

*1**~April 13th, 1994~*

As they pulled around the curve, she couldn't help but feel a sense of warmth. *Home*. She had finally returned to where she was born for the first time in decades and couldn't wait to get settled in. It had been so long since she

had had a place to call her own. One where she felt so at peace, anyways.

“Hailey, pull your butt into that spot before someone else gets it. I don’t want to lug this crap down the road from that lot.”

Hailey couldn’t help but break into a grin as her train of thought was derailed by her best friend, “I’m getting to it, Lucas. You know I suck at parking. Why can’t we just use the driveway?”

“Because they’re repaving it for us tonight. I didn’t think you’d want tar all over that pretty orange paint job.”

Driving, it was unnecessary really but it would be very awkward to explain to their neighbors how they were getting around without a vehicle.

Then again, if it weren't for her abilities, they would still need the car anyways. He didn't have quite the same talents.

Hailey was a crossbred shapeshifter with a broad array of gifts. A gifted Tsialo. At least, she saw herself as gifted. Humans and even some of her brethren would consider her otherwise.

Lucas let out an exaggerated sigh of relief as she backed into the spot successfully, earning a firm punch to the shoulder, "I am not that bad."

He gave a roll of his eyes as Hailey put the car into park and turned it off, popping open her door and pulling herself out into the sunshine.

She stood at a mere five foot, barely taller than her 1970 Cougar

Eliminator and certainly a lot lighter with her petite yet well-built frame. Hailey appeared to be around the age of 21. Her skin, smooth against supple muscle and broad, high cheekbones, was the color of darkened copper.

She scanned her grey-blue eyes, starkly bright against that dark skin, down the street once. To her left their single neighboring building, a bakery, attracted quite a few customers. The smell of fresh baked goods wafted its way into her nose. *Mm..*

Her dark brown hair lightly swept her shoulder and fell down in front of her breast as she turned around to push the driver's seat forward. Hailey leaned in to retrieve a few bags from the

back seat, only to hear Lucas give a snort.

“If you keep that up you’ll alert the resident Peeping Tom within the week exactly which windows he should be creeping on,” this time it was Hailey who rolled her eyes, causing Lucas to break into a goofy, lopsided grin.

“You better hope that creeper isn’t into guys,” Hailey shot her friend a playful smirk with a light scrunch of her nose.

Admittedly, they wouldn’t have had bad tastes. Lucas had cropped, dark hair that was barely distinguishable from black, the same high cheekbones and darkly tanned skin as his friend and steel blue, thickly lashed eyes.

He normally sent the girls reeling with his charming smile and haunting good looks. During their time growing up together she had certainly seen enough of those poor creatures, human and Tsialo alike, just fawn all over him, only to be virtually ignored by Mr. ‘Tall Dark and Handsome’.

Lucas was a sweetheart, but he never seemed interested in the fauns with their doe-eyed looks and pouty lips. They fleetingly held his attention for the brief timespan of a courteous conversation, during which he politely rejected their advances and eventually turned his attention elsewhere.

Instead, Lucas spent most of his time doting on her and working on his

culinary escapades. His most recent number included working at an Italian five star down in Coronado known for its rich pasta dishes. And he enjoyed every minute of both. A bit too much.

That cooking had cooled her temper any number of times on some of her bad days. Who could be mad on a stomach full of ambrosia?

Hailey shook her head with an amused quirk of her lips and hefted one of the bags over her shoulder as she pulled a single key from her pocket and turned, her hair falling back to grace the line where her bra stood out from her black tank.

Walking cheerfully up the path to the large red door of the renovated fire

station that they now called home, she couldn't help but think what would have happened if she hadn't had the goofball as a friend. *Growing up would've been pretty lonely in the pack without him.*

Hailey and Lucas hadn't been like most of the others in their pack. They were half-breeds, crosses between different species of Tsialo that didn't necessarily need to be mixed together. To the pack, that made them unpredictable and subsequently dangerous.

Especially Lucas.

At least, that is what the pack thought. Because her friend was a mix between the shapeshifting Tlvdvgi and

the naga-like Utsanati, he terrified most of the kids they grew up with.

The Utsanati had always been one of the darker nonhuman groups. Their mating methods were questionable, involving rape of the opposite gender and abandonment of the child.

