

I couldn't wrap my brain around vampires, let alone anything else right now.
Calm down, Lily demanded. You're starting to hyperventilate.
I stopped walking and sank to my knees, the damp earth and scratchy leaves on my bare skin
centering
me a bit.
shirt.
You need to let me shift back. We need to try to get his scent off you.
Lily's words didn't register with me until I looked down to see that I was still wearing Braden's flannel
F uck. She was right. It was better for me to stroll back in naked than to show up wearing a strange
shirt
with an even stranger scent. The last thing I needed was even more attention than I was already going
to be faced with after this morning's absolute disaster.
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I snorted. Well, at least discovering that vampires existed had managed to overshadow my humiliation
momentarily.

Get it together. Someone is going to see us. Let me take over. Now.

With a shake of my shoulders and a cr ack of my neck to steel myself, I took the flannel off and shoved

it

under some leaves and behind a rock. Lily took over and the shift was even quicker than usual. She

must

have been anxious as hell to shake the masas dima scent off.

Meanwhile, once we shifted and Lily proceeded to roll around in the leaves and dirt, part of me wilted

inside at the loss of that spicy, musky aroma I hadn't realized had seeped into my nose.

We're safe now, she said.

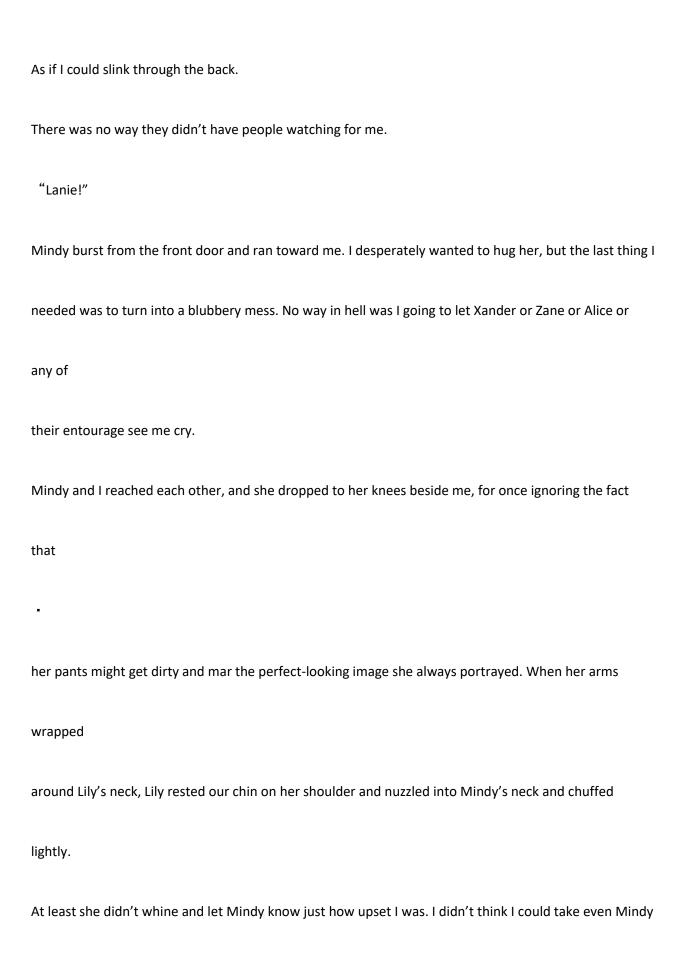
The words "It's time to get back now" remained unspoken, and I was a bit grateful for her rare

consideration instead of being the battle ax she usually was.

It's now or never. I urged her forward with my thoughts and we started trotting out from the tree line,

across the vast lawn of Xander's house, and toward the front door. May as well make an entrance

instead of trying to slink through the back.







<sup>&</sup>quot;You sure? We could go for a walk, sit here for a bit longer..." Mindy cast a furtive glance back at the

front door, where a few guards were now standing and watching us. At least they had the decency to let us have our moment. My guess was that it had more to do with Mindy and who she was mated to and less about any sort of compassion for me. The last thing these guys wanted to do was pi ss off Mindy's mates-their bosses. And then Monroe and Maxim were stalking our way, and their faces didn't radiate sunshine. At all. I looked over at Mindy, and titled my head in a silent "Everything okay?" She gave me the slightest shake of her head, and in that moment, I knew just how much she had risked by rushing out to meet me. There was no way that her mates, Xander and Zane's High Guards, would be happy with their mate being seen as overly sympathetic to an outcast. Well, at least, that's probably how I was going to be considered now after being so thoroughly rejected this morning. I gave her a slight nod and stood, straightening my back and squaring my shoulders as I met their

gazes

head-on.

"Let's get whatever happens next over with."