

Excerpt from: Throwing Shade (Magic After Midlife, #1)

A man kneeled next to Alex's body. He seemed a few years younger than me, probably in his late thirties, and was about six inches taller, putting the shifter at about six-foot-two. His hair was a riot of dark curls.

The man's jaw was firm, his lips full, but right now, they were set in a severe line. Moonlight kissed the olive skin of his broad shoulders and leanly muscled torso, a trail of hair leading down to—

Jeans. I gusted out a breath.

The man huffed softly. "You came back," he said dryly, with a slight accent I couldn't place. "You've got balls, I'll give you that."

I gave a weak laugh and he locked his brilliant emerald gaze onto mine. Thickly lashed, his eyes were what I would have called beautiful in his human form, but there was a hardness to them—like he'd seen too much and all innocence was long gone.

Eli had looked that way after his first year in homicide. Fuuuuck! This guy had to be a Lonestar. Okay, looking on the bright side, he could help me find Jude—if he didn't destroy me. I'd been so bent on getting answers from Alex that I'd thrown away every single safety procedure that I'd lived by and shown a stranger my magic. I could have left when the shifter took off with Alex but no, I had to play detective.

I reached behind me, clutching the railing because my legs felt rubbery.

The Ohrist reached into a duffel bag, revealing a nasty silver jagged scar that ran halfway up the left side of his back, and pulled on a faded blue T-shirt that said "Bite Me." This wasn't a gym rat with a six-pack for show; he was a warrior and his body was his well-honed weapon, in or out of wolf form.

Ohrist magic was based in light and life, while Banim Shovavim powers were rooted in death and darkness. Historically, they'd taken that as clear-cut signs of good and evil. They pitied Sapiens but had hunted my kind into near extinction.

There was even a skipping game sung by Ohrist kids: "Clap for the light, 'cause light is right. All other magic is a blight. How many shadow freaks will we smite?" At which point they'd jump as fast as they could while counting.

I eyed the wolf shifter with a sinking feeling that he'd probably counted pretty damn high.

Maybe he didn't remember the exact details of his time in his wolf form? Could I bluff my way out of here?

"Did you want something?" he said, impatiently.

My brain short-circuited. "I'm guessing that light magic allowed you to cut through his breastbone and rib cage only using your claws," I said, "but why isn't there blood all over the place?"

I could have smacked myself. This was not the time for curiosity or further questions like "How do you have more than one magic ability?" It was the time for well-crafted lies.

"The magic cauterized the blood vessels." The man rolled his "r's." He grabbed a box of table salt from the duffel bag.

"Regular sodium," I said thickly. "How bland. I prefer Pink Himalayan to balance the delicate flavor of human flesh."

"I'm not eating him." He dumped the salt over the corpse. "It interferes with the scent so animals don't show up before Ohrists get here to retrieve the body."

“That’s good, because cannibalism can make you sick. You get this brain disease called kuru and—”

“Like mad cow?” He tapped the last of the salt onto the body with a contemplative expression.

I blinked. People didn’t generally come back with follow-up questions to my random facts. “Not quite. People can’t get mad cow disease, but in rare cases they get a form called...” I shook my head because cows, mad or otherwise, were not the issue. “Was Alex human?”

Or was he some other species entirely and did that make a difference to the answer? He had looked human, even if what was inside of him wasn’t.

My moral compass was having trouble finding true north.

“Not anymore,” the wolfman said.

I knelt down beside Alex to close his lids because his lifeless stare felt accusatory, but the man batted my arm away.

He lay a hand on the deceased’s forehead and stared into his eyes as if committing him to memory. There was both a gravitas and a resignation in the shifter’s expression, and I couldn’t tell if he did this to honor the dead or torment himself with a parade of his kills. Maybe it was one and the same.

When he was done, I checked Alex’s back pockets for his wallet.

“The man’s body isn’t even cold and you’re robbing him?” Wolf Dude said.

