**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 12**

**Episodes 1248-1351**

**Episode 1248**

Icy cold fingers wrapped tight around my wrist, and I jerked back with a little squeak. Arlo’s grip on my arm was unforgiving, and the chill of it sank into my bones.

*What the hell is wrong with him? Ew, get off, get off, get off!*

Arlo’s eyes were glowing bright orange, and his lips were pulled back in an animalistic snarl. I yanked harder, but he still wasn’t letting go.

Arlo had always been a quiet, chill guy. Not, like, super interesting, or really the kind of guy you could have long conversations with, or who would be your first pick to, say, go on an amazing, harrowing adventure, or fight in a war against a violent psychotic werewolf. But he’d never once come across as a genuine threat. And certainly not as a creepy, almost-set-himself-on-fire pseudo-zombie.

*What happened to him? Is he… dead?*

Arlo yanked on my arm, and I stumbled forward with another suppressed scream. Greyson immediately lunged forward and slammed Arlo back down to the ground, loosening his grip on my arm enough for me to slip free. Greyson’s actions only made Arlo fight harder, thrashing around and snarling in his hold. I couldn’t help skittering back a few feet to put some more distance between us.

I could still feel the unearthly chill of his touch on my wrist.

Still pinning Arlo to the ground, Greyson looked up at Big Mac. “Is someone going to tell me what the fuck is going on here?”

But the witch’s eyes were just as wide as everyone else’s. She shook her head. “Don’t look at me! I’m in the dark here too.”

I looked past Greyson and Big Mac to Marta, who was still standing closer to the wall and looked distressed. Her dark eyebrows were knit together, and unlike the rest of us, there didn’t seem to be any confusion on her face. Just horror.

Our eyes met, and I could tell Marta wanted to say something, but she was holding back. Why? Did she know something?

“Marta?” I asked softly. If she had even the slightest inkling of what the hell was going on here, then she was leagues ahead of the rest of the group.

The girl turned to Big Mac. “Something’s wrong.”

“You think?” Big Mac snorted and looked pointedly at Arlo, who was still pinned to the floor, thrashing about in Greyson’s grip and gnashing his teeth together. His eyes darted wildly around the room, and I half expected him to start speaking in tongues—whatever that meant.

Marta shook her head and pointed down at Arlo. “No, I’m being serious. Something is terribly wrong. He shouldn’t be here.”

I frowned. What was she talking about? Like, here in the basement, or here on this earthly plane?

“His ghost was right *there*,” she reminded us, jabbing her finger vaguely in the direction where Marta, Big Mac, and Violet had been standing when Greyson and I had first arrived. “But then… I felt something.” Marta grimaced and a shudder ran through her body. “It was a very dark energy. I don’t know how to describe it. It was something perverse and *unnatural*. And now his spirit is back in his body, and I don’t know how.”

“And?” Big Mac asked, her voice encouraging Marta to continue.

She shook her head. “And that’s… just so *wrong*. Like saying up is down. Like bending the laws of nature for fun.”

*Well, that doesn’t sound great.* Still, even with Marta’s discomfort written plainly on her face, I didn’t quite understand what she was getting at. Didn’t vampires exist with the same rules? They weren’t alive, either. So why was this especially terrible?

“I’ve never heard of anything like this happening before,” Marta continued, and she wrapped her arms around herself, like this whole ordeal had left her in need of some comfort.

I blinked. “So what are you saying?” My mind moved slowly over her words, parsing them and comparing them with what I knew about Arlo, as well as his current wild behavior. It was like he wasn’t even a real person anymore. He was just… a feral thing, full of bloodlust and apparently running around with his ghost jumping in and out of his body.

My eyes flicked back to Marta. “Is Arlo some kind of… zombie?”

She immediately opened her mouth to respond, and then stopped, closed her mouth. She cocked her head to the side, like she was listening to something—*or someone*, I thought with a sudden chill—that nobody else could see or hear.

*What on earth is going on around here? Is it not bad enough that Artemis is missing? That the Orb is missing too, and vampires have been lurking around trying to either kill us or turn us into juice boxes? Come* on*, universe! Give us a damn break!*

Marta nodded slowly, and then her eyes slid back into focus and we made eye contact. “The doors are shut,” she said calmly, as if that explained *anything*.

“Come again?” I asked.

“Can you explain?” Greyson asked, sighing.

“Arlo might be stuck here because the doors to the spirit world are shut.” She shrugged. “That’s my best guess.”

Big Mac, who was staring intently at Marta, went pale. “What do you mean the doors are shut? I’ve never heard of such a thing—it’s unthinkable. It… It—”

“Throws off the balance of both worlds,” Marta finished. “I know. But it’s true. He says so himself.” She pointed at an empty space next to her. Violet and Big Mac nodded, as if this was a reasonable response.

“I’m so confused,” I said out loud.

I met Greyson’s eyes. He looked just as lost as I felt. I had no idea what to believe. None of it made any sense, and part of me wanted to simply write Marta off as crazy. What if she wasn’t really a medium? Maybe she was just seeing things and had really good branding?

But I couldn’t discount the meeting I’d had with Cassandra. Marta had made that happen for me. She *was* the real deal, and if that was the case, then the chances were high that whoever’s ghost she saw standing next to her, they were real too.

*Which, I guess, means that the doors really are shut.*

What the ever-loving hell were we supposed to do about that?

Suddenly, Arlo’s body went completely still in Greyson’s hold, and the room fell into silence. I hadn’t realized until he’d stopped moving how Arlo’s wild fight, the thrashing and snarling, had created its own kind of horrifying ambiance. In its absence we all went still as well, watching and waiting for something to happen. But the body didn’t move; Arlo’s eyes were glazed over. He really did look dead.

*Is Arlo’s ghost going to try to leave his body again and try to cross over to the spirit world?*

Slowly and carefully, Greyson eased himself off the unmoving body. He waited a beat to see if the body would start to move again. But there was nothing.

Greyson leaned down, probably to see if Arlo was still breathing, and suddenly the body lurched upright.

Greyson jolted, then immediately reached out to pin the somewhat-dead body back down. His hands landed heavily on Arlo’s shoulders, but he didn’t fight. If anything, he just looked very confused, like someone who’d fallen asleep in one place and then woken up in another.

*His eyes…* They were back to their normal color. Not that haunting orange.

“What… What happened?” Arlo asked. He sniffed himself and grimaced. “And why do I reek of gasoline? Do you know how many brain cells huffing gasoline can kill? So bad for gains.”

Greyson sat back, breaking contact with the other werewolf.

We all looked at each other wordlessly. What did you say to someone in this situation? *Sorry, I know this must be confusing, but you’re dead and your ghost is playing the hokey pokey with your body*?

Arlo’s eyes filled with terror and he looked around wildly as if something was just dawning on him. “I shouldn’t be here.”

*The poor guy!* I knelt down closer to reach for him, but then suddenly his eyes flashed orange and the nice, unassuming Arlo disappeared. He was replaced by the same feral animal that had tried to attack me.

But this time, I wasn’t his target.

He leapt up with seemingly inhuman strength, stronger even than an Alpha werewolf as he threw Greyson off and got to his feet faster than I could blink.

In a flash, he was snarling and racing toward Violet, who let out a scream.

Arlo lurched to a stop inches from the girl. A strange expression crossed his face, and his body convulsed, his head falling to his chest, before he went still again. When he lifted his head to look at me, I gasped.

His eyes were blue now. And I could have sworn I’d seen them somewhere before.

His gaze flicked over to Violet. “Violet!”

*Wait, his voice—it’s different somehow. Whose voice is that?*

Violet’s eyes filled with tears as she stared back at Arlo. “*Lilac?*”

**Episode 1249**

XAVIER

When this was all over, I’d never be able to set foot in anything resembling a hospital ever again.

Strapped down to that damn blood-soaked gurney, my entire body thrummed with anticipation. The fluorescent lights overhead stung my eyes, and every time I so much as moved a single muscle, I felt my own dried blood crunching between my skin and the gurney.

*This might be the worst thing that’s ever happened to me*, I thought with a strange sort of detachment. Probably some kind of self-preservation mechanism to help me feel one step removed from this shitshow of a situation, from the horrors I’d already endured as a vampire entree. Or maybe it had something to do with the fact that I’d spent less than half of my time on this gurney lucid. The rest of it I’d either been out cold or dreaming whatever weird shit my mind and the vampire venom could come up with.

Still, I wasn’t about to roll over and turn into some kind of blood junkie. I was an Alpha werewolf, dammit—more than that, I was the son of Silas. If I could survive my childhood, survive the death of my mother, survive ripping out Ava’s throat and losing my wolf… I’d seen some shit, stared real, terrible evil in the face, and I’d survived it all. I would *not* let this break me.

My only chance for escape was quickly approaching—I’d have to break free during transportation. And I was ready to fight tooth and nail, with every ounce of strength I had, if it meant getting my freedom back.

The room slipped out of focus for just a moment, the fluorescent light above my head turning into two long strips of dying brightness, and I shook my head. *Okay, so I’m not exactly in top form. Fucking bloodsuckers.*

But that was okay. I had more than enough pure, violent fury to get me where I needed to go. And I still had my wolf, too, if I could just get into a situation to use it. I’d probably be able to heal faster if I could shift, too—

The doorknob jiggled, and I went still. *It’s go time.*

The door opened and I tensed, ready to throw myself at Iñigo and rip his throat out, but instead, it was that witch, Kira.

She eyed me with a frown, her gaze sliding up and down my body. There was a distance in her eyes. Not coldness, necessarily. More like clinical detachment, as if I were a guinea pig she’d experimented on and she was mentally recording the results.

“It looks like my healing took,” she said tonelessly. “You’re looking much better than when you came in.”

I narrowed my eyes but didn’t reply. This wasn’t good news, since she’d only bothered healing me so I could be drained all over again.

*Of course they’d send in the witch. Fucking hell…*

I didn’t trust witches, and her being here was only going to complicate things. Vampires, I knew how to handle, how to kill. But witches? They were clever, unpredictable pains in my ass. Kira could probably turn me into a snail and crush me beneath her foot just as quickly as she could heal me.

Kira continued to watch my face, looking for… I didn’t know what. And then her expression softened, just the slightest bit. And an idea popped into my head.

*Maybe I’m strapped to a table and unable to fight my way out, but that doesn’t mean I’m down for the count. Maybe if I play my cards right, I can talk my way out of this.*

*Talking instead of fighting?* I could practically hear Colton’s sigh and see his eyes roll. But what was that saying about beggars and choosers?

I softened my own expression—just a little bit. Enough that hopefully I didn’t look quite so much like a rabid animal who’d attack the moment she loosened my cuffs, but not so much that I looked like I actually cared about her. This wasn’t a *Lifetime* movie.

Besides, she’d never believe me if I laid it on too thick.

Kira had turned away from me while I plotted her downfall and was now puttering around the room, doing god only knew what with all the equipment. Her back was to me. It would have been a fatal mistake if I hadn’t been tied down.

Fucking vampires.

I cleared my throat. “How did you end up with this job in the first place? In my experience, witches tend to be lone wolves, not supernatural assistants.”

I tried to imagine Big Mac in a role similar to Kira’s, and almost laughed out loud. Sure, she’d helped the Redwood pack out of its fair share of scrapes, but more often than not, there was a price to be paid for her services. And even then, she still bitched about doing the work.

Kira went still but didn’t turn around. “I don’t see how that’s any of your business.”

“I’m your patient-slash-captive. Believe me, it’s my business.” I tried to keep the fury out of my voice. “Iñigo has something on you, doesn’t he? I can’t think of any other reason why a witch with power like yours would spend her time cleaning up after a bunch of vampires.”

Something must have struck a chord, because she slowly turned to face me. Her eyes scanned my face with that same critical gaze. “Well, I can’t deny that having an Alpha werewolf around as a… what did you call it? ‘Patient-slash-captive’? It *has* broken up the monotony.”

The slight tug of her lips and the challenge in her voice told me she thought she’d dodged the question. But I’d still learned something. If she thought working here was monotonous, then she clearly wasn’t working here of her own volition. Which meant Iñigo had to have something on her.

*Point to Xavier.*

“If this is monotonous, then what do you *like* to do?” I asked. Maybe if I could get her on my side, offer to help her out of whatever situation Iñigo had her trapped in, and then she could help me get the fuck out of this living nightmare.

“I’ll tell you what I don’t like to do: chat with nosy werewolves.” Her eyes closed off, and her expression hardened. She was done with our little chat.

So much for talking my way out of this.

Kira turned back to her instruments, fiddled with something I couldn’t see, and then turned back to me with a loaded syringe in her hand. “It’s time to go.”

*Fuck. I need more time.*

“Oh, uh, go where?” I asked, desperately trying to stall. “Because I was really starting to enjoy this room. Good ambiance—*ah*!”

She plunged the needle into the side of my neck and then, while I thrashed helplessly against my bonds, depressed the plunger. I felt whatever the hell she’d just injected me with hit my system, and an immediate, smothering wave of exhaustion plowed into me.

*Stay awake, Xavier! Stay awake. Stay…*

The world blurred around me, and everything went dark.

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I woke up slowly, the world still soft around the edges. *Where am I? What… What happened?*

I shook my head to loosen the concrete that filled my mind and tried to reach up to touch my head, but my wrist met firm, unyielding resistance. And then everything flooded back.

