Willow frowned. “Then shouldn’t we stay inside so people don’t hear what we discuss?”

“People don’t pay attention to us too much,” the stranger said.

“Yes, thank you, Elliott. I’ll explain it to her.”

Willow looked at the blond-haired man, who just shrugged, his interest clearly more focused on whatever he was doing than the conversation. Nolan got her attention again. “Do you want to stay inside?”

“No, but ... it would be nice to get some answers.”

“Do you guys mind staying here for now?”

As if on cue, there was a buzzing from Levi’s pocket. His face looked stunning as a wide grin spread across his face. “That’s got to be Sybil. Hopefully, she’s almost got her old pack fixed up because I’m ready to start our family.”

Finally, Elliott looked up, “Is that why you are here? Because she’s taking care of her old pack?”

Levi beamed. “You guys needed help; I was bored, so.” With that, he turned and pulled the phone out of his pocket. He strode into Willow’s room and closed the door.

Elliott sighed, then returned to messing with something metallic. He held it at an angle so she could tell it wasn’t a phone. Before she could ask about it, though, he said, “Make sure you tell her about being the bait. Otherwise, we’ll have to go in and drag him out.”

“What?” Willow turned and looked at Nolan, a look of shock and worry on her face. “I’m supposed to be the bait for what exactly?” In her mind, she was starting to feel like the unassuming man in her kitchen had just played her all too well.

“Thank you, Elliott. It will be so much easier to talk to her about it now. Your inability to use tact or read the room remains unrivaled.”

Elliott looked up at him, then walked toward them, making Willow worry about his intentions. Then, the man just strode past them and out the door.

Confused by the whole situation, Willow asked. “Where are you going?”

“Away. I’ve seen this setup enough times, and I’ve no interest in being around to watch it again.”

“What setup?” Nolan asked, but Elliott simply left the apartment, closing the door behind him.

“You don’t know what he meant either?” Willow asked, looking up at Nolan with a half grin.

“He’s hard to understand on his best days. Something’s clearly under his skin, but I’m not exactly someone he opens up to.”

“He said you bullied him, too.”

Nolan looked down at her, his expression pained. “I’m sorry, Willow. I want you to know that if I could go back and treat you well, I would. You didn’t deserve all of the pain.”

“If it makes you feel better, my parents were worse.” She tried to lighten the mood, but her words did not hit the mark. “It’s fine. Really. It’s in the past, and we can just leave it there. A fresh start because you’ve proved you aren’t the man you were back then.”

He leaned forward and kissed her forehead. “Thank you. Come on. I’ve got a picnic and a lot to discuss.”

Less than five minutes later, they were outside, snowflakes drifting lazily past them. Willow laughed, and Nolan looked at her quizzically. “No one else is going to be out here picnicking, so I guess there isn’t anything to worry about.”

He offered his arm. “Shall we go make some good memories?”

Willow put her arm through his, a grin on her face. “That sounds good to me. Although, I will say that the whole part of me being bait has me wondering how sincere your intentions are.”

Squeezing her hand, Nolan said, “Don’t worry. I’m not going to let any harm come to you. You have my word that you will be just fine when all is done and dusted.”

“What about you?”

Nolan smiled down at her. “I’m hoping it has a happy ending for me, too. But I will leave that up to you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ll see. Now, if you don’t mind, I have some questions about what happened back at the facility.”

“I ... I’m not sure how much I can answer.”

“You give yourself too little credit. The toxins were in me, and I still couldn’t detect what they were.”

“Like you said, you weren’t trained with that kind of poison, so how could you?”

“You did, though.”

“Ah, well, yeah. I’m able to manipulate things like metals and other substances. Not all of them, since my parents could fortify their house so that I could pass through anything there, but most of them.”

“So, you could sense the metals in my bloodstream?”

Willow shrugged. “I don’t know how I knew. I just knew.”

Nolan chuckled and shook his head.