“I’m looking for identification,” I said through ground teeth. There was a cracked phone but no wallet. It must have fallen out at some point during the fight. A vise tightened around my chest and I shoved the Ohrist, banking on the fact that if he’d intended to hurt me, he’d have done it already. “You ruined my chance to get information about—”

“I saved you.” The man stuffed his bare feet into motorcycle boots, which also came out of the duffel bag. “I don’t know what interrogation skills you think you have, but I can assure you that dybbuk wouldn’t have given up shit.”

“Dybbuk?”

“Merde,” he said in perfect French. Ah. “You went after him without knowing what you were dealing with?” His full lips twisted. “Fucking BS.”

He remembered.

I took two wobbly steps back, Delilah by my side, but he didn’t come after me.

He laced up his boots. Okay, he was a derisive son of a bitch, but he lacked the horror others of his ilk displayed upon meeting my kind, nor did he seem inclined to kill me.

I’d take the win.

“Alex had attacked me once already,” I said, “and if he did something to my friend—”

The shifter pulled out a beaten-up brown leather jacket and shrugged into it, his shoulders bunching. “Then she’s gone. Sorry for your loss.”

My eyebrows shot up. Yes, this guy was an ass, but surely he was connected to an infrastructure that could help me find Jude. “Sorry for your loss? How about you help me find her? Aren’t you a Lonestar?”

He laughed without an ounce of humor. “Hardly.”

Then what was he? He’d already killed one person, and yes, that dybbuk thing seemed to justify Alex’s death, but I was alone out here. If he was working on his own vigilante moral code, how safe was I?

I eyed the stairs. How many were there? Thirty? Then perhaps another fifty feet to lose myself in the crowds in Terence Poole Plaza? He'd be faster than me, even as a human. I bit my lip. If I screamed for help, would anyone come?

Screw that. I had magic and could cloak and get away at any point, but his rudeness was grating. I threw my hands up. "That's all you have to say?"

"No." The man raked a shrewd glance over me. "Should we ever have the misfortune to meet again, get out of my way."

"Or what? You'll huff and you'll puff and you'll blow my house down?"

He bared his lips, briefly shifting his canines to wolf form. *My, what big teeth you have.* A strangled laugh burbled out of me. My epistemological crisis involved a hell of a Freudian undertone.

"I'll do whatever the fuck is necessary," he said.

"Is that your action hero catchphrase or something? Because it's a little on the nose."

He zipped up the duffel bag. "My reputation doesn't precede me? Shocking." His voice was laced with bitterness.

"Wow. Someone is full of themselves. I've got no idea who you are."

He peered at me suspiciously. "Are you new in town?"

"No."

He shrugged. "Then you know who I am."

"Hate to disappoint you, but you're just some rando who crashed my party and ruined my plan—"

“To get answers from someone who wouldn’t tell you anything you actually wanted to know. Brilliant strategy. You’ve the mind of a tactician. Even if you did get something out of him, did you think he’d let you walk away after?” His accent thickened when he got annoyed.

“I had my shadow.”

“I wouldn’t brag about that if I were you.”

“For your information, I’m doing an admirable job. Before yesterday, the only monsters I had to worry about were of the human variety.” I shot him a pointed look.

“There’s no way you didn’t know about dybbuks. You’re too—” He snapped his mouth shut.

Delilah puffed up behind me. “Oh, no,” I said. “Finish that sentence.”

The man crossed his arms, rustling the leather. “Old,” he said levelly.

My shadow bopped Wolfman in the nose with a swift jab. Ha!

The man pinched his nostrils together to staunch the bleeding, his emerald eyes glinting dangerously.

My amusement drained away, my magic swirling around my feet, ready to cloak me, but I’d hit the wall and I was out of fucks to give.

“Should we ever have the misfortune to meet again, get out of my way,” I said.

“Vraiment? Why?”

“I’m a woman in my forties who’s remembered how powerful she can be. Don’t fuck with me, Huff ’n’ Puff.” Head held high, Delilah and I sailed past him into the night.