*Of course. Those fucking bloodsuckers and their witch.*

As the world slowly came into focus, I found myself still strapped to the gurney—my new home away from home—and it looked like I was in some kind of ambulance. Except it was old. Really old. All the equipment looked ancient. A strange sound echoed in my ears, and I realized it was a siren. The kind I’d only ever heard in period films. Were these vamps into time travel too?

And then something more important hit me. I was being transported *now*. This was my window for escape, and I’d already slept through part of it. I looked around with more purpose and realized that Kira was sitting beside me.

She straightened. “Good, you’re awake. The customer won’t want a dead fish for dinner.”

She stood up and began to fiddle with some of the ancient medical equipment. Fucking great. What weird shit was she going to put me through now?

But when she returned, she just dabbed something on my cheeks. Something that burned.

She grinned. “Don’t worry—it’s just something to put a little color in those cheeks. Quinton wants you in full bloom.”

The ambulance slowed to a stop, and I tensed. I might have missed my first opportunity to escape, but I was awake now. The back doors of the ambulance opened, and sunlight flooded into the small space. I took a deep breath, gathering what little strength I could muster. I was only gonna get one shot at this.

Someone I couldn’t see grabbed the end of the gurney and began to pull it out of the ambulance.

*Cali*,I thought to myself. Her name was a battle cry as much as it was a reminder of everything I had to lose. *Do this for Cali.*

The gurney hit the ground and, ignoring the white-hot flash of pain, I forced my body into a werewolf shift. I felt the silver chains digging into my flesh, and pain sparked up my limbs, but I refused to stop.

Then one of the chains burst open.

**Episode 1250**

ARTEMIS

I was unstoppable.

Wind whipped around me, tossing my hair in every direction. The trees lining the cemetery groaned as the wind pushed against them, testing how far each bough could bend before it broke. The storm raged around me, but I wasn’t afraid. Because the storm was part of me, a manifestation of the unfathomable power that burned through my body.

I could do anything, think anything into existence, shape the world into whatever I desired.

I blew out a long breath as I took in the cemetery sprawling out in front of me. I could destroy the entire thing with a flick of my finger if I so desired, turn the trees and the headstones and the inhabitants slumbering beneath it all to dust with half a thought.

*Yes*,the Orb whispered. *Yes, you can. You can do whatever you want. You see now, don’t you? How much you can accomplish if you allow yourself to embody your full potential?*

I closed my eyes. “Yes,” I whispered. “I see it now.”

How had I ever feared this amazing, thrilling, life-affirming gift I’d been given? How had I ever truly believed it was wrong? There was *nothing* wrongabout this power, this ability that hummed through my veins. I was special. I was uniquely equipped to channel this power, to tame it. It had been created for me, and I for it, and nothing in my entire life had ever felt so *right*.

I felt the Orb’s gentle caress against my mind. *You can shape the world however you choose. Think about your greatest desires, the things you’ve always wanted but could never have.*

It was a good question. What did I want? What could a being such as I, endowed with powers that were greater than anything the world had ever seen, possibly be in want of?

I had to delve into my deepest memories for an answer.

Even decades later, I could still recall those days in the orphanage. How I’d been surrounded by people at all times—workers, other orphans—and yet I’d always felt so alone. The orphanage had provided for my most basic needs, but I’d still been a child starved. Starved for affection. For love. For attention and validation and the simple knowledge that someone out there gave a damn whether I lived or died.

All I’d wanted in those days, and in so many of the years that had followed, was a family who loved me—who saw me for who I was and still cared about me.

A thought rose, unbidden and whisper-soft, from the depths of my mind.

*Cali is your family. And Orla. And Tom. They all love you. They care about you. They’re the family you yearned for all those years—*

The Orb’s voice was harsh, almost guttural, ripping through the soft voice like the wind tore through the leaves and branches around me.

*But they did not love you for* you*, did they? They wanted you to play a role. To be their well-behaved daughter they could put on a shelf whenever they got tired of you. Then don’t even know who you truly are! What you’re capable of! And if they knew the truth, they would* never *accept you.*

I couldn’t help but flinch—not only at the voice that thundered through my mind, but also at the cruel truths it shared. My mind searched back, comparing the account to my own memories.

Orla and Tom always put Cali first, and Cali was always busy with her Alpha werewolves. I’d been invited to be part of their lives, but as an accessory. A helper.

A sidekick.

I tried to imagine how my mother would react if she could see me now. She’d been so furious when I’d gone after the Orb, and afterward, when I’d lost it. She would never accept me as I was now.

Maybe she’d never accepted me to begin with.

*But someone else in your family will.*

The Orb’s voice was gentle, soothing against the raw edges of those lifelong wounds, and I tilted my head like a cat whose head was being scratched. A warm current of power slipped down my shoulders and spine, feeling oddly like an embrace. My body relaxed, loosened, leaned in to the energy and the voice that controlled it.

“Do you mean my father?” I whispered. “Kadmos?”

The Orb purred in agreement. *Now you can find him. You and your father can finally be together, exactly where you belong.*

I nodded slowly, still caught in the Orb’s thrall. “Yes, of course.” Nothing had ever made such beautiful and perfect sense. Cali had our mother and her father. They were a perfect family unit—one in which I had no place. But Kadmos… He and I could be that for each other. The perfect fit. The family we both deserved.

I needed to find him. That had been my original plan, after all. I held up my hands in front of me, reveling the sheer power that poured forth.

*And now I have the means to see that plan through to the end.*

Looking between my splayed fingers, I could make out movement in the cemetery in front of me. Something was making the ground tremble and shift.

*Is that… me?*

I dropped my hands, but the trembling continued and grew even worse. The cemetery ground bucked and heaved with motion, knocking over headstones and cracking some of them with the force of the shifting.

I took a step back, my eyes wide. “What’s happening?”

Suddenly, a voice piped up from behind me, and I jumped.

“It has begun!”

It was York. I’d completely forgotten he was there. His lips were pulled back in a dark grin.

“It has begun!” he repeated.

The phrase shook something inside me. *It has begun. It has begun*.

No… I shook my head. Something was wrong.

York stepped up beside me. “What will we do when they join us, mistress?”

There was a strange light in his black eyes, and something about it sent chills down my spine. Something was terribly, terribly wrong.

York gasped, then let out a delighted laugh and pointed toward the cemetery. “They’re coming!”

I followed his finger, and my jaw dropped. To my absolute horror, I saw that an entire hand had thrust itself up through the cemetery grass, its bony fingers clutching at the empty air.

The sight snapped something inside me, and my true self seemed to plummet back into my body. That tiny, whispering voice in the back of my mind let out a loud, mournful cry.

*What the hell have I done?*

That intoxicating sense of power was gone, and now all I felt was abject horror and regret. I looked over at York, who was staring at the cemetery as multiple grasping hands joined the first. The entirely cemetery had come alive. I’d done that, somehow.

“No,” I whispered. “No, no, no, no, no…”

What had I been thinking? How could I have lost my sense of self, my sense of *right and wrong*, so completely? This was dark and perverse and made a mockery of the laws of nature. And I’d done it.

Fear poured into my mind as hands became wrists and wrists became arms and entire bodies began to dig themselves out of their graves.

*No*.

No, I *hadn’t* done this. This was the Orb’s work. The Orb had controlled me, had made me bring these bodies back to life, just like I’d brought back York and Arlo. It hadn’t been me. I would never have made those choices on my own.

The bodies lurched and jerked as they fought against the earth. They looked like demented puppets on strings, and I wondered if I had looked that way too, when the Orb had taken full control of me.

But… how could the Orb truly be controlling me? It was in the Fae world. I knew it was! I’d felt it being yanked from my hand! How was it doing this to me?

My mind spun, fear and disgust and regret hugging each heartbeat. I felt dizzy, lost. Could the Orb possibly be controlling me from so far away?

A terrible ripping sound echoed through the graveyard, and a corpse pulled itself free of the ground and looked around as if it could see through the eye sockets in its skull.

I let out a horrified scream and stepped back. Oh gods! I was still near the pack house, well within the area pack members used for long runs. What had I just unleashed on them?

With a terrifying, sucking noise, several more corpses pulled themselves out of the ground. I had to get away. I couldn’t let them see me, couldn’t let them touch me. All I could think about was putting as much distance between myself and these monsters as possible.

I choked back my horror, my fear and regret, and then I spun around and raced into the woods.

**Episode 1251**

CHARLIE

I sat on the edge of the surprisingly soft bed in the Airbnb my parents had booked us for our journey to kill the vampires. While my parents were probably gearing up *Fast & Furious* style in the other room, I couldn’t seem to peel myself away from my bed. My leg jiggled, a nervous tic that had followed me from elementary school spelling bees to the locker room before a lacrosse match and now to this strange Airbnb… right before heading out to hunt a bunch of vampires in a team-up with my parents.

I blew out a long, slow breath. This was really starting to feel like a mistake.

“Charlie!” my mom called. “Come in here! We have something to show you!”

Shaking more than any eighteen-year-old werewolf really had a right to in front of his parents, I stood and shuffled into the living room. When I saw them seated at the kitchen table, I sucked in a breath. The whole table was outfitted with more weapons than I’d ever seen in one place in my entire life—even when the Redwood pack had been preparing for war with Silas.

*Oh, wait. Werewolves don’t need fancy weapons. Because their bodies are weapons on their own.*

My mom picked up a large double-bladed axe with the same finesse and competency that I’d seen her use to wield cake pans and help me glue together dioramas for my school art projects, and I had to blink twice to make sure I was seeing things correctly.

*Yep, my mom is definitely still holding a giant axe.*

She hefted the weapon. “Charlie, these vampires aren’t going to show us an ounce of mercy if we so much as give them a fighting chance. So we have to go in strong, fast, and lethal. Got it? I know from my own novice years how hard it can be to hit the heart with a stake on your first try—”

My dad snorted. “Like that time in Tacoma. You smashed up the guy’s entire ribcage just to get to his heart. The whole thing was pulp before you even got the stake in there.”

My belly twitched at this latest piece of information about my mother. Was it just me, or was it hot in here? I tried to force something like a smile to my lips while Mom elbowed Dad and threatened to “bring up that goblin nest in Louisville.”

Who even were these people? Because they could *not* be my parents.

“Anyway, sweetheart.” Mom turned back to me. “The point is, it’s tricky to know exactly how to take a vampire down if you don’t have a lot of experience, so a… ‘life hack’ as you kids call it, might be just to lop a vampire’s head clean off with an axe first.” She gently pantomimed the motion with the axe, and it struck me then how similar it was to the technique she’d used to teach me how to swing a bat for tee ball. “It won’t kill it, but it will immobilize it long enough for you to move in for the final kill.”

“Which would be a stake to the heart,” my dad clarified, just in case that was somehow unclear.

A long silence set in, and I realized they were waiting for me to give some sign that I’d heard and understood them. I swallowed thickly—not because of dry mouth, but because my continental breakfast was threatening to come back up. “Okay,” I managed.

This felt so wrong, and I knew why. It hurt to the point of being horrific to listen to my parents go on and on about the finer points of murdering supernatural creatures—not only because in doing so they made it abundantly clear what a freaking joke my childhood had been, but because *I* was one of those creatures they hunted without remorse.

Mom pursed her lips. “One more demonstration, sweetie. Just to make sure it’s crystal clear.”

Then she pulled my dad in front of her and gave a demonstration of the good and bad spots to attack a humanoid monster. Little gems like “The ribcage is tricky, and short of breaking each rib individually, you’ll want to aim the tip just below the breastbone and then kind of jerk *up* and into the chest cavity beneath the rib cage,” and “When in doubt, you can always dislocate one or both of their arms. The shoulder joint is more than just bones—there’s soft tissue there, vulnerable muscles and ligaments that, when severed or dislocated, cause great pain and render the extremity useless,” and “Oh! And speaking of tendons, don’t forget the Achilles! Cut that sucker and they won’t be able to outrun you ever again!”

I didn’t even try to hide the flinch this time. Dad’s eyes softened, but that same confused expression flitted across my mother’s face.

It was the anatomy and physiology lesson I’d never asked for: Biology for Vampire Murderers 101. How was it that I was mated to a werewolf and I’d been chased by a crazy Rogue and trapped in a literal haunted mansion at the mercy of a poltergeist, and yet *this moment* was the single most horrifying thing I’d ever experienced?

These people weren’t my parents—they were strange, cheerful murderers. How was it that the same hands that had taught me how to bake cookies were now teaching me the optimal method for scooping a heart out of a body?

*I never knew my parents at all, did I?*

Mom’s face brightened, but it looked just as forced as my own stoicism. “That’s your crash course. You’re going to do great, honey. All ready?” She grabbed a stake from the table and tossed it to me.

Words caught in my throat, so I just nodded. It was probably for the best. There was a 50/50 chance my response would’ve been “no.”

My parents gathered up the gear and headed out. I took a deep breath and followed. I wished Violet were here. More and more, she seemed like the only one I could truly count on. But… I would never want her to see the presentation my parents had just given. And Violet would’ve been a distraction. I knew from experience that fighting with her was terrifying—I couldn’t help but worry about her the entire time.

“Charlie.”

My head snapped up. I was standing still in the living room, I realized. And my parents were waiting in the open doorway in front of me. Mom held out a hand, no weapon this time. Just the warm, gentle grip that played a role in my earliest memories.

She smiled. “It’s time to go.”