“I know. It’s stupid, and I’m not clever enough to ...”

Nolan stopped, causing her to halt mid-step. “You are not stupid. Please don’t insult yourself in front of me.”

Willow blinked at him, not sure what to say. It crossed her mind to point out that he had said similar things, but there was no need to bring up the past. The Nolan in front of her deserved better than to be haunted by his teenage self. She certainly didn’t want to be reminded of her behavior back then, or worse, from college. It was a very different time, and as Elliott had said, Nolan wasn’t the same person now.

She smiled softly. “Okay. I’ll keep my insults to myself.”

His eyes were locked on hers as he slowly shook his head. “Not good enough. But I suppose, for now, I’ll need to help you see through whatever negativity you have about yourself.” He tapped her forehead as he said the last part.

Willow giggled. “You have your work cut out for you. As the family screwed up, I’ve got decades of that mindset.”

“If you are willing to stick around, I will work with you for decades to help you see yourself the way I do.”

She cocked her head, “And how’s that?”

“An amazing woman who saved my life. Come on, the food is getting cold.”

The conversation turned to lighter topics as they headed to a park as the snow fell around them.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:45 am

An Enjoyable Month

When they returned to the apartment, Willow felt carefree and light. She giggled and kept bumping Nolan or playfully hitting his arm. A part of her was aware that she was flirting, but she was having so much fun that she didn't want to stop. The fact that Nolan seemed just as happy was surreal, and she didn't want it to end.

They laughed when they entered the apartment, and Willow placed a hand on his bicep as she tried to remove her shoes. He put a hand on her elbow and helped make sure she didn't lose her balance.

“Well, you two seemed to have cleared the air. Good for you.”

Willow looked up as she pulled the other shoe off. Levi was stretched out on the couch, his muscular body looking relaxed.

Ahhhh.

It was like a lightbulb had gone off over her head. His lackadaisical attitude, graceful movements, and apparent ease when most people would be uncomfortable.

Yeah, I can see cat shifters .

Willow smiled.

Nolan leaned down and whispered, “What's up?”

“He doesn’t hide it very well, does he?”

“I could hear you from the elevator. Do you think I can’t hear you now?” Levi raised an eyebrow, but he didn’t look upset.

“How’s your lady?” Willow asked, not bothering to answer his question.

His shoulders sagged, and a heavy sigh escaped him. “I’m condemned back to the void.”

“She’s not done yet?” Willow asked, trying to be empathetic.

“No. And it sounds like she won’t be done for another month.” His head flopped back on the couch, and he placed his hand on his forehead. “I feel as if I’m going to be no priority for the rest of my life.”

Nolan rolled his eyes, “Get a grip, Edevane. You’re not an actor, so don’t try to be.”

He frowned at Nolan; Willow gave him a slight push. “Be nice.” She walked over and sat down next to Levi. “You must be really in love to ...” She stopped, then looked at Nolan. Then she looked back at Levi, who was watching her with a concerned expression. “Levi Edevane? You’re Levi Edevane?”

The shifter looked over at Nolan with a knowing smirk. “Yes, I am.”

“Oh, wow, that’s – I – This is so surreal! Did you really go into space? What was it like? What are you doing so far from home? Is this why you just disappeared?”

He laughed. “I will answer the first question. Yes, I did. And for the second, it was pretty disastrous. The only reason I’m still alive is because Sybil didn’t want to live with my death on her conscience.”

“I would imagine she wouldn’t want to cause the love of her life to die.”

This got a hearty laugh from both men, and Levi said, “Oh, she hated me then. I wasn’t trained, and the launch was really important, so she tried hard not to help me. She was quite displeased with me being sent up, and she quit to try to force them to listen to her.”

“Really?”

A wistful smile on his face. “Yeah, it was definitely something winning her over.”

“Really?” Internally, she cringed because Willow knew she was coming off as a fangirl. Wanting to act more normal, she asked, “How did you manage it?”

