

The Monster Heist

By: Taylor Bell

The group had opted to travel through the woods instead of on the dirt roads that the humans had paved. While it meant that Shaya's gown would get caked in grime, she far preferred that to the alternative. Just what would a passerby think of a vampire, a werewolf, and a witch, marching along a well-worn path to a major city? She shivered at the thought. Forget co-conspiracy, they would be tried for just *looking* at a human the wrong way!

"Yuck!" Leon cried after stepping in a particularly unforgiving patch of mud. "My poor suit." They stopped so Leon could lean against a large cypress tree and shake what he could off the hem of his pants. A few moments later, he growled in frustration and cuffed them up to his knees. He smoothed his hands over his black curls, though that did nothing to help the frizz in the hot, Arkansas night. He did that often, halting their journey to check his appearance, assuring that he looked nothing less than a symbol of his family's wealth. Though to the city of New Orleans, Leon Cazelar was dead. The only wealth he had left to hold onto was his suit, which he only ever took off to clean.

"I thought that wolves liked to roll around in mud," Lela asked, her soft voice innocently inquisitive. Shaya winced in response. Lela was the newest member of the Coalition of Southern Monsters, and she has yet to grasp the social normalities of the time and how it often led to stigmas around creatures like them. They were outcasts and were treated as such, which didn't always bode well for people like Leon who hadn't always been on the outside. While Lela has been a witch her whole life, her mother had kept their family hidden away from society out in the bog. When her mother died when Lela was seventeen, just one year prior, she traveled to Des Arc in search of community. However, she did not find a community there. Instead, she was met with a group of humans ready to burn her at the stake for her blasphemous behavior. She had strolled into town thinking nought of her thin, green summer dress with flowers and herbs stitched into the seams. She thought even less of her long red hair, sleek with oil, worn loose down her back or of the crystals that hung around her neck. The townspeople had immediately gawked at the sight of her. If one of the Coalition's witches had not found her and brought her to the safe house just outside of Heber Springs, it was entirely possible that Lela would not be here with them now, setting off on a journey to perform the greatest heist in monster history.

So, her observation of Leon was entirely innocent. After all, it was a common misconception that werewolves liked to roll around in the mud.

“And I thought all bog witches were likened to ugly old hags,” Leon huffed. He straightened his posture and promptly began to lead the way once more, this time carefully watching the ground.

“Take that as a compliment,” Shaya whispered into Lela’s ear.

“Ah, yes,” Leon retorted, his hands waving wildly through the air, “take it as a compliment that you just insulted my entire personhood!”

“I didn’t mean no harm,” Lela mumbled.

Leon continued on as if he didn’t hear her. “You know, it’s not enough that we have to deal with the constant belligerent judgment from the humans, but from our own kind, as well?” He took a deep breath before turning around to look Lela directly in the eyes. “Just because I am a werewolf does not mean that I have to act like a dog. And just because you are a witch does not mean that you are a devil-worshiper.”

“But I *do* worship the devil.”

“Oh,” Leon cleared his throat and clutched the cross necklace that hung around his neck, “to each their own, I suppose?”

“I’m just joking,” Lela giggled, hands reaching up to pat his heated cheeks.

“Right,” Leon laughed hesitantly, still tightly clutching his cross. He turned around and picked up his pace, mumbling something about wish-wash human propaganda.

They came to a stop as they reached the outskirts of the woods. In the distance, they could see Hanora’s Inn. It was a two-story farmhouse with colonial whiteboards that reflected moonlight like a beacon. It had large windows that were open during the night and closed during the day, courtesy of the creatures that found sanctuary there. On the spacious porch, a rocking chair rocked itself back and forth.

Shaya recalled when she had first come upon the farmhouse a good twenty years earlier. It didn’t serve as an inn then, just the home of an old witch from Ireland who had the tendency to care for supernatural stragglers. When she had passed, Shaya had convinced her daughter, Hanora, to open the home to the public, serving as a supernatural safe haven in secret.

Shaya yearned for the reprieve of the roof over her head. The sun would be rising soon, and she did not want to find herself burning against its unforgiving light with only a flimsy umbrella to protect

her. She hoped that Hanora had her blood jars in stock. Her canines were beginning to ache with hunger of a hunt.

The relief vanished as quickly as it had come. In a flash, she stuck her arms out, pushing Leon and Lela back into the shadowed canopy of the woods. Leon glared down at her in response.

“Something is wrong,” she whispered. Shaya eyed the flickering lantern that hung from one of the inn’s columns. At first glance, it appeared inconspicuous, just a faulty lantern. But after years of hiding, Shaya knew better. The flickering was calculated; it had a rhythm. She tapped her fingers against her thigh in time with the flicker and dread burned against her skin.

Danger.