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After a car ride that was entirely too short, my parents and I found ourselves huddled in the woods, outside a large cavern. I still couldn’t shake the nerves buzzing in my belly. I’d been in my fair share or life-or-death situations, but something about this felt totally different.

At the fight with Silas, I’d been backed by an entire pack. We’d had a plan. I glanced at my aging, very human parents, who were pretty much just holding pointy sticks.

*Yeah, there’s no freaking way the three of us are going to be able to take out a coven of vampires.* Mom had casually mentioned that there were at least six vampires inside. She’d said that she and my dad had tracked them down all the way from the house where Violet and I had been held captive by *Bert*. They had to be stragglers from the coven that Violet and I had thought we’d wiped out.

Which meant they already knew me, and they had a really good reason to want me dead.

My dad looked over at me. “Ready, son?”

But before I could even open my mouth to respond, vampires started pouring out of the cavern.

My eyes practically bugged out of my head. This was way more than six vampires—it was at least a dozen. The vampires moved fast, just like I knew they would, but some of them looked startlingly familiar.

“Fuck,” I muttered. I’d been right.

Without enough time to fully react, the vampires were on us, and there wasn’t time to think about the demonstration my parents had given, or the laundry list of rules and best practices for killing a vampire. All I could do was react, follow my instincts, and fight like hell to stay alive.

Oddly enough, it worked. I ducked just in time to avoid a vampire swiping at me and then rolled to the side and leapt to my feet to avoid the other bloodsucker trying to sneak up on me. I spun to face it as it followed me through the motion, then shoved my stake through its ribcage and into its heart. It was messy, and I was pretty sure the *crunch* of the vampire’s ribs was permanently etched into my brain, but my werewolf strength turned out to be a great help.

I shoved the dead vampire off my stake and glanced over at my parents. They were back to back, fighting in a fluid dance. Mom dodged vampires with precision while Dad jumped in with his stake. Mom covered him from behind, both of them taking out vampires with half the effort and mess I’d exerted.

Okay, maybe my parents were a little bad ass.

But I didn’t have long to watch them. Another vamp set its sights on me and slammed me into the ground, growling and snapping its teeth. Its breath was hot and smelled like literal death. I tried to kicked it off, but it had me in a tight grip. It reared back to sink its teeth into my throat—

Only for Dad to grab it by the arm, wrench its arm out of its socket with a sickening crunch, and yank it off me.

“That’s it, son,” Dad said as he shoved his stake up beneath the vampire’s ribs. Then he held out his hand, and I took it, standing next to him and Mom as we faced the remaining vampires.

Suddenly, the vampires all froze, looking off into the woods as one creepy unit. What was that about?

But before we could take advantage of their distraction, all the vampires hightailed it, sprinting away from the direction in which they’d been staring.

“What just happened?” I asked.

A crashing noise echoed through the forest, and three people with orange eyes emerged from the woods, heading right toward us.

**Episode 1252**

VIOLET

My brother was standing in front of me. Except he wasn’t my brother. Not completely. He looked like Arlo, but his eyes, his voice, even the energy he put out… I *knew* in my heart of hearts that I was staring at my twin brother.

I took a tentative step closer. After how long we’d spent apart, I couldn’t *not* be close to him, but I was afraid, too. Not of Lilac, of course. And not even of the sort of dead Arlo. I was afraid that if I got too close, if I reached out and touched him, he’d disappear all over again. And I didn’t know if I could survive that.

Charlie might have been my soulmate, but Lilac and I shared the same heart. The same blood.

“Lilac,” I said again, softer this time. I stopped right in front of him, just short of reaching out and touching. “You’re here?”

Marta stared at both of us with wide eyes. Her jaw was slack and she slowly shook her head. “I’ve *never* seen anything like this.” Then her lips pursed and twisted into a frown. “This… This isn’t right.”

I chose to ignore that. It was easy for her to talk wrong and right with all these spirit world shenanigans—she could see Lilac anytime she wanted. She was his anchor to the material world, or whatever.

I didn’t get that privilege. Since Lilac had died, I’d gotten a few handfuls of moments scraped together between near-death experiences, and the séance earlier. And while I was so, so grateful for even another second of connection with my twin, it wasn’t anywhere near enough.

So *excuse me* if I wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth. So what if this was weird? So what? The spirit world was blocked and unstable. Lilac’s ghost was probably better off here anyway. With me.

I turned away from Marta and lifted my gaze to meet Lilac’s. His eyes were just as blue as I remembered—the same bright shade of blue I saw whenever I thought of him, whenever I dreamed of him.

I reached out oh so slowly to touch “Arlo’s” arm. My hand closed around flesh. He was here, and he was real. I let out a shuddering breath. “Lilac.”

Hands that weren’t my brother’s wrapped gently around my shoulders. Lilac was smiling at me gently, like he knew how much it meant to me to see him again. To finally be able to touch him.

“I’m here,” he said softly. “It’s really me.”

I blinked back tears and looked down at the basement floor. Tears slipped down my cheeks, hidden by my hair. His voice, his eyes… If I closed my eyes, I could pretend he truly was here, soul *and* body. My brother, returned to my side, where he belonged. I wanted so badly to believe that it could be this easy, that Arlo’s spirit had left a body behind, and in it, Lilac had found a vessel.

But what if this was some kind of cruel trick? Arlo wasn’t the man I remembered, after all. What if he was just doing all this to hurt us?

“Hey.” His fingers slid under my chin and tilted my head up so I could look him in the eye. He was giving me that same gentle, unassuming smile I’d missed so goddamn much. “It’s okay, Vivvy-lou.”

The breath slipped out of my lungs. *Vivvy-lou.* The stupid nickname our parents had given me when I was little. I hadn’t heard it in so long, since well before Lilac’s death. It had been a child’s nickname, and Lilac and I had stopped being children the moment our parents had died. We’d each been all the other had, and reminders of the happy family we’d lost had been too hard to face.

And then Lilac had died too, and I’dlearned what loneliness truly felt like. I’d stared grief in the face, learned its name and carried it with me every day.

A sob ripped out of my throat. “Y-you’re really here?” My voice cracked.

He nodded, and Lilac’s eyes shone with love and loss and so much tenderness that the dam holding my broken pieces together finally cracked. I launched myself at my brother, throwing my arms around his neck and squeezing as hard as I could.

Differences—little and big—between Arlo and Lilac stood out almost immediately. Arlo was taller, his body was wider. He was a full-grown werewolf, after all, not a teenage boy. I had to reach on my tiptoes to hug him, and the arms that wrapped around me were thicker, heavier than I recalled.

Still, I’d take it. I’d gladly, *gratefully*, take all the mismatched hugs, the secondhand body, the uncanny sense that Lilac was more puppet master than living being. I’d accept this a thousand times before I’d even consider saying goodbye again.

This might not have been my brother’s body, but it was Lilac in all the ways that counted. It was his soul, finally existing on the same plane as my own. And it was more than I’d ever dared to hope for.

I buried my face in his chest, grinning and sobbing, barely able to breathe around the raw edges of my joy, my grief. Lilac’s arms tightened around me, and I knew he felt it too.

Someone nearby cleared their throat pointedly.

I pulled back. Big Mac—along with the rest of the group—was still staring at us.

The witch folded her arms over her chest. “Do you mind telling us what the hell is going on here?”

Lilac’s hold on me loosened as he turned to speak with Big Mac. I barely resisted the urge to hold on tighter, to demand that he never let me go, ever again. Instead, I comforted myself by staying at his side, holding one of his hands like we had when we were children.

“Arlo’s gone,” Lilac said. “His spirit was weak, and it disappeared. I didn’t mean to, but somehow when he left, my spirit must have recognized a vacant body and… Well, it took advantage of the opportunity.”

My head spun with this new development. So Lilac was some kind of… ghost hermit crab? But before I could think it through any further, Marta piped up.

“Does that mean the door is back open?”

Lilac shook his head. “No. I don’t know where Arlo’s spirit went, but the spirit world is still closed.”

Cali and Greyson were still staring at me in absolute shock, and I realized with a jolt that they didn’t know the whole story about Lilac’s spirit being back, and that it had been tethered to Marta.

I saw Marta look over at them and then back at me, realization dawning on her face. She must have been coming to the same conclusion. “Uh, it seems like some of us might be a little behind the times.”

She gave a quick summary of the whole story of Lilac popping up from time to time, and us doing a séance and something going wrong, and Lilac being connected to Marta. That old chestnut. “Like I said,” Marta concluded, “I’ve never heard of anything like this happening. I don’t know what it means, but I can’t imagine that it’s good.”

Big Mac frowned deeply. “This is *very* worrisome.”

I felt a frown twisting my lips too. Seriously? I’d literally just gotten my dead brother back, and now they were all looking at us like it was bad news? *Who cares why or how it happened? My brother is back, in the flesh!*

Greyson still looked stunned, and more than a little unsettled, but he stepped forward. “So you’re really Lilac, then?”

My brother nodded.

Greyson let out a sharp breath. “In that case, we’d better question you. Find out everything you know so we can get to the bottom of this.”

“I concur,” Big Mac said. She hadn’t taken her eyes off me and Lilac.

Desperation bubbled up inside me. Finally, Lilac was here in front of me, and they already wanted to take him away? I couldn’t allow that. Not even to help my pack. This was everything I’d ever wanted!

I turned to Greyson with wide, pleading eyes. I wasn’t above begging.

“Please, Greyson,” I said. “You can question him all you want, but give me half an hour with him first. There’s so much we need to talk about it. You can’t even imagine how much I’ve missed him.” My voice broke again, and I blinked back tears.

I could see in the firm set of Greyson’s jaw that the waterworks weren’t going to sway him. He was ready to start *now*, and he honestly looked a little annoyed that I was even asking him to hold off.

*Xavier would have known what this meant to me.*

Fortunately, Cali elbowed him, and Greyson relented.

“Fine,” he said. “Thirty minutes. Not a second more.”

I couldn’t contain my grin. “Thank you!” I grabbed Lilac’s arm and tugged him to the door. “Come back to my room, and tell me everything about how you’ve been. I want to know what the spirit world is like.”

Lilac smiled and we started our way up the basement stairs. Words poured out of my mouth with each step. Oh, there were so many things I wanted to catch him up on!

“Were you really with me the whole time?” I asked. “Does that mean you know Charlie already? If not, that’s okay! I can’t wait for you two to actually meet. You’re going to love Charlie just as much as I do!”

We crossed the landing and began to ascend the stairs to the upper floors. I looked back at Lilac as I led him upward. “Oh, and I *really* have to spill the tea on Charlie’s parents. You wouldn’t—”

I stopped. Something was wrong. Something about his eyes. The bright blue color was leeching away. “Lilac?”

I reached for him, but it was too late.

Lilac crumpled to the ground, lifeless.

**Episode 1253**

I stood in the basement, listening to Big Mac and Marta speculate about what all the crazy things that happened in the last few hours might mean. Once Violet had left with… Lilac, I guess, all the sweetness had left the room with them, and we’d been stuck with what seemed like an endless supply of questions. I kind of wished they’d come back down so we could focus on the surprising upside to all these spirit world shenanigans for just a little longer.

*Who would have thought that Violet would end up being reunited with Lilac?* Though… it wasn’t entirely Lilac, was it? Since he was running around in Arlo’s body?

*Does that make him Arlolac? Lilo? Arlac?*

I shook myself. *Geez, Caliana. Can you try to stay focused for once? The doors to the spirit world are shut. You can worry about portmanteaus later.*

I shifted my focus back to the conversation at hand. Big Mac was filling Marta in on our history with the Orb. “After Silas was killed, we took the Orb for safekeeping but have since…” She grimaced. “Lost it.”

Marta’s eyes widened. “You *lost* the Orb of Lucifer? Seriously?”

“Letifer,” Big Mac corrected. “Much worse. And how it got lost doesn’t really matter right now. What *does* matter is that we get it back. This is the only dark magical object I’ve ever encountered that has these sorts of powers, and clearly it’s being used for evil.”

“I’d say,” the medium muttered. “Do you have any leads?”

“It’s in the Fae world, right?” I interjected.

Big Mac threw me a glare. “We *thought* it was in the Fae world, but I’m not sure about anything anymore.”

A crease appeared between Marta’s eyebrows. “Why—”

The basement door opened with a slam, and we spun to see Violet stumbling forward, struggling under the weight of Arlo’s limp body. Or was it Lilac’s body now?

*It’s like all those old battery commercials—“It’s what’s inside that counts.” So that would make it—*

*CALI, ENOUGH.*

I yanked myself out of my ever-distracted thoughts. Greyson was already rushing over to Violet. He eased Lilo’s body out of her arms. “What happened?”

Violet shook her head wordlessly. Her face crumpled and she burst into tears. “I don’t know!” she wailed. Fat tears rolled down her face and dripped onto the cold cement floor. Her lower lip quivered and she hiccupped with each breath, like she was on the verge of a panic attack. “W-we were just g-going up to my room and th-then he just…” She gestured at Arlac’s limp body as Greyson laid him down on the floor.

It didn’t look great. If Arlo hadn’t looked dead before, he certainly did now. Had Lilac’s ghost slipped out of him or something? Or maybe the door to the spirit world had opened back up and he’d gone back to where he belonged?

I glanced at Violet’s near hysterical face. She was folded over Arlo’s body, sobbing in his chest.