Nolan smirked as he sat at the dining room table. “Yeah, Levi, how did you manage it?”

“Oh, it was easy; I nearly died. She became putty in my hands after that. Or maybe because some of the other shifter families tried to take over, and she had to rely on me. That could have helped her see just how magnificent I am.”

Willow looked at him like he was insane. Ready to change the subject, Nolan asked, “Where’s Elliott?”

Levi held up his hands. “I’ve no idea. That guy does his own thing in his own time. Good on him for that. It sounds exhausting to me, though.” Levi dropped his head to the side and looked up at Willow from under his eyelashes. “Did he tell you the plan?”

“A bit.” Willow licked her lips, not wanting to say that she was worried about the success of their plan.

“You are very nervous about it. That's understandable. Neither Elliott nor Nolan is likely to think of others when making their plans.”

Nolan snorted, then folded his arms over his chest. “And you are a paragon of consideration.”

“Sybil doesn't complain.”

“That's because she's an alpha. She doesn't wait for anyone to make a plan.”

“An ... alpha? What does that mean?” Willow looked at the two men.

Levi's expression softened, and a smile spread across his face. “My lovely lady is a wolf shifter. She was the alpha of her pack. Not now, though. She hasn't been for a while.”

“But she still does a lot for her pack.”

“Not everyone has a happy family like yours and the Sextons.”

Nolan opened his mouth to respond but thought better of it.

Levi pushed up off the couch. “Well, you've got a few weeks before you can go through with the plan since the facility is starting to panic.” He walked toward Willow and leaned over so his nose was just a few inches from hers. “I would love to hear exactly how you were able to penetrate the center of the facility because your boy there,” he pointed toward Nolan, “won't tell us anything of the escape.”

Up close, she could see that his pupils were more feline, less human, and gold was mixed in them. Being so close also made her uncomfortable – not because he was in her personal space. It felt more like a cat playing with a mouse.

Then he stood up and smiled as if nothing had just happened. “Well, I had best get going.”

Willow blinked as she tried to determine whether she should feel relieved or offended by what had just happened. However, Nolan didn’t seem bothered when he said, “I thought you said you were on hold for a month. Where exactly do you need to be going?”

Levi gave him a wry look. “I know when I’m not wanted. Besides, I do have my own family to contend with.”

“Felix?” Nolan asked.

“You would think it was him, but no. Not this time. Jace has assumed a bigger role, and some other families are having hissy fits.”

“Wait, are you heading back to Florida?”

Levi sighed melodramatically again. “Unfortunately. Hopefully, it won’t have as much fallout as last time. They need me since Felix is all for him taking over about half of the company and business.”

Nolan shook his head. “I just do not understand how your East Coast families function.”

“On our terms,” Levi smirked at him.

“Will you be back before the plan starts? Because if not, we’ll need someone else for your role.”

“I’ll have to wing it. But I’ve let Sybil know what’s going on, so if you need help,

you can pull her in. Unless you want another Sexton brother in on this fun.”

Without hesitation, Nolan said, “I’ll take Sybil.”

“Good call,” Levi said, then gave Willow a sweeping bow. I have very much enjoyed meeting you. I wish you the best of luck should I not return in time.”

She smiled at him; still a little shaken from his earlier actions. “It was nice meeting you. Have a safe trip back.”

“My way of traveling is always safe, at least for me. Adieu.” Seconds later, he was gone.

Willow looked at Nolan. “Do I want to know what his method of travel is?”

“It’s best not to ask because it’s nearly impossible to explain.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s not normal, even for a cat shifter. Anyway, come on.”

“Where are we going now?”

“Well, since we are left just the two of us, I think it’s time I made good on my promise to get you new clothing. It’s the least I could do considering.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I know, but I want to. Besides, I have a few propositions about the next couple of weeks.”

“What kinds of propositions?”

“Come with me, and we can talk about it.”