Not to mention the personality traits exhibited by their species, cunning, keen deception abilities, and manipulativeness, were less than desirable traits in allies, let alone friends and family.

Lucas' mixed heritage offset those traits but also made them more pronounced to the pack with his ability to hide his serpentine form more

successfully with his shapeshifting abilities. There was no glimmer of scales, or leftover reptilian traits to compare. She was the only one that had ever seen his Utsanati form.

So while they were worried about the snake in boy clothing, they frequently overlooked Hailey entirely. She slid the key into the lock, gave it a twist and pushed open the door in one fluid motion, stepping inside. *Kind've stupid really.*

Hailey looked around the expanse that was their front living area. The high ceilings and built in lockers on one wall showed that large trucks had once been stored in this very room. But

it was no longer the garage these features paid homage to.

Over the last few months, they had lived out of an apartment while they renovated the building, putting in new lighting, plush, dark carpeting, and various walls and other amenities. This had turned the abandoned building into a livable space, and saved them the hassle of dealing with the harsh property values of the San Diego housing market.

She took in the scents of fresh paint and cinnamon mixed with vanilla, the aromas warm and inviting to her senses. Lucas must have gotten her favorite oils. *I'm so spoiled.*

He would never do that to someone just to reproduce anyways, or he would've taken advantage of one of those tarts by now. At least, she was pretty sure he wouldn't, and he'd had a few thousand years to prove her wrong.

The splendid climate of San Diego had allowed them to keep the large doors, which had once permitted the flow of fire trucks, functional. *It would be nice to open them during the day and bask in the warm sunlight.*

Hailey hit the button to open the door and made her way back to the car. It needed to be unloaded and that wasn't going to happen if she reminisced and dragged her feet, as fun as it would be.

“Y’know if you don’t get Tigs out of the back seat, he’s going to be pissed at you. And then he’ll hide under the beds for a week.” Lucas motioned towards the inside of the car. Loud meowing was resonating from the back seat and the spicy scent of annoyance mixed with cat musk flowed out from the car window.

“Oops,” Hailey scrunched her nose and pulled out the cloth pet carrier, looking inside one of the little mesh windows. She smiled as her companion, a Tabby-Savannah mix affectionately named Tigger, rubbed his face against the pliable screen with a purr as his demands for attention were met. “I’ll get you inside sweetie, I’m sorry.”

As she plucked up a few more bags and headed inside, Hailey heard the distinct sound of the trunk popping open. Lucas was soon behind her, swooping around with his cargo of duffel bags which were destined to litter the floor of his room. *Until I yell at him to settle in after about a month.*

Hailey was no neat freak, but Lucas tended to be a bit ridiculous when it came to picking up after himself. Everywhere except the kitchen which was always in pristine condition. Hailey had never had to worry about a single dish since he had moved into her mother's home. They had been around ten.

She pressed the button to shut the large door after their luggage was inside and bent down to open the carrier to release her furry friend. Tigger emerged, timidly at first, and kept close to her feet. Hailey gave him a good scratch-down before she straightened up and gave the semi-empty room a good once over.

Something is missing... The woman suddenly smiled before giving a loud snap of her fingers, causing the room to almost visibly hum with power.

The floor shimmered with energy as furniture began to emerge, seemingly from the carpet, and fill the space. A dark suede couch, wood and glass side tables with a matching coffee table and

tv stand with a widescreen became their movie and game spot, along with a bright orange rug.

“Hey Lucas, we won’t be needing that truck.” She couldn’t help but smile appreciatively at her own handiwork. *I don’t think the neighbors will notice if we tell them we had been moving the furniture in during renovation, but only if they bother to ask.*

He let out an audible sound of exaggerated annoyance.

“I’m not backing you up if the city tries to burn you at the stake,” Lucas popped his head down from the hole of one of the fire poles. “Don’t you remember how crazy these people got during Salem?”

Hailey merely laughed, “Like flames are going to do much, you know better. Besides, we only have the one neighbor and their bake shop is keeping them more than busy.”

Her smile broadened, showing oversized canines as she headed towards the stairs herself. “They don’t have the time to watch in our windows.”

A long, sleek black tail with barely distinguishable Jaguar spots trailed closely behind as Hailey made her way to her room and turned in for the night. She stripped down and slid under the warm, soft covers, clicking off her bedside lamp and setting the alarm

clock. Tomorrow, her first challenge would begin.