For her sake, I really hoped Lilac was hanging out somewhere inside the body. I could only imagine how traumatic this had to be for her. It was bad enough that she’d already lost Lilac once, and now that she’d just barely gotten him back, they were already hitting snags.

“H-he was totally fine!” she stammered, peeling herself up from Arlo’s chest and clutching his tear-stained shirt in a white-knuckled grip. “Well, as fine as he c-could be. Talking and acting normal, and then when we tried to go upstairs it was like he…”

“Checked out?” I offered.

Violet threw herself back down onto the body with a whine. Greyson gave me a look so clear, we didn’t even need the mind link for me to read it.

*Smooth move, Cali.*

“It’s not fair!” Violet cried. “I only just got him back! He can’t leave already!”

Marta crouched down beside her and patted her arm. The gesture looked somewhat robotic, like Marta was mimicking something she’d seen someone else do. “It’s okay, Violet. Lilac’s still here.”

Violet’s head whipped to the side so fast I was surprised she didn’t hurt herself. “What?”

I blinked, and then glanced at Greyson and Big Mac. They looked similarly puzzled. “Are you sure?” I couldn’t help but ask. Arlo—Lilac—whoever he was, did look awfully dead. And more than that, his body looked empty. The lights were out, and nobody was home.

“I see dead people, remember?” Marta pointed to an open space next to her. “He’s right here.”

*Is this like the real version of having an imaginary friend?*

Violet, however, seemed to believe her. Her face immediately brightened. “Really? He’s here? He’s not gone?”

Marta tilted her head as if she were listening to something nobody else could hear, and then snorted. “Yeah, he’s definitely not gone. Lilac is tethered to me, somehow—he must have lost Arlo’s body because he was too far away from me.”

“But why didn’t he go back into the body again when we came back?” Violet asked.

Marta shook her head. “I’m not sure. It takes energy for a spirit to manifest itself. Even though Lilac might protest, I think he just doesn’t have the strength to do it again yet.”

*Okay…* I didn’t really know what to make of any of this. But I was relieved on Violet’s behalf to know that Lilac was still here—the grief on the girl’s face when she’d thought she’d lost her brother for a second time had just been devastating to watch.

And I honestly couldn’t blame her for being so hung up on getting a second chance at having her brother in her life, even if it meant things were out of balance between the spirit world and the material world. I was pretty sure that just about anyone who’d lost someone they loved would jump at the chance to talk to them again.

Beyond that, Violet and Lilac were twins. They had a special bond, and when Lilac died, it had seemed like a piece of Violet had gone with him. Maybe getting her brother back, even in this ghostly way, would help her come to terms with that first terrible loss.

Watching these two siblings fight to be together, even with the veil of death hanging between them, I couldn’t help but think about Artemis. She wasn’t dead—at least, not that I knew of—but I wasn’t thinking of her or looking for her as hard as I probably should have been. Was she okay? What if she wasn’t?

I’d only just met Artemis, and things had been nonstop crazy since then. What if something happened to her? What if I lost my only sibling when we’d barely had any time together?

Guilt and panic bubbled in my stomach. If I were in Violet’s shoes, I’d be absolutely devastated.

She was huddled over Arlo’s body. Probably hoping Lilac could gather the strength to occupy it again. “How is he doing?” Violet asked.

“He’s a little… unsettled about all of this,” Marta said. “But he’s happy to be here with you.”

“Hey.” The soft, deep voice next to me pulled me away from watching Violet. It was Greyson.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

I bit my lip. “Honestly? No idea.”

He reached out to put a hand on my arm, no doubt an attempt to comfort me. But even before we touched, I felt as if an electric current were passing between us. For one crazy moment, all I wanted to do was run into his arms, where I felt safest.

*But I can’t do that. I can’t afford to be weak around him, not after all the boundaries I set down.*

I shook my head and stepped away. “Actually, I’m fine.”

I felt his eyes on me, felt the displeasure and disappointment practically radiating off him in waves. But I also felt another set of eyes on me—Big Mac.

The witch walked over to me. “Have you heard anything about what’s going on with Artemis?”

The question—and the aggression in Big Mac’s voice—put me on edge. It felt more than a little accusatory. “Of course I haven’t heard anything. How could I?”

But the question still nagged at me. Along with my inability to answer it.

*Artemis, where are you?*

The witch watched my face carefully. “We need to find her right away.”

*No freaking duh.* But I had a feeling Big Mac had a different motivation in mind than I did. “Why?”

“I think you know why—everything that’s happening right now reeks of the Orb, and we both know that Artemis has been acting strange lately.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I’m saying that I’m not so sure your sister really *did* try to get rid of the Orb, back at Haystack Rock.”

My jaw dropped. “How dare—”

Noise thundered from upstairs, cutting me off. Giving Arlo’s limp body one last look, Greyson ran toward the staircase, and the rest of us followed. We poured into the living room, where Rishika, Sage, Zainab, and my parents were all standing in front of the wide windows overlooking the lawn, their mouths agape with horror.

I frowned and moved to the window. “What are you looking—”

Then I gasped. A trio of what my brain could only describe as zombies was racing across the lawn, heading straight for the pack house.

**Episode 1254**

LOLA

My heart pounded as I followed Emmett down one of the dark hallways of Tottenville, and I was sure it wasn’t only due to the compromising situation he’d nearly caught me in.

It felt like we’d been walking through a maze of stone walls and candles for ages. For a house that mostly seemed like a gorgeous, new age art haven, a lot of the decor looked like it had been pulled directly out of a Gothic romance.

*Wait, what?* Heat rushed into my face. *Am I seriously walking down a dark hallway with a strange man and thinking about* romance *right now? Come on, Lola! Stop thinking with your lady parts! You have a mate! And besides, Emmett is a professor. I’m sure he’d never see one of his students that way.*

The firm pep talk helped a bit, though it didn’t come anywhere close to answering the question of where the actual hell Emmett was taking me. And it didn’t squash the butterflies in my stomach either. We turned down a hallway, and the shift in the air wafted Emmett’s scent over to me.

Honestly, it wasn’t terrible. My mouth actually watered, and not in a “I want to suck you dry like a bottle of Evian on a hot afternoon”kind of way.

I blew out a breath. *Maybe it was time for a different tactic.*

Instead of focusing on the no-no that was any non-academic thought about Emmett, I thought about Jay. How he made me feel, how he’d always supported me and loved me, no matter how hard I made it for him to do so. I thought about the fun time we’d had over the phone—before Emmett had interrupted.

My stomach twisted with a familiar, unpleasant sensation. Guilt. Like I’d done something wrong. Abandoned Jay, somehow.

But I wasn’t doing anything wrong! I was *supposed* to be here! In fact, I had to be here if I ever wanted to return to my pack, my mate, and the people I loved without putting them in danger. I’d chosen to come here to learn to be a vampire and to understand how to control my urges.

And Emmett was a professor, right? He was here to teach me. That was almost certainly what this little midnight jaunt was all about it. Nothing wrong, nothing even vaguely Gothic romance-y. Just me, learning more about my new life from my teacher.

Still, the stomach churning didn’t ease up. The best thing I could do was try to ignore it.

I zoned back into my surroundings as Emmett led me to… wherever it was we were going. As we turned down another hallway, I noticed a long row of glass cases standing along the wall. My eyes caught on one item in particular, an old black and white photo. The caption on the photo said that it was from 1916.

It was a picture of Irma. And she looked exactly the same as she’d looked earlier today.

My eyes widened. *Oh my god. She really is ancient, isn’t she?*

Emmett stopped and looked back at me. “Lola, what is it?”

I pointed at the photo. “I had no idea Irma was so… experienced.”

His full lips quirked into a smile. “If you’re into history, you should talk to her. She was on board the Titanic, just a few years before that picture was taken. If there’s a period in relatively modern history that you want to know about, it’s probably safe to assume she lived through it.”

I blinked. “Whoa. I… feel like an infant now?”

“How’s that?”

“Well, I guess I always knew that vampires were immortal. Like, it’s one of those things that even human books and movies get right,” I babbled on. “But seeing it… knowing that even if I added up all the ages of everyone in my pack house to one big number, it would still probably be younger than some of the people who live here? It’s just…” I sighed. “It’s kind of hard to wrap my head around.”

Emmett’s head tilted to the side, and he stared at me with an intense expression. One I didn’t know him well enough to figure out. One that made my heart flip flop.

*Keep it in your pants, girl! You have a mate. The best mate in the whole freaking world!*

I tore my eyes away from Emmett’s and pretended to be interested in another black and white photo. I stared at it without really seeing it as silence settled between us.

Finally, Emmett said, “That’s exactly what I wanted to show you.”

My head snapped up. “What? Really? What do you mean?”

He grinned. “Good things come to those who wait. Now, come on. Ideally I’d like to get there before sunrise.”

Oh my god, the sexy professor was teasing me.

I gulped and followed after him, repeating *Jay, Jay, Jay* over and over again in my mind.

We took another turn—I had no idea how I was ever going to find my way back—and stopped in front of a huge wooden door. Emmett twisted the knob and pushed it open to reveal a cozy library with plants all around.

I gasped. I hadn’t seen something so lovely before. The bookshelves looked to be made of mahogany, and they hugged the walls from the polished marble floor to the elegant moldings around the vaulted ceiling. Rolling ladders were set against the shelves, and a fireplace roared at the other end of the room. It must have been enchanted so as not to present a danger to the books, and it gave off more heat than a normal fireplace, keeping the whole room cozy without being stifling.

Overstuffed armchairs, regular chairs, and tables with spindly legs, and even a couple of chaise lounges were scattered artfully around the room, offering an earthly comfort to the grandeur of the bookcases and architecture. Taper candles were set in seemingly random places around the room, and they cast a warm, romantic glow. I took a deep breath; the plants made the air so much fresher and mixed with the book smell? Pretty much heaven.

Faced with all this beauty, I could barely breathe, much less string a whole sentence together. “Wow,” I managed. “This is beautiful.”

*This must be what Belle felt like in* Beauty and the Beast*.*

Emmett moved to a shelf with the confidence of someone familiar with the space. He ran a finger down the spines of a row of books, and my breath caught in my throat as if he’d been dragging that same digit down *my* spine.

“I thought you might like it,” he said with a smile.

He looked so beautiful in the candlelight. Like a dark, sexy Disney prince. His broad shoulders were the perfect inverse to his slim waist, and I wondered if he’d ever tried swimming. His cheekbones looked like they’d been cut from marble, chiseled at just the right angle—mathematical perfection. His eyes practically glowed in the candlelight. It was all too easy to imagine those eyes on me—the intense way he’d stared at me, like I was a puzzle he was thrilled to solve.

Was it just me or was it actually hot in here?

*God dammit, Lola! What’s gotten into you? You’re here to learn!*

Emmett finally found the right book and pulled it off the shelf. He laid it out over a nearby table and motioned for me to join him.

I leaned over the old book, hyperaware of how close we were.

*Come on, Lola. It’s time to focus.*

Emmett flipped through the pages until he reached the section he was looking for: “A Treatise on Mortality.”

I frowned. “What’s this got to do with me?”

He looked at me, and our eyes locked. I swallowed and looked back down at the book.

“It has everything to do with you. Because you…” He paused, never taking his eyes off me. “You are unique.”

My heart was doing back flips.

He pointed to a section. “Read this out loud.”

I scanned the text. “‘Among all those who walk outside the boundaries of the human realm, the vampyre is the sole heir to immortality. Once transformed from Adam’s flesh, the vampyre walks through the veil of death but does not linger. Thus, they are both dead and can never die.’” I looked up at Emmett, confused. “I mean, that’s like Vampire 101, right? I knew that already.”

He pointed to a spot further down the page. “Keep reading.”

I cleared my throat and continued. “‘As to the effects of vampyric bites on those other creatures who forsake humanity, the werewolf alone is exempt from transformation. The inner wolf knows only how to fight, and in that battle… the wolf will die.’” The breath stuttered out of me, but I forced myself to continue. “‘Along with its human counterpart’?”

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

I looked at Emmett, aghast. “Are you saying that I’m going to die?!”

**Episode 1255**

GREYSON

I stared through the living room window, shock and horror spilling into my chest.

This had to be some sort of nightmare. Or a bad trip at the very least, because there was no way to explain how it was possible for a trio of undead—not vampires, not ghosts, but something that looked very, *very* much like, well, zombies—to be heading for the pack house.

“Oh god,” I heard Big Mac gasp.

They raced across the lawn, moving faster than any zombie I’d ever seen in a movie—if that’s what these even were. They were unlike anything I’d ever seen before. One of them was little more than a skeleton. The other two were still partially decomposing, and bits of flesh and clothing clung to them as they moved.

*Maybe this is some kind of post-Halloween thing? Or one of Astrid’s glamours? Maybe she’s playing a trick?* My mind scrambled to find a reasonable explanation that didn’t involve me adding actual zombies to the list of things that went bump in the night.

Tom stepped closer to the window, his eyes narrowed. “What on earth are those things?”

I wished I knew.

As the creatures got closer to the pack house, it was easier to make out their appearances. If they *were* humans playing around, then they had a movie-quality costume person helping them. One of the creatures was missing an entire arm, and everything—from the exposed bones, to the greenish, peeling skin, to the sunken eyes and cheeks, to the uncanny way the creatures moved so fast and so *unnaturally* at the time—seemed too flawlessly detailed to be anything but authentic.