They spent the next few hours out shopping and had more fun than she had had in a long time. When they returned, Nolan insisted on sleeping on her couch, saying he was concerned that they might return. As guilty as she felt about it, Willow was happy he was sticking around to ensure she was safe.

Over the next few weeks, no other obscenely handsome and intimidating men appeared, so the pair had a lot of time to discuss the plan and go over many contingencies. If Willow thought that it would make her nervous as the time drew near, she was pleasantly surprised to feel that everything would be all right.

So, she was surprised when Nolan sat her on her couch the evening before and asked, “Please be honest with me. Do you want to go through with this?”

“Of course. I trust you, Nolan.”

He became visibly uncomfortable. “Surprisingly, that doesn’t make me feel better. I’m worried and don’t want to risk something happening to you. I haven’t heard anything from Elliott, Levi, or Sybil. And I don’t want to be the only person between you and what’s to come.”

Willow smiled and placed a hand on his. “We got out of the facility on our own the last time. I don’t think we need anyone else.”

He turned his hand and squeezed hers. “The only reason you nearly died was because I stopped. That wouldn’t have happened if I had just gotten you out of there. You were at risk because of me, because of the bad decisions I made. I’m afraid that the next time, my decisions could end up getting you killed. I don’t want to live with that,

knowing that you died because of me.”

“And that’s why I trust you. This isn’t about your pride or your reputation. You are caring about things beyond yourself. Also, I know you always succeed when you put your mind to something.”

Nolan pulled his hand away and ran it through his thick black hair. “For the first time, I’m not sure it’s enough. They are angry about losing you, and ... I don’t know just how far they will go to get your back.”

She laughed. “You are mistaken. They wanted you more than me.”

“No,” he shook his head. “I can assure you that you were the primary target. They knew about our history, and they figured that saying you were helping prank me, to teach me a lesson, was very much a calculated effort that they already knew would work well for them. If they thought that you were close to any of your siblings, they would have used them. The only benefit to it being me was that they hoped to get a ransom for me. The point was using someone who would get you engaged.”

She wrinkled her nose with a grin. “You still have quite a high opinion of yourself, huh?”

With a short chuckle, he said, “While I’m glad it was me, despite the implications.” His smile softened, then disappeared, “They are going to be a lot more desperate to get you and keep you this time.”

“I’m sure they will move on to others. That’s why we are moving now, right? To prevent more people with abilities from being taken?”

Nolan frowned. “It’s personal now. They want you specifically.”

Willow laughed, thinking he was being ridiculous. "I'm not important, so..."

"Don't say that."

"What?"

"You are important. I never want to hear you say you aren't important again."

She leaned forward and laughed, her hand covering her mouth.

"What's so funny?" He tilted his head and tried to look at her face.

Willow looked at him. "You have changed."

"I would hope so. I don't like who I was back then."

"I didn't either." When Willow said that, Nolan lowered his head, putting her hand on his chin, she made him look at her. "But I adore who you are now."

He looked at her, his eyes searching hers. "You adore me?"

Swallowing, she was about to say something, but he looked so vulnerable. Instead of saying anything, she leaned over and gave him a chaste kiss on the cheek. When she pulled back, he looked at her; then his eyes darted to her lips. Realizing he was feeling the same things she was, Willow leaned toward him again and kissed his lips. They were soft and warm. At first, she was going to give him a simple peck, but once their lips touched, she didn't want to stop.

Willow turned her body as Nolan slid a hand around her neck. Feeling bold, she opened her mouth and pressed her tongue to his lips. He moaned, then leaned forward, his mouth covering hers as he started to gently stroke her tongue with his

own. Willow let out a moan as she began to press her body against his. Her hand moved up a little along his thigh, then gently moved over a bulge.

Her eyes opened, and she pulled away a little. At no point in her life had she ever considered anything like this with Nolan, but now that it had started, she knew she didn't want it to stop. He was watching her, his chest heaving, clearly waiting for her to decide what happened next.

Willow moved her body and threw a leg over his lap, straddling him and pressing him into the couch as she began to kiss him. Nolan's hands were on her upper thigh, gently massaging them as she moved against him. His lips moved over her chin and neck, stopping at the nape. Tilting her head back, she began to pull on his shirt. Nolan continued to kiss her as he shifted his body so she could remove his shirt. Once it was on the floor, Willow stopped and looked at him. She placed her hands on his pecs, then she leaned down and ran her tongue around his nipple. The sound he made was animalistic, but Nolan didn't take control. His hands moved up and down on her thighs as he closed his eyes and let his head rest on her couch. Willow let her hands slide down his abs and over his pants. When her hand brushed over him again, she placed her head on his chest and pushed her hips against him.

Then she unbuttoned his pants.

Finally, Nolan's hands moved up her back undoing her bra, then removing her shirt and bra at the same time. Willow looked down at him as he brought a hand up to cup one of her breasts. His other hand held her as he brought his mouth down to her other nipple. The way his tongue flicked over her sensitive skin drew a gasp from her, and she arched her back as if inviting him to do more.

He lifted her and placed her on the couch in one swift motion. His arms bulged as he looked down at her. Willow wrapped her legs around him and tilted her hips. With a grin, he quickly removed her pants without unfastening them.

Despite the heat, she couldn't help but laugh. "I guess I won't be wearing those pants again."

"If I have my way, you'll have a whole new wardrobe. And you'll only wear them once."

She started laughing, but he pressed his body against hers and began to suck on her neck. The laugh shifted to a moan. Unable to control herself, Willow squeezed him with her legs, pulling his bulge closer to her. He pulled away for a moment, and she felt disappointment flood her. When she began to open her eyes, Nolan's mouth covered hers, his tongue delving into her mouth as something began to press between her legs. She pressed her chest against his, and Nolan brought a hand up to cup one of her breasts. His thumb toyed with her nipple, momentarily distracting her from what she wanted.

Then she felt him begin to enter her. Almost as soon as he pressed into her, he pulled out. She thrust her hips up against his, and he rewarded her desire by sliding back into her, just enough to leave her wanting more when he almost immediately pulled out again. He repeated this motion, and she realized he was smiling against her mouth.

Breathless, she tilted her head back. "Are you torturing ..."

She didn't have a chance to finish the question as she felt him thrust into her. Instead of pulling out, he slid in and out, touching her sensitive spot with his head before pushing back into her. With each stroke, she felt him move a little bit further into her, but he wasn't fully inside her when her first orgasm tore through her. Crying out his name, she was rewarded by him sliding against the spot, applying enough pressure to sustain the sensation for far longer than she thought possible.

Expecting him to finish, she began to pant. Instead of ending it, though, Nolan slid a hand around her back and lifted her hips, holding himself inside her. Then he pushed

a little further, creating a friction that brought her to the brink before she had fully relaxed after the last one. The second orgasm was just as intense as the first, and he drew it out for just as long.

When her body finally began to relax a little, he fully thrust into her, his body flush against hers and holding her tightly. Willow kept calling his name as each thrust heightened her pleasure.

“I thoroughly enjoy the sounds you make,” Nolan whispered near her ear, “but I love the sound of my name on your lips when you are pushed over the brink.”

Willow had no words, so she began kissing his neck as he slowed his movements, moving inside of her at a pace that allowed her to come down from the last orgasm but kept her wanting more. Nolan leaned his head back as she began to suck on the nape of his neck as her hands moved over his perfect muscles. The roundness of his butt felt perfect in her hands, so she explored the shape and enjoyed the way he hardened inside her at her touch.

When she reached around and touched between his thighs, Nolan seemed to lose control. Lifting her off the couch, he said, “I need more access. I need to be fully inside you.”