Cali turned to me with wide eyes. “Are there *zombies* out there?”

I shook my head helplessly. Did it look like it? Hell yes. But the bigger question was, were zombies even real? Up until literally two minutes ago, I would have been certain the answer was no.

But there wasn’t time to think about this, or wonder what other horrendous surprises the world had in store. The monsters were already almost halfway across the lawn. I had no idea what they wanted, or what they would do when they reached us. But I wasn’t about to sit here and wait to find out.

I looked down at Cali. Her eyes were wide, glued to the window with a stricken expression. I’d seen that look so many times before, and it never failed to make my heart stutter. My mate was afraid, and I hated it. I would never get used to seeing her like this. I knew that, regardless of what these creatures were, what they wanted, or the risk they posed, I would take them out. I would do whatever it took to make Cali feel safe.

I turned to the stunned pack members pressed against the windows and snapped into Alpha mode. “Stay inside. I’m going to deal with this.”

Big Mac met my eyes, raising an eyebrow. A silent question. She’d never quite been one of the pack, which meant she’d never been completely obedient. Normally, it annoyed the hell out of me. Right now, I was glad to have the backup.

I nodded toward the door, and she and I headed for the foyer. I turned back to face the pack members, my eyes landing and staying on Cali. “Remember, stay here. I don’t know what we’re dealing with, and until we have more information, I don’t want anyone in this pack risking themselves.”

I never took my eyes off Cali. I hoped she understood the meaning behind my words.

*Stay here, where you’re protected, love*, I told her.

*Stay here because I can’t let anything happen to you.* I couldn’t bear to tell her this.

I turned away from my pack members and headed for the front door. “Put a shield around the house,” I told Big Mac in a low voice. “But leave the lawn open. We need to see what the hell these things are.”

I walked through the front door and stepped out onto the lawn to meet the trio of monsters. They moved fast—too fast. And yet, their movements were more like barely coordinated lurches than actual steps. Like puppets being tugged along on a string, only staying upright because their master willed it.

With a jolt of horror, I realized one of them was running on all fours, but was clearly the rotting remains of a person. *What the fuck is this?*

Again, I had no time to think, to plan, or sit there in horrified wonder. They weren’t slowing down. I’d sort of hoped that I’d be able to talk to them and figure out what the hell they wanted, but the growls and snarls they let out as they approached pretty much killed that idea.

*Fighting it is, then.*

And then they were on me.

I shifted and dodged out of the way before they could touch me, and to my absolute shock, the zombies spun on their heels and tracked my movement—then came at me at the same breakneck speed. I couldn’t wrap my head around how quick they were, what was powering their movements. I’d always thought zombies—and I cringed to even *think* the word, but I didn’t know what else to call them—were supposed to be clumsy and slow. They didn’t have muscles or ligaments, at least not all of them. Blood didn’t pump through their veins.

What, exactly, was powering these nightmares?

Maybe I should’ve let the rest of the pack come out, too. There was a very real chance that I was in deep shit here.

One of the creatures jumped in front of me, cutting off my next attempt at evasion, and I had no choice but to barrel into it, teeth flashing. The monster practically fell to pieces the moment I made contact with it. I skidded to a stop in front of the disgusting, decayed mass of bones and sinew and rotten flesh.

*Well, that was easy, at least.*

“Greyson, don’t let them bite you!”

I spun to see Cali standing on the porch. What the fuck? Hadn’t I just explicitly told her to stay inside? For all I knew, Big Mac’s barrier didn’t work on undead monsters.

“If they bite you, you could turn into a zombie too!” Violet called out next to her.

Ugh, this wasn’t a TV show. I didn’t have time for paranoid theories from horror movies. After all, zombies weren’t even real.

Another reanimated corpse leapt at me, and I tore that one to pieces too.

Okay, so zombies were *possibly* real. But that didn’t mean pop culture knew anything about these things.

… *I should probably avoid their teeth, just in case.*

In almost no time, I’d taken down all three monsters. Their remnants lay motionless, strewn across the lawn. I turned to Big Mac and shifted back to human. “What the hell were those things?”

She shrugged, her eyes still wide. She looked just as confused as I felt. “Wish I knew.”

Fuck. None of this made any sense. At least they went down easy. I was heading back to the porch, considering the best way to start looking into this phenomenon, when the front door flew open and Cali raced out.

“Greyson!” she screamed. “Behind you!”

I whirled around. “What the fuck?”

One of the zombies was getting back up again—even though its neck had been completely ripped open its head was attached to the rest of its body by a thin strip of flesh. I fought the urge to gag, and then a new wave of horror washed away all of my disgust. The other two zombies were getting up too, even though they’d essentially collapsed into pieces.

My stomach twisted as one of the zombies pulled off its own arm with a disgusting popping sound and rushed forward, like it was going to use its own limb as a club.

I shifted and quickly dispatched two of the creatures again. Just like the first time, it was almost effortless to knock them down. Hopefully this time they wouldn’t get up again.

I caught movement in the corner of my eye. The last of the trio had taken off again and was sprinting into the woods.

As much as I wanted to let it retreat and hope I never saw its ugly mug again, I knew that if I could catch it and restrain it, then maybe I could try to question it. Figure out where the hell it and its friends had come from.

I chased after the zombie and was soon enveloped by the trees. The zombie was nowhere to be seen. I stopped for a moment, trying to catch its scent, and then a cold, freakishly strong hand gripped the nape of my neck and whipped me around like a ragdoll.

The whole thing happened so fast, I couldn’t even muster up a reaction. All too suddenly, there were teeth at my neck and hot, putrid breath in my face.

*Fuck. I’m about to be zombie food.*

The monster growled and leaned in—

And then exploded in a burst of light. I dropped to the ground and scrambled back. Cali stepped out of the trees and raced up to me. “Greyson! Are you okay?”

She’d followed me. Alone. Relief and anger mixed in a dizzying cocktail. I shifted back to human and barely felt it when she threw her arms around me.

“Did they hurt you? Did they bite you?” She checked me over, running her hands over my naked body, and I was suddenly very aware that she’d backed me up against a tree.

“I’m fine—”

She looked up at me, her eyes wide with fear, but not for herself. She was afraid for me. That was why she’d run out here and put herself at risk. My mouth went dry.

My mate… She’d saved me. And more importantly, she was *safe*.

I couldn’t stop myself from tipping my head down and kissing her.

**Episode 1256**

XAVIER

My left arm was on fire, but I forced myself to breathe through the pain. *It’s okay. You’ll survive. And more importantly, the chain is broken. Just keep breathing.*

I sounded terrible, even in my mental pep talk. But still, I was optimistic. If I could just withstand the pain, just suffer through it, then I knew I’d be able to break the rest of them and finally be free. I’d show them who was really at the top of the food chain, and that it wasn’t some ancient bag of bones with a taste for A-negative. My wolf would rip them all to shreds before they could even beg for mercy.

And then I’d escape, find my way home, and reunite with Cali, just like I was meant to. Freedom was so close, I could almost taste it. I pushed myself into a shift again and jerked hard against the remaining chains with a grunt that turned into a scream. *Jesus Christ, those chains hurt!*

And knowing exactly how much it took to truly damage a werewolf, I hoped like hell that they’d break soon. Otherwise I might not ever make it off this gurney, even to be served up as Iñigo’s loaner blood bag.

Suddenly, something pricked the back of my neck. There was a hot flash of pain, and then my body went limp and crashed down heavily onto the gurney. I couldn’t move, couldn’t fight, couldn’t keep shifting.

*No, no, no!* I screamed inside my head, inside my heart. Even though I couldn’t move, frustration thrummed through my limbs, pumped into my veins. I wanted nothing more than to scream, to thrash, to fight and kick and snarl and claw. To show them what a monster really looked like. That I wasn’t their passive dog to kick around.

But my body was no longer under my control—even though my mind couldn’t have been clearer. So all I could do was lie there, helpless, on that fucking gurney, staring up at the clear, open sky.

Kira’s face loomed into my line of sight. She gave me that clinical gaze I loved so much, her lips twisted into a frown. “You really shouldn’t have done that.”

*No fucking shit.* It wasn’t like I’d planned on lying here like a fish out of water. Actually, I was even less powerful than that—a fish that flopped up on shore could actually move if it wanted to. I didn’t even have that luxury.

She shook her head with a *tsk*ing noise. “Typical Alpha-blooded wolf behavior, thinking you can fight your way out of any situation. Tell me, do you ever think about anything other than fighting, eating, and fucking?”

Wow. Her tone was really heated, more than the situation probably called for. I’d broken one chain, and I hadn’t even made a proper getaway before she’d drugged me. What did she have to be so pissed off about?

Unless this wasn’t about me. Maybe she had some kind of personal issue with werewolves, or at least with Alphas.

Kira let out a long-suffering sigh. “Now I’m going to have to sedate you again.” She was talking to me like we were having a conversation, but since I couldn’t currently form even a single word to save my life, I had a feeling this was more for her benefit than mine.

“I promised you’d be up and kicking for Quinton, you know,” she continued. “But you’ve given me no choice.”

She loaded another syringe, and my heart sped up into double-time. I wanted to scream, wanted to fight against both the witch and the medicine she was dumping into my veins…

But instead of ripping her limb from limb, I found myself drifting into darkness.

\*\*\*\*

My eyes snapped open, and I found myself in Cali’s childhood bedroom. Sunlight streamed in through the open window, along with the crisp scent of spring. I rolled over to see Cali tucked into bed next to me, sleeping peacefully.

I looked warily around the room, then back at Cali. My instincts were screaming at me to fight, but… fight what? There was nothing here.

*Maybe it’s from my dreams… They were so fucking dark.* I remembered vampires and ghosts and my father and something… I strained myself to remember and came up short. *Something about Cali and Greyson?*

The thought alone made my skin crawl, and I shook my head. Everything was fine. It was just a nightmare and now, thank god, I’d woken up. I looked back down at Cali and felt a smile tugging at my lips. With her at my side, all of that darkness seemed so far away.

I snuggled down next to my mate, wrapping her in my arms. Nothing had ever felt so right. I couldn’t wait to spend the day with Cali and her parents.

As I stroked her hair, I couldn’t help wondering where all those dark thoughts had come from…

*No, it doesn’t matter now.* I was awake, right where I was supposed to be.

Cali stirred in my arms and lifted her head, smiling up at me sleepily. “You’re already awake?” Her voice was rough with sleep.

I kissed her forehead. “Just enjoying the view.”

Heat rushed into her cheeks. God, she was so adorable. She eyed me with a devious grin. “Would you like to enjoy another view?”

I felt my own smile widening in response. “There is no version of you that I wouldn’t want to see more of.”

“Good.” She crawled onto my lap and leaned in, brushing her lips against mine. It was a clumsy kiss—she was still clearly a little sleepy, a little softer around the edges, a little less inhibited than normal. But I didn’t mind. She was perfect. And everything about this moment was perfect too.

The kiss deepened, growing more urgent, hungry. I nipped at her bottom lip, and when she gasped against my mouth, I drank her in deeper. Her sighs and the little hitches in her breath sent all my blood rushing straight to my cock.

Cali broke away from my mouth long enough to ease her shirt over her head, and then to tug off mine. Then her lips were back on mine. She kissed me deeply, like she couldn’t get enough, but it wasn’t rushed, wasn’t a heated race to completion. We had all the time in the world, after all.

The rest of our clothes were peeled away, and my mouth left a hot trail across each inch of newly exposed skin.

“Xavier,” Cali moaned beneath me, her naked body pressed against mine. My mouth trailed lower, closer and closer to the apex of her thighs, and she twined her fingers into my hair.

The cry she let out when my tongue first lapped at her hot, swollen core almost made me come on the spot. I anchored my hands on her hips, right over her tiger stripes, and proceeded to drive her wild. With each lap and swirl and flick of my tongue, my lips coming in every now and then to suck at her swollen clit, Cali moved her hips more, gripped my head tighter, and soon, she was moaning like a cat in heat, rutting her hips up against my face and holding me in place for her use.

Her body bowed forward and she came in a hot rush, her cries echoing in my ears. She was absolutely delicious.

I worked her through her aftershocks until she was boneless on the mattress.

“How—was—the view?” she panted.

My lips still shiny with her slick, I leaned in and kissed her hard. “Fucking gorgeous.”

Her hips canted up against mine with a whine. She was insatiable, my tiger.

I settled between her legs, wrapping her thighs around my waist, and slowly, oh so slowly, sank into her swollen heat.

“Fuck,” I breathed, resting my head in the crook of her neck. How did it always feel like this? So good, so perfect.

Cali reached for my hands, and I entwined our fingers and pressed our joined hands into the mattress on either side of her head. I rolled my hips into hers slowly, savoring the sensation. Why rush? We had all the time in the world.

I took my sweet time with her, nibbling at her neck, whispering about how fucking perfect she felt wrapped around me, reaching down to where our bodies were joined to rub at that bundle of nerves…

And when we reached that peak, when Cali clamped down like a vise around me, crying out my name, I saw stars.

This was how we were meant to be.

I gathered her in my arms, kissing her flushed, sweat-slicked skin. “You’re amazing. You know that?”

“Mmm… You too.” She snuggled closer. “I’m thirsty, though.”

“Well after that performance, I think you deserve breakfast in bed.” I eased myself out from under the covers and slipped on some sweatpants. “Do you want coffee or OJ, Cali?”