She felt herself falling, and when she stopped, Willow felt Nolan under her, and he was filling her. The sensation was intoxicating, and she began to bound on him, her hand moving around to play with him. When he called out her name, it sent her over again, and Willow began to move faster, sliding up and down him, taking all of him in as she felt her muscles tighten. She could feel him coming, and she squeezed him a little, hoping that it heightened his pleasure, too.

Flopping over onto him, Willow felt a new sense of contentment. “Wow. I don’t have any words, Nolan.”

He kissed her head. “I hope you don’t think we are done.”

She moved to look at him, her chin on his chest, “Are you saying that you want to keep meeting like this after tomorrow?”

He moved too quickly for her to register fully. Before she realized what had happened, everything had been knocked off her table. Nolan’s lapis lazuli eyes looked down at her, “I would love to make this a permanent arrangement, but that’s not what I meant.”

Without warning, he slid her legs on his shoulders, then held her in place as he leaned forward and began to kiss her as he started to slide his head into her. She said something to indicate she approved, but Willow was too lost in the feel of his body on and in hers to care what she was saying.

Eventually, they ended up on her bed, their bodies wet with sweat. Nolan pulled her to him and kissed her temple. “We should probably shower.”

“Just five minutes,” she murmured, nuzzling into his neck. She was aware of him laughing as she quickly drifted off to sleep.

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The Bait

The pair was startled awake the following day by someone banging on her apartment door. Willow pulled away from Nolan a little.

“Are you expecting anyone?”

He gave her a half smile. “This is your place.”

“Oh, right,” she smiled sleepily at him.

He got up and pulled on a pair of sweatpants. When he headed toward the hallway, she asked, “Where are you going?”

Stopping in the doorway, he looked at her. “To answer the door.”

“As you pointed out, it’s my door.”

“Yeah, but I know you take a while to wake up. It’s safer for me to answer anyway, so just take your time, and we can talk when you get out of the shower.”

“That sounds ominous.”

Nolan walked back to her, leaned down, and gently kissed her lips. “We can talk about last night after you are finally safe. When you are ready, we’ll finish planning for later today.”

Willow looked up into his eyes. “Okay.”

He smiled down at her, then headed toward her door as the knocking started again, sounding more insistent. He closed the door behind him, leaving her naked on her bed.

Willow stretched as she heard Nolan talking to another man. Their voices remained low, so it didn’t sound like there was anything particularly worrisome. She finally got out of bed and walked right into her bathroom. Once the water warmed up, Willow stepped in, wishing that Nolan could have joined her. The water felt good, so she spent a little extra time waking up as she washed herself. When she was done, Willow dried quickly and returned to her room to prepare for an interview.

Nolan figured the company was still monitoring her, so he contacted someone to set up an interview with her. It set up the plan because he suspected they were still tracking her emails. His communications were nearly impossible since he didn’t rely on technology. Since they had not escaped at the same time, he figured they would not expect the pair to work together. No one at the facility had witnessed her ability to walk through walls, and when they had checked on Nolan, they had not seen her in the room. Given their history, Nolan was sure they wouldn’t expect them to work as a team.

Dressing for an interview, Willow applied some makeup and styled her hair. It was simple, but she knew it didn’t matter.

It’s not an actual interview, so no one will care how I look. This whole thing is just for show, anyway.

She exited her room and saw Elliott and Nolan talking at the kitchen table.

Elliott looked up at her. “It’s her decision, Nolan. Not yours.”

“What’s my decision?”

Nolan frowned at Elliott. “Nothing. He’s just trying to ...”

“Nolan,” Willow said sternly, “I need to know what you are talking about.”

His expression was pained, but Elliott babbled, “They aren’t going to take you back to the facility where you were because they know it’s compromised. We don’t know where they will take you.”

“That’s fine. I trust Nolan.”

Nolan looked surprised, but Elliott was nonplussed. “If you are unconscious, you won’t be able to communicate with him. And that means we won’t know where you are going. That’s why I’ve told him we need a tracking device on you.”

“I have a cell.”

Elliott shook his head. “Something they can’t track or block.” He pulled something out of his pocket as someone else knocked on the door. Without looking, Elliott said, “It’s Levi.”

Willow looked skeptical. “How could you possibly know that?”

“His smell,” Elliott said as Nolan said simultaneously, “We can smell him.”

She looked between them as Nolan finally relented. “Fine, give her the device, but if anything happens to her because of it, there will be a steep price.”

Elliott looked at Nolan over his glasses. “I’m as scared of you now as I was when you were a teen.”

“Prick,” Nolan said, walking toward the door.

“High praise from you,” Elliott said, then turned his attention to Willow and gave her the gadget.

It was smaller than a phone, but the screen was far more advanced than any phone she had ever seen. “Is this the next model of cell phones?”

Elliott shook his head. “I would never give humans my work. It’s far more interesting watching them muddle through science. You can have it until Nolan brings you back, but I’ll need it as soon as you return.”

“How does it work?” She turned it over in her hand.

“You don’t have to do anything. I’m only loaning it to you as a tracker.”

“Oh, okay.” Willow looked at it briefly, then slipped it into a pocket.

“Well, if it isn’t my favorite geek.” Levi’s voice boomed as he strolled into the apartment. “Where did you disappear to?”

Willow looked at him. “I’m surprised you made it back in time.”

“I had a little extra incentive to return.” He looked at Nolan. “Besides, this company is directly competing with some of our departments. If I’m here taking them down, it’ll make Jace look that much better. Two birds and all that.”

“Oh,” Willow looked at him, feeling she mostly understood what he meant.

Nolan walked in and placed a hand on Willow's back. “As much as I hate to say it, we should let Willow get going.”

She got up on her toes and kissed his cheek. “I’ll be fine.” She then looked at Levi and Elliott – the first was smirking at Nolan, the second was looking out the window with his cheeks a little pinker. “Thank you both. I appreciate your help. See you later.”

When she turned to leave, Nolan joined her, resting his hand on her lower back. As soon as they were out of sight of the other two, he pulled her into a kiss. It was tender, and for a moment, Willow was lost in it. When he pulled away, Nolan rested his forehead on hers. “Take no unnecessary risks. Please promise me that.”

“I promise.” She kissed him back.

“So that you know, you look amazing. Although, you may need to touch up your lipstick.” He pulled her close to him, then backed her against the wall.

With a giggle, Willow let herself get lost in his arms momentarily. “That was nice, and you’ve given me something to look forward to when I get back.”

He gave her a chaste kiss, then finally took a step back. “I know. I need to let you go. Good luck with the interview. Stay safe. And I’ll see you soon.”

She squeezed his hand and left before the pressure made her rethink the decision.

The following two hours went far too quickly, partly because the interview went surprisingly well.

If it were an actual job interview, I would feel pretty good about it. Perhaps Nolan will help me get a job after all of this. She cringed at the thought. No, I’m not going to ask him to support me right now. It’s enough that he’s enjoying spending time with me. Besides, I still have a lot of money to use until I find a real job.

Her confidence was high as she entered the café and ordered a green tea. As she sat in

the same chair as the last time she was in the café, Willow was entirely relaxed. Unlike last time, she smiled about the previous day as her eyes looked over a few emails. The job hunt still wasn't going well, but the young woman could accept the rejections without thinking it said anything about her worth.

Nolan had told her not to worry about it, but Willow knew that her money would eventually run out, and she didn't want him to think she was just interested in his money. She didn't want to appear weak in front of him. Still, the rejections didn't sting nearly so much, which she attributed to having Nolan in her life for the last few weeks. Life felt a lot better now as if the abduction had turned everything on its head.

She was just closing her emails when someone passed by her. There was a sting in her arm, and Willow turned to see who had done it. Her vision blurred, and she didn't have a chance to do anything as she slumped forward.