She sat up in bed, her expression pinched with confusion. “Who’s Cali?” Her voice was all wrong.

I stepped back with a gasp and screwed my eyes shut as a blinding light suddenly hit my face.

When I peeled my eyelids open again, I found myself in an unfamiliar, grimy, dark room, with Kira sitting at my side.

It had all been a dream.

*No…*

Kira suddenly spoke, her voice low. “If you want any chance of living, tell me who Cali is.”

**Episode 1257**

How was it that no matter how many times I kissed Greyson, it always felt like the first time? That rush of longing, the chemistry sparking between us, the sheer sense of *right* that hummed through my body and soul any time we touched…

Despite all the good, firm boundaries I’d tried to lay down with him and Xavier, the second Greyson’s lips touched mine I absolutely melted against him. It felt like his strong arms were the only thing holding me upright, the only thing keeping me grounded, keeping me from melting into a puddle of want in the middle of the forest.

I nipped at his bottom lip and deepened the kiss, savoring the sensation of Greyson’s lips and tongue moving against my own. Sure, we were probably in danger, but I couldn’t think about that now. It didn’t feel real—at least, nowhere near as real as the man in my arms. God, I’d missed this so much.

Why had I ever walked away from this? From him?

The thought brought me up short, and I broke away with a gasp. I stepped back, and Greyson mimicked the movement, following me and shortening the distance between us even as I tried to widen it. I put my hands on his chest to try to keep him at bay.

“I can’t,” I whispered.

Disappointment flickered through his eyes, and I felt the echo of that emotion through our bond. It sent an ache through my chest. Never in a million years had I wanted to hurt him. And yet, no matter what I did, no matter how I tried to handle the *due destini* curse, it seemed the only thing I *could* reliably do was hurt him.

Greyson recovered quickly, and a pained smile stretched across his lips. “I get it. And I’m sorry. I, uh, got kind of caught up in all of this, I guess.”

“Me too.” I forced myself to look away from his eyes—anywhere but that deep, longing gaze. I settled for his chest, and it was then that I realized I’d never taken my hands off of him. I was suddenly *very* aware of the heat of his skin just beneath my palms.

My mouth went dry. Our kiss was still so fresh, so recent that it barely counted as a memory. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew I needed to back away, to stop touching him, to forget that anything had ever happened because a) boundaries! And, perhaps more importantly, b) zombies were real and out to get us?

But I didn’t back away. I didn’t take my hands off him, and I was *not* going to forget that kiss anytime soon. The heat of it felt branded into my lips. Slowly, my heart in my throat, I lifted my eyes to Greyson’s.

The amount of sheer love and longing I saw there nearly knocked me over. I forgot how to breathe. How to think. How to do anything except *want*. Heat traveled down my neck, and I felt tingles working their way up my fingertips from where we were connected. I knew just how easy it would be to close the gap between us and kiss him. To tear off my clothes and feel him, my mate, skin to skin. It would be the easiest thing in the world. And oh my god, did I want it.

Greyson slowly reached for one of my hands and pried it off his chest. My heart raced as he lifted my fingers to his lips. It was meant to be a sweet gesture, I was sure, but his dilated pupils looked anything but sweet.

“Don’t get any ideas, love,” he said softly.

My lungs unclenched, and I stepped back. Relief flooded through me. Greyson was teasing me, but more than that, he was giving me an out. He respected my boundaries, didn’t try to push them when I’d told him no. Even when he could no doubt read the desire on my face.

My hand slipped out of his grip, and I stopped touching him altogether. *Come on, Cali. Get yourself together!* I’d made up my mind to keep my distance from both of the brothers. Greyson, for all of his gentle understanding, was making that boundary feel impossible to enforce.

Xavier, as it turned out, was making it pretty damn easy. A tendril of worry slipped down my spine at the thought. Where was he? And shouldn’t he have been back by now? Was he truly all right? I shook myself. I couldn’t worry about that right now. If he was far, far away from me, then that was for the best. In the meantime, I apparently needed to add zombies to my list of problems.

I took another step back and looked down at the ground. The remnants of the corpse were scattered near our feet. It had seemed so terrifying when it was upright and attacking, but now that I’d blasted it, it was just a pile of bones. It was difficult to imagine something so vicious rising out of that.

I swallowed. “We should get back to the pack house.”

“Right.”

We set off back the way we’d come.

“Have you ever seen anything like those… zombies?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Honestly, I can’t explain it. It’s like something out of a bad horror flick, and yet…” He sighed. “Hopefully Big Mac can shed some light on things.”

Dread crept across my skin, leaving goosebumps in its wake. The sudden appearance of all this ghost and zombie stuff couldn’t be a coincidence, could it?

But even if it wasn’t a coincidence, that didn’t give us the first clue about what any of this actually meant. I could only assume it was spelling out something truly horrifying.

Greyson’s head snapped up and he looked out over the trees, staring at or listening for something that I couldn’t see. He held up a hand and we came to a stop. Then, in one fluid motion, he shifted into his wolf form and mind linked with me.

*There are more coming.*

I took a deep breath and raised my hands. I could do this; I knew I could. Those zombies—or whatever they were—looked absolutely horrific, but at least they were easy to cut down. Branches and twigs cracked nearby, and leaves rustled.

They were coming for us. Fast.

I mind linked with Greyson. *Get behind me.*

His voice slid through my mind simultaneously. *Get behind me, Cali.*

I glanced over at his wolf, who cocked its head. Amusement hummed through our bond, along with something else. I felt amped up, somehow, despite the fact that we were about to face down what could be a horde of the undead.

Maybe it was because I could finally hold my own. I was finally Greyson’s equal—not just a helpless girl who needed her Alpha to protect her.

Before we could say anything more, another zombie burst through the trees, heading straight for us.

My heart sank. The zombies were pretty easy to cut down, but it was still freaky as hell to see an undead monster racing toward you. I sent a focused blast at the zombie, but it was pretty apparent that I’d used up too much juice protecting Greyson. Rather than blowing it to pieces, the blast only knocked the zombie back a little bit. It didn’t even fall over.

And worse, beyond the zombie, I saw more glowing, lifeless eyes. Over a dozen undead creatures were headed straight for us.

*Oh shittlesticks!*

Beside me, Greyson braced himself for a fight. But there were so many of them. How could we even hope to make it out of this?

The zombies didn’t hesitate, and neither did we. I pushed my weakening magic to the limits, blasting one zombie after another, while Greyson dashed and leapt and bit and clawed every one of the monsters he could reach.

Still, it wasn’t enough.

I backed up, and Greyson mirrored me until we felt a large tree at our backs.

What the hell were we going to do?

I glanced beyond the horde, hoping that they didn’t have any reinforcements, and then the breath was kicked out of my chest. Through the trees, beyond the zombies, I spotted my sister.

“Artemis!” I called. “Help!”

She turned to look at me, a strange expression on her face. I’d never seen that look before. But she was still my sister.

“*Artemis*!”

Greyson looked up to follow my line of sight, and then he went still. Artemis was still too. Why wasn’t she moving? Why wasn’t she helping us?

Then she put up her hand and, like magic, the zombies suddenly turned away from Greyson and me and sprinted—some on two legs, some on all fours—back into the trees.

I was only vaguely aware of Greyson shifting back and racing to my side.

“Artemis!” I called again. “Come back!”

My sister turned to look at me again, and without the threat of death looming over me, I could see her much more clearly. She looked like hell. Her eyes were glazed over. Her hair was a stringy mess. She had dirt and… other things… flaking across her skin. Even though she was looking in my direction, I had the strangest sense that she wasn’t seeing me.

I took a step toward her, her name on the tip of my tongue. But then Greyson grabbed me by the arm and pulled me back, clapping a hand over my mouth.

What the hell?

I wriggled in his arms, watching as Artemis disappeared into the trees.

Once she was gone, Greyson let me go, and I rounded on him with a snarl. “What the hell were you thinking? We have to go after her!”

His face dead serious, he leaned down and whispered in my ear. “That’s not Artemis.”

**Episode 1258**

LOLA

It was like I’d been punched in the gut. Winded, I stared up at Emmett, the words I’d just read echoing over and over again in my ears, making me feel woozy and lightheaded with fear. It couldn’t be, and yet…

*I’m going to die. I’m going to die. I’m going to die…*

An image of Jay rose up before me—Jay with his beautiful smile, Jay’s arms reaching out to me, rolling around on the bed, kissing me, being together… And there were so many things I hadn’t done yet, like bungee jumping or visiting Hollywood. Hell, I hadn’t even put out a viral makeup tutorial on YouTube yet!

“But I can’t die! I’m way too young and pretty!” The words were out before I could stop myself. I clapped my hand over my mouth in horror and my cheeks burned bright red with mortification.

*Oh my god, did I actually just say that out loud? Could I have sounded more like a shallow idiot?*

I glanced over at Emmett and bit my lip, prepared for his look of scorn and total disgust. To my surprise, he only threw back his head and roared with laughter.

I was shocked. I should have been relieved, but to be honest, I was kind of pissed off and close to tears.

“Really, you’re going to laugh at me at a time like this? Shit.” I started to pace, trying to talk myself down from the ledge. It wasn’t working. “Okay, okay. Okay, no it’s not okay. Oh my god. Do I need to make a will? Oh god. What are my dads going to say? Fuck. I can’t handle this!”

I’d worked myself up into a total panic when I felt a gentle hand take hold of my wrist.

“Lola. Stop.” Emmett’s voice was low and kind. I stopped mid-pace and met his warm, serious gaze. A little unwanted shiver ran through me. He smiled. I wished he wouldn’t smile because when he did, something crazy happened to my insides.

“Look, I’m not saying you’re going to die,” Emmett continued. “Listen to me. Typically, a werewolf who is bitten by a vampire and starts to go through the change *will* die within hours—and I’ll be honest, it’s not a pretty process.”

A fresh wave of panic rushed over me, and I tried to squirm out of his grasp.

*Oh shit, I’m totally going to die!*

Emmett only tightened his grip. “But listen, Lola.” He gave my wrist a little squeeze “Don’t you see? Here you are! Clearly alive and well! And clearly a vampire. What I’m saying is…” He paused for a moment, his eyes scanning my face. “What I’m saying is that you’re special.”

Special*? What did that mean?*

I swallowed. I wanted to shake off the dreamy melty feeling I was experiencing, but it was hard. After all, who wouldn’t feel butterflies when a super-hot dude looked into your eyes in a candlelit library and told you that you were special?

I took a little step back, wanting to clear my head, but Emmett continued.

“I mean, I’d heard rumors about people like you—stories of vampires whose hearts continued to pump, whose blood continued to flow. But at Tottenville, we learned that that was all they were—just stories and rumors.” He brightened. “That is, until *you* came along. Don’t you see, Lola?”

He was looking into my eyes, his gaze earnest and intense. I couldn’t help but take a step toward him. Or maybe he stepped toward me. Either way, we were now standing close together, gazing into each other’s eyes. I glanced down and saw that he was grasping both my hands. When had that happened? I didn’t know and didn’t care. I was lost in his beautiful eyes, drowning, and I didn’t want to be saved…

A burst of giggles exploded from the doorway. I sprang away from Emmett and spun around to see who had broken the spell. I could see four little heads peeping in through the doorway. Vampire children. Ugh.

To be honest, most of them gave me the creeps. They looked so innocent and young, despite the fact that some of them (probably *most* of them) were wayolder than I was. It was seriously unnerving. But, to be fair, these little spectators were acting… well, like children. They were looking from Emmett to me and back again, giggling. And just when I thought it couldn’t get more juvenile, they burst into a well-known and highly annoying little kid chant.

Apparently, it didn’t matter if you were a century-old bloodsucker or not—some taunts never died.

“EMMETT AND LOLA SITTING IN A TREE, K–I–S–S–I–N—”

“All right! That’s enough! Get to bed!” Emmett waved them away. He’d been trying to sound stern, but his lips twitched upward, and his eyes gleamed with good humor. That kind paternal thing… It was an adorable look on him. The kids all scattered, still laughing, and Emmett turned back to me, a smile playing across his lips.

“What exactly does this mean, then?” I didn’t want to ruin the moment, but I had to know. “I was a werewolf hybrid, and now are you saying that I’m a vampire hybrid?”

Emmett blinked. “You were a werewolf hybrid?” His eyes narrowed as he studied me intently. “Interesting.”

Hope rose in my chest and heat in my cheeks. “Yes! Why? Do you think that might explain it?”

He frowned, gave it some thought, and then reluctantly shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. Werewolf hybrids have been bitten before.” He paused. “They just haven’t survived. But with you…” He gazed at me. “Well, as I said, there’s something… different about you.”

My cheeks started to burn again. I couldn’t help but feel overwhelmed. The werewolf inversion spell must have truly messed me up somehow. On the brighter side, I wasn’t dead yet! You had to celebrate the small victories.

It was then that the meaning of what Emmett was saying hit me like a sledgehammer.

If I was so different and unique that I surprised even someone as worldly and as smart as Emmett, just how in the hell was anyone at Tottenville going to be able to help me?

My heart sank, and a wave of despair crashed over me. I suddenly felt exhausted, crushed by the weight of this realization. I’d had so much hope that I was going to find the answers I needed here, and all I was getting was more questions. I should have known better. Sometimes it felt like I would never learn.

Emmett could probably see the disappointment on my face. He took a step toward me and did his best to perk me up.

“But Lola, this is exciting!” he insisted. “Just think, there’s so much we can learn from you!”

I swallowed hard, trying and failing to meet his gaze, “Yeah, but I wanted to learn from *you*,” I said. “I was hoping this place could give me answers. Help me learn how to be a vampire, not find out I’m maybe some weird kind.”

This sucked. I couldn’t believe I’d come all the way here just to land up as some shitty science experiment.

Emmett took another step toward me. His voice was low and soft, his expression almost tender.

“You know, Lola… I think we could both learn from each other.”

I hesitated for a moment, but then I shook my head. I hadn’t felt this down in a really long time. There was nothing for me here after all, and staying would only delay the inevitable. I needed to go home. I needed Jay.

All of a sudden, all I could think of was Jay. Jay reaching out for me, pulling me close. Jay pressing me to him. All I wanted, in that moment, was to dive right into Jay’s arms, to snuggle up to him, for him to hold me tight and murmur in my ear. *Lola. Baby. Everything’s going to be okay.* Jay always knew how to calm me down, how to comfort me. Longing for him made my throat close up and my eyes burn with tears. I swallowed hard and forced myself to summon up the courage to look back at Emmett, standing there in the candlelight.

“You know, Emmett—er, Professor Laurence—it’s not that I’m not grateful for everything you’ve done.” My voice had a slight tremble, and I fought to control it. “But I just think that it’s probably best if I go back home now.”

There was a long pause that seemed to go on for an eternity. Emmett went still, as if all the humanity had left his body. All that remained was a tall, silent statue in the flickering shadows. The expression on his face was unreadable, but it unsettled me. I bit my lip. This didn’t feel right. More than that—it felt downright sinister.

Finally, Emmett spoke, each word dropping like a coin into the dark well of silence.

“Oh, I don’t think you’ll be leaving us for a very long time, Miss Spillane.”

**Episode 1259**

CHARLIE

We all stood stock-still and gaped at the three figures—the living nightmares that had appeared in the clearing and were now racing straight toward us. Their movements were disjointed, but they were fast, almost scuttling, and all sorts of images flashed through my mind—ragdolls with torn limbs and seeping stuffing; half-crushed beetles with oozing, broken shells; skinless, squeaking rats; rotten meat in human form, squirming with maggots—and then they were upon us.

There was no time to react, or even see how my parents were dealing with it. The thing was coming straight at me, lunging forward, arms outstretched as if it meant to tear my heart out of my chest, or rip my head off. I couldn’t believe how quickly it moved (and what the hell was it, anyway?) but I’d never fought anything like it before.

“Watch out!” Mom shouted.

Its movements were jerky and erratic, lumbering and clumsy while also sharp and deadly. There was no way to predict how it would come at me next, no pattern of attack, just an endless, snarling, brutal assault. No matter what I did, it never backed down and it never grew tired. The thing just came back at me over and over and over again.

Its attack was throwing me off, and out of the corner of my eye, I could see that it was throwing my parents off too. They were faltering in their defense. But how could that be? My parents were experts, masters of their craft, supernatural hunters—they had to know what we were dealing with.

“What the hell are these things?” I replied.

“No idea!” my father shouted back. His eyes were wide and shocked. The creature lurched at him again and again, and each time it came a little bit closer. He was only just managing to fend it off. I couldn’t remember my father looking like this before, his lips white and pressed tightly together, sweat beaded on his forehead. It came to me suddenly—my father was terrified.

Meanwhile the things kept on attacking, their decomposing arms flailing and crashing down, their hands ready to pull and tear with outstretched fingers grabbing and clutching. They were hellishly quick and insanely strong for all their festering rotting flesh and decaying limbs, a blur of snapping teeth and clawing bony fingers.

It didn’t seem to matter how often you knocked them down or how many killing blows you laid on them, they just popped right back up—like demonic inflatable tube men at a car dealerships, or punching bags that didn’t just punch back, but leapt toward you, trying to tear chunks of flesh from your face. And if I was growing tired, how were my parents doing?

How the hell were we going escape?

I’d just rammed a stake through a moldering horror when I heard my father cry out. I glanced over just in time to see that a zombie—the closest term to describe these things—had jumped up directly behind him. It leapt onto his back and turned to bite him, its clacking teeth inches away from chomping into his face.

*Oh. Hell. No.*

Without even thinking about it, I shifted into my wolf and charged toward the creature at full speed. No way was it going to even touch my father. I tackled the thing, which let out a scream of rage, and we fell, rolling backward together. I saw its rotting face through a sea of red rage. Howling and snapping, I tore at the creature, biting it into smaller and smaller pieces then scattering the wet, dripping chunks across the forest floor.

Instinct had totally taken over by this point, and I rounded on the other two zombies and let my teeth and claws go to work, tearing and rending the shuffling monstrosities into bloody, oozing shreds. Finally, there was silence.

My parents and I stood frozen, all of us staring in shock and disbelief at the moldering, steaming remains on the ground. The moment seemed to go on for an eternity. Tearing the creatures to pieces was the only thing that had taken them down—at least I hoped it had.

I shifted back and was instantly embarrassed. I hadn’t been naked in front of my parents since I was a toddler. They were both staring at me, and I felt a new flame of panic. My mom and dad didn’t approve of what I was. I knew that.

Were they going to start thinking I was a monster again? If I’d been thinking logically at all, there was no way I would have shifted. I didn’t want to press my luck, not when my parents weren’t trying to kill me anymore. Then again, if I hadn’t shifted, my dad would have been eaten by a zombie, so maybe it evened out.

“Charlie?”

My dad’s voice brought me back to reality, a place I wasn’t sure I wanted to be in right now. Nevertheless, I looked up at him. His eyes were shining, and his voice shook with feeling. “Son, that was incredible!”

He was beaming from ear to ear, and a jolt of emotion ran through me. My dad was proud of me, even though I’d shifted into a werewolf? I turned toward Mom—she would always be the harder sell, but maybe after this, she would be proud of me too? It only took one look at her face to know the answer, and my heart sank.

Her eyes had narrowed, and her lips were pressed tightly together. She deliberately turned away from me, and it felt like she’d punched me right in the gut. My father might have been proud of me, but my mother?

My mother still thought I was a monster.

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Later, after we were certain there were no more of those undead things anywhere, we’d gone back to the Airbnb. We’d showered, and I’d personally never been so grateful to be wearing clothes again, even if they were my dad’s shirt and jeans. The awkwardness hadn’t lifted itself since the attack.

My family now huddled together in a corner booth at a diner. My dad was still going on about how cool it had been to see me in action: “A real werewolf, my own son!” At least he sounded proud about me still. It was more than I could say for Mom. After I’d shifted, the floodgates had opened, and Dad couldn’t seem to stop talking.

“Look, I’m still not a fan of werewolves in general, but the way you fought out there…” He shook his head, marveling at the memory, and clapped me on the shoulder with real warmth. “Charlie, you saved my life.”

I smiled at him and tried my best to swallow down the hurt and anger over the fact that my mother still wouldn’t—or worse, couldn’t—even look me in the eye. I was eager to change the subject.

“What do you guys think those creatures were?” I asked. “You really haven’t seen anything like that before?”

“You mean have we ever fought the walking dead?” my dad asked.

I nodded. They looked at each other and slowly shook their heads in unison.

“Vampires, we’ve run into,” Dad said. “But reanimated whatever those were? We’d never even heard of them before tonight.”

I couldn’t help but frown. “Well that doesn’t sound good.”

“No,” Mom said. “It doesn’t.” For the first time that night, she seemed willing to talk. I brightened as she leaned forward. “That’s the thing about being a hunter—even after all the years that Paul and I have spent hunting, there’s still so much we don’t know.”

My dad nodded in agreement.

“And you,” Mom continued, finally looking at me square in the eye. “You know practically nothing.”

I started to protest, but my mother held up a hand. She wasn’t done yet.

“Charlie, your father and I have been thinking,” Mom started, “and we’ve decided it’s time for you to take your hunter lineage seriously.”

“What?” I was totally confused. “I am.”

“No.” My mom was curt. “No, you’re not.” She sighed, then continued. “You need to do your initiation rite. There’s so much you still have to learn, and you can’t be distracted.”

I frowned. “What are you talking about?” I didn’t like the sound of this.

My mother spoke clearly and slowly. “We’re leaving for Duluth in the morning.”

I balked. “What? No, I can’t! What about Violet?!” I couldn’t believe this. Was I hearing her right? “I thought all this was about vampires, not you secretly swooping in and taking me home.”

My mother stared back at me, sipping her coffee.

Fuck *that*.

Two could play that game.

I narrowed my eyes at her.

“Forget it,” I told her. “There’s no way in hell I’m going without Violet.”

My mother eyed me, equally coolly.

“Well then.” Her voice was soft and low, with no hint of love or warmth. “I guess you’ll just have to break up with her, now won’t you?”

**Episode 1260**

XAVIER

Kira stared at me. “Do I have to repeat myself? Who’s Cali?”

“What? What did you say?” I murmured, but in truth, I was only playing for time. My mind raced and my heart pounded. I didn’t like the way she was looking at me—her gaze felt almost hungry.

But witches tended to be shrewd, and this one was no different. Kira wasn’t buying my act.

“I asked you who Cali was,” she said.

I swallowed and didn’t say anything. One moment she’d been cold and detached, prepping my body like a chef prepping a prize piece of steak for an important meal, and now she seemed engaged and eager, her eyes bright with curiosity. Her intensity—coupled with the abrupt shift in mood—was disturbing. And what’s more, I hated that I’d talked about Cali in my sleep, when I’d been so out of it.

*Cali, the love of my life. Cali, her laughter, her smile, the way she felt in my arms…*

What the hell had I said?

So Kira wanted to know who Cali was? Well, Cali was practically the only person in the world I could be open and vulnerable with. And frankly, the witch doctor who was keeping me strapped to the table as a living blood bag wasn’t someone I wanted knowing anything about my personal life.

*Stop, Xavier. Think. Put your ego aside for once.*

I forced myself to stay cool and calm while I studied Kira’s face. Her expression, while eager and curious, seemed to be a little softer than before. Maybe I was kidding myself, but I thought she looked more open and less guarded.

It began to dawn on me that if I could play up some kind of sob story and win Kira’s trust, I stood a chance. That way, I could convince her that I would help with whatever terrible thing Iñigo clearly had over her. No matter what happened, I had to win her over as an ally. I eyed her as she stared at me, calculating what would work.

“Cali is my mate,” I said eventually, trying to make my voice as gentle as possible.

Wrong answer. Something flashed in her eyes, and her expression hardened.

“Ah, your *mate*.” Her tone was raw and bitter.

Inwardly, I winced. Great. She had an issue with Alphas, now she had issues with mates. Just what the hell was her deal?

*Keep going. You can do this.*

“Yes, that’s right,” I answered as calmly as possible, like she wasn’t glaring daggers at me and like I wasn’t strapped to something to be a fucking vampire’s blood bag. “Cali’s my mate, and I need to get back to her.”

Shit. That was even worse. Kira’s face twisted up in an expression of total disgust.

“You werewolves always do turn to feral dogs when it comes to your mates.” She spat out the last word, her voice dripping with contempt.

I couldn’t help but frown.

*What the fuck?*

Okay, okay. I had to stay calm, keep Kira talking. I glanced around the room. I knew that I needed to work quickly, before the client who was coming to feed from me showed up. Maybe it was time to change tactics. I decided to try and piss her off. If she was angry enough, maybe she would divulge something useful.

My heart was pounding in an alarming way, and I was beginning to feel woozy, but I had to stay alert. It was my only chance at escape.

I cleared my throat weakly, and Kira looked at me.

“Well, I wouldn’t expect a witch to know anything about love, anyway.” I said it as condescendingly as I could manage.

I saw another fierce flash in her eyes. It was clear that I’d hit a nerve.

This time, I was glad. I pressed on.

“In fact, I bet you’ve never experienced anything even close to what my mate and I have shared.”

This was clearly too much for Kira. She leapt to her feet.

“Shut up. Just shut the *fuck* up! You don’t have the slightest idea about what I’ve experienced and what I’ve lost,” she said.

I winced, struck by her pain and raw emotion. I had gone too far.

Good.

“Maybe I can help you,” I tried to say, but to my surprise and dismay it came out all garbled and strange, like I was drunk or having a stroke. Oh my god. What the hell was happening to me?

Kira frowned and took a breath. My unintelligible stream of words had halted her mid-rant. She leaned over and, taking time and care, examined my wounds—the ones that I’d received during my escape attempt.

After studying them closely, she pulled back.

“Silver poisoning.” She had gotten her control back, and her voice was calm, devoid of its previous hectic, raw emotion.

*Shit*.

While I was wondering what to do, Kira idly traced a finger along one of the black veins on my chest.

Even in my weakened and fucked up state, I managed a growl. I didn’t want her hands on me.

Kira raised an eyebrow at this feeble show of defiance, the ghost of a smile seeming to float across her lips. Still, she took her hand away. I was lucky, considering that a growl was all I could seem to manage right now. Kira wasn’t paying attention, anyway. Instead she pulled out a small vial from her medicine bag and carefully poured a few drops into my wounds. Then she put the vial back in her bag with a satisfied look and wiped her hands.

“There you go,” she said. “That’s Light Fae blood—it’ll cheer you right up.”