Despite being unable to move, Willow was very aware of what was happening around her. Someone said that they were a doctor and would handle a medical emergency. Hands picked her up and took her outside.

She felt soft seats under her, automatically knowing she had been put in a car.

It'll be okay. Nolan will save me, and then these people will lose everything.

The thought kept her spirits high as Willow had no control over the situation. They were on the road for a while, but she had no idea how long the trip lasted.

When they stopped, she felt the air rush as the doors opened. She was roughly pulled from the car, her head hitting the door as the people carrying her had no interest in protecting her.

The men nearly dropped her when a menacing voice said, "Well, well, it looks like you guys need a more direct warning about messing with women like her."

Although she couldn't move her muscles, Willow's heart sang at the sound of Nolan's voice. Her joy was quickly quashed when she heard the doctor's voice.

"I wondered if you had somehow charmed her into helping you. What did you do? Promise her money? A position in one of your family's companies? Your hand in marriage?" This got a harsh laugh, and Willow's heart sank. She didn't think Nolan was using her, but the thought of him asking her to marry him – she couldn't imagine him asking her. But now that it had been spoken, she realized she wanted it.

"No, Matt. I just promised to get her out and take care of her."

"Ah, the poor, spoiled rich boy has failed. I guess you never saw that coming. After you lorded your superiority over everyone when we were young, you were fooled by someone you thought was weak."

"And you weren't any better. Did you ever tell her that you had a crush on her? No. I may have treated her poorly in high school, but you were cruel to her. You catfished her, nearly causing her to have a breakdown."

The doctor got mad at this. "When I tried to express my interest in her, she just said she wasn't interested in dating. She wouldn't have fallen for my fake account if that hadn't been a clear lie."

Willow was stunned to hear this. For years, she had thought Nolan had been behind the catfish that had ruined her reputation her senior year. Instead, it was some random guy ...

Matt Henkle. The guy in biology who kept trying to get me to date him. He was the one who did that to me?

Nolan countered, "And if you weren't such a creep, you would have accepted when she said no the first time. Like most women, I'm sure she could sense something was

off with you. And, oh look, she was right about it.”

“Shut up! You will never understand what being a scholarship kid was like because your parents had money. Everything was handed to you! I earned my place.”

“Funny because I recall being valedictorian. You weren’t even in the top ten.”

“That’s because it was rigged! The whole thing was unfair, and...” He stopped. “No. We aren’t going to talk about this. Farewell, Nolan.”

“You know, I thought you had potential. I tried to help you. Yet, this is how you repay me. You will always be inferior because you do everything for the wrong ...”

A gunshot rang out, and Willow felt her heart pump faster. She couldn’t react normally, but some of her abilities were still clearly reacting to the situation in a way that she would expect. And she knew that Matt had just shot Nolan.

Please be okay. Please, please, please .

She felt her body being set on the ground, and then all she could do was wait until something else happened.

There was screaming around her; a few times, she heard loud sounds of what she thought might be bodies hitting the ground.

Please mean what I think it means.

A few tense minutes passed, then she heard Nolan, and her heart sang. “Matt, you will never learn, so there’s only one place for a guy like you.”

“I won’t go to prison! I’m too valuable; the company will never allow me to be put in prison.”

“Funny. You used to say that no one could touch you because I was willing to help you, to show you the ropes when we were in middle school. I even believed you freshman year when you said Willow wasn’t interested in me, convincing me she thought I was stuck up and not worth her time. When you confessed you were in love with her, I thought you may have lied to me, but I had treated her too badly by then. I knew she would never believe me, so I got worse. That was all my fault, but you played your role, and you played it well. How fitting that she forgot you. Because you still are just some petty little man playing at being important.”

Matt spewed a steady stream of insults, but they were short-lived. There was another thump on the ground near her. Then Willow felt arms lifting her gently off the ground.

She felt something warm touch her forehead as Nolan softly said, “I’ve got you. Everything will be okay. I swear.”