I started, still feeling dizzy, but the phrase “Fae blood” had triggered me. Before I could help myself, I asked, “Cali’s blood?”

The words were out before I could stop them.

Kira pulled back. “Your mate is Fae?”

The expression on her face went back to being bright and intense, as well as deeply intrigued.

*Know when to keep your fucking mouth shut, Xavier.*

I wanted to answer her, but the world was growing pretty hazy and an overwhelming need for sleep crashed over me like a wave. I slumped back, my eyelids suddenly too heavy to lift.

I was tired—I’d never been so tired in my life—and yet I didn’t seem to be sleeping. I just lay there with my eyes shut, breathing deeply. I was awake but unable to move. It was like a nightmare. And that was when I first heard the noise. Someone had entered the room and was coming closer. I could tell it was a man. He moved deliberately, like he was taking pleasure in drawing out the moment. Then he was there beside me. I sensed his presence, dark and black, heavy as smoke as he leaned over me, taking me in.

Finally, he spoke, and his voice was thick with rage.

“Kira. This is unacceptable. You told me he’d be up and kicking! You know I like my prey with some fight in it! But look at him! He’s totally out.”

Everything inside me fought to open my eyes. I wanted to shout, to protest, to tell the speaker that I could kick his ass any day of the week. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t do anything. It was no use. My eyes wouldn’t even open. I was just too damn tired.

From far away, I could hear Kira’s voice, protesting and on edge.

“It wasn’t my fault, Quinton,” she said. “He tried to escape. I can’t prevent them from trying.”

Quinton let out a harsh laugh. There was no humor in it.

“I should have known you wouldn’t be able to get the job done! And I know why—you’ve been like this ever since that werewolf killed Geoff three years ago.”

There was no answer from Kira, only a silence that spoke volumes.

Quinton laughed again, sharp and sneering, triumphant. “I thought so. You haven’t even been able to think straight since then. Color me shocked that you couldn’t be deal with them in any capable capacity.”

Kira still said nothing, but the smell of hatred and fear emanating from her was palpable, and it was clear even as I lay prone and helpless that she was barely hanging on, holding back a vicious response. As the silence stretched on, I tried my hardest to open my eyes—I wanted to see his face, wanted to know who I was dealing with.

Then, musingly and chilling, Quinton added, like it was an afterthought, “I should have known you’d want revenge on Garren’s type. That’s what this is, right?”

*Ahhh. There it is.*

Even through the drugged need for sleep, the stress, the pain, and the fear of what lay ahead, I experienced a moment of pure triumph. It shot through me like fiery adrenaline.

*Kira wants revenge.*

That was a language I spoke.

There, finally, was the crack in the wall—my way in with Kira. Because knowing this, I finally had some leverage and a chance of saving myself. And what’s more, I knew exactly how I could help her. But how would I ever convince her to listen?

**Episode 1261**

I stood in the pitch-black woods, struggling and fighting to break free and go after my sister, but Greyson held me back. I couldn’t understand what had just happened, and it was making me see red. I turned around to face Greyson, furious and confused.

“What do you mean, she’s not Artemis?”

Greyson had been scanning the woods, focused on the direction where we’d last seen Artemis, but now he turned around to face me.

“Cali.” His voice was grave and quiet, and I felt myself go still, reacting to his tone. “You saw her yourself. That didn’t seem like the Artemis we know.”

I started to respond, but he held up his hand and continued.

“Think about it; she could have come back, and she could have helped us, but instead…” He paused. “Cali, she was looking at us like she’d never even seen us before.”

He seemed to take my silence as agreement.

“I don’t have a good feeling about this,” he said. “I’m really worried for her.”

My frustration boiled over. I couldn’t take it anymore. Why was he being so damn dense?

“Yes!” I yelled. “I know that! I feel the same way! That’s why we need to follow her!”

“Cali, come on, stop! What did we just see? *Zombies*?” Greyson said. “Who the fuck knows what’s going on out there? I don’t think it’s safe to follow whoever that was.”

I swallowed hard. My throat was tight and hot, and my eyes burned. I was furious.

“You’re being ridiculous! We need to go help Artemis!” I said. “She’s my sister and she’s clearly in some kind of danger. Maybe she’s possessed by something…”

It struck me at that moment that maybe Vander had been right all along. But what did any of it mean?

My mind flashed back to the image of Lilac in Arlo’s body, and for a split second I had the most horrific thought.

*Maybe Artemis is dead and one of those creepy spirits has taken over her body?*

The thought of it made me want to simultaneously throw up and pass out. I tried my hardest to force that evil thought back down where it had come from. There was *no way* Artemis was dead. It was impossible. She was such a badass Fae, she could take anyone on. Besides, Vander would have said something if that were the case, right?

*Right?*

“Greyson, you’re wrong,” I said. “We need to go after Artemis. Now.”

He shook his head, jaw set. “I’m sorry Cali, but there’s just no way. I’m putting my foot down for once. What we *need* to do is to go back to the pack house to make sure everyone is all right, and that all the zombies are gone. After that, we need to get to the bottom of what’s happening before we just jump right in. Otherwise won’t have a chance in hell of getting her back.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but Greyson held up a hand as if he knew what I was going to say.

“Before you start in on me again, I give you my word that I’ll help you find Artemis later. But what we just faced was unprecedented.” He paused and looked at me solemnly. “You understand that, right, love?”

I didn’t answer at first. I was really torn. I wanted to run into the woods myself, but then again, I also had to admit that Greyson had made some good points. We really *didn’t* understand what was happening. And it was probably best if we did form at least some kind of plan before taking action.

On the other hand, like I’d said, Artemis was my *sister*. Wasn’t leaving her alone a huge betrayal, given that we were already on such shaky ground to begin with?

But ultimately, I knew that Greyson was right. We didn’t know what was out there, as much as I hated it. A fat lot of good it would do if I went in with no plan to help her.

“Fine,” I muttered.

We made our way back to the house in silence. When we arrived, it seemed like every resident of the house ran out onto the porch, full of questions for Greyson.

“Were those really zombies?” Torin sounded breathless. “Like on that show we just started, *The Walking Dead*?”

“Was anyone bitten?” Violet demanded

I looked up and saw Big Mac leaning against the house. She didn’t say anything, but she looked deeply concerned.

Greyson held up a hand, and everyone went quiet. He was all business now. A total leader.

“All right, that’s enough. First, everyone needs to get back into the house—now. We have to make sure that all the doors have been locked and the windows have been closed.” His expression was grim. “It’s more than likely that more of those creatures will appear at some point. We have to make sure the house is as secure as possible. We’ll put together a team to sweep the woods first thing tomorrow morning.”

With that, he herded everyone inside. But my mom and dad stayed out on the porch with me. Judging by the looks on their faces, they weren’t going to be so easily deterred. They pulled me aside, but Greyson stayed by my side.

“I need to know, Cali.” My mom looked pale and tense. “What happened out there in the woods?”

I started to explain the zombie attack as best as I could. Even recounting what we’d seen out loud felt like a fantasy. Like something that should’ve been in the fucking Fae world.

I explained about the group of them that had cornered us, but I hesitated before telling them that I’d seen Artemis in the wood with them. I knew that my mom would want to rush off to save her, just like I had wanted to. In fact, I still wanted to. But what Greyson had said was really bothering me.

*That’s not Artemis.*

I thought about seeing Artemis standing in the woods, how strange and vacant her face had looked. My nagging sense of unease grew stronger and stronger. Vander had said that Artemis was in danger, but not that she was *dead*. I couldn’t just ignore that.

I realized that my parents were waiting for me to finish.

“Then they all just turned and sprinted back into the woods. Weird, right?” I spoke too hastily, and my voice sounded a little strained. My parents agreed that yes, it was weird.

Greyson gave me a strange look. “We’d better get some rest. It’s been a long day.”

My parents nodded and sighed, then they gave me a kiss and headed upstairs. As I watched them go, Rishika came up to me, seeming concerned.

“Are you okay? You don’t look so good,” she said.

I looked across the way at Greyson. While I understood where he was coming from, he had to understand where I was coming from, too—that Artemis was my sister, and I couldn’t just stand by when she was in trouble.

I turned away from Greyson and faced Rishika.

“Actually no, I’m not. We saw Artemis—or someone who looked like Artemis—standing in the woods.”

“What? Are you serious?” Rishika looked like she was about to sprint out into the woods.

“Yes, and what’s more…” I paused. How was I going to explain this? “It looked like Artemis was controlling those things.”

Now Rishika looked truly shocked. But before she could speak, a familiar voice cut in.

“You saw *what*?”

I whipped around. Big Mac had been standing behind me the whole time. The witch had heard everything I’d said.

*Fuck.*

There was no going back now. I took a breath and tried to work out how much damage control this would take.

“Well, I mean,” I fumbled, “it only looked like her, you know? And obviously that would be impossible, right? It’s not possible… Is it?

Big Mac stared back at me gravely. There was a look of grim determination on her face that would’ve scared the crap out of anyone.

After what seemed like a lifetime, she responded. “Yes, we’ll have to go after her.”

I should have been cheered up. But somehow, I wasn’t. I was scared.

“And if what you’re saying is true, Cali—that is to say, if Artemis was actually controlling those undead—then…” Big Mac paused, as if she wanted to end her train of thought but had no choice but to continue. “Then we’ll have to stop her. By any means necessary.”

I gasped. I couldn’t help myself.

“What? But why? *Why*?” I demanded, my words tripping over each other. “Why are you always trying to go after my sister?”

“Cali.” Big Mac looked sad now, and her voice was almost gentle—which was of course far scarier than when she was angry. “Cali, I think you know why.”

I swallowed. I didn’t want her to say it, but I could only stand frozen and helpless until it was said.

Big Mac never took her eyes from my face. I could give her credit for that. She wasn’t a coward.

“It’s pretty clear isn’t it?” she said. “We just found out who has the Orb.”

**Episode 1262**

VIOLET

I was in my bedroom, lying flat on my back on my bed. I stared up at the ceiling. A single thought was looping over and over in my mind.

*What kind of a crazy, insane day was that? What kind of a crazy, insane day was that?*

I forced myself to breathe slowly. In and out, in and out. I was still trying to work out how to process everything, to understand what was happening.

First of all, for a brief and incredible moment, I’d been able to communicate with Lilac. Lilac, my dead brother. And now it turned out that Lilac was stuck here, since the door to the spirit world was closed. So there was that. And if Lilac coming back hadn’t been enough, Charlie’s parents had shown up.

*Charlie. Where the hell was my mate?*

That brought me out my funk and temporarily broke the loop. I sat up quickly and checked my phone again, staring at the screen, trying to will a message from him into existence. But there was nothing. Not a damn thing. Not a single text or missed call. I was growing increasingly worried.

I hadn’t heard anything from Charlie in ages. Just what was going on? Was he okay? It was beginning to drive me completely crazy. I missed him so much, it was doing my head in.

I lay back down, because even Charlie’s parents hadn’t completed the craziness of my day. No, just to put a cherry on top of the most fucked up Sunday in the world, the pack house had been attacked by… by… could I even say it? *Zombies?* Zombies. Just what the holy hell was going on?

I had to admit it—even for the Redwood pack house, it had been a serious doozy of a day.

I’d closed my eyes and was trying to make sense of it all when suddenly I heard a faint knocking at my door.

Now what?

“Yes?” I called out, then sat up as Arlo came into the room.

I screamed. Had Arlo reanimated and turned into one a zombies?! I was about to lose my shit and shift then and there. Then I stopped and really looked into Arlo’s face, and—

Lilac’s eyes stared back into mine.

He put his hands up hastily, and it was my brother’s voice that came from Arlo’s throat. “Hey! Don’t worry, it’s me, Violet!”

I gasped. “But… But… You’re back in his body?” I stammered. “How?”

He grinned, and my heart filled with warmth. It was him. It was Lilac. My brother.

My heart couldn’t keep dealing with these ups and downs like this.

“Marta and I were doing some experimenting down in the basement…” He paused, clearly wanting to draw out the good news.

“Yeah?” I was too impatient. “And?”

“And we figured out that if I’m close enough to a soulless body, I can kind of, well… I guess, kind of zip back in if I want to.”

Marta now entered the room from where she’d been standing in the doorway. She pushed her black hair behind her cheeks, nodding.

“Can confirm,” she said. “It’s not perfect, but it’s something.”

I turned to her, my eyes probably as big as saucers. “That’s amazing!”

Marta rolled her eyes, but even she couldn’t keep the wry smile off her face. “Just as long as he doesn’t move more than ten feet away from me, he’s good.”

But I was barely listening to her anymore. I’d already leapt up and practically crashed into Lilac, determined to give him the biggest hug ever. I held him tight, not sure if I would ever let go. I was beaming with joy.

Just being able to touch him again, even if it wasn’t technically his body—a thought so weird and strange that I decided to shove it away and never think about it again—was more, so much more, than I’d ever dared to dream was possible. Lilac held me tight, and we stood there for a long time, not saying anything, just hugging each other.

After an eternity had passed, I sat back down on my bed and patted the spot at my side, indicating that Lilac should sit next to me—like now, like immediately.

“Come in! Sit down!” I said. “There’s still so much we need to talk about!”

In two steps Lilac was there, both of us grinning and laughing like freaks.

Marta eyed us dourly.

“Uh, I guess I’ll just be sitting on the floor then?” Her tone was heavily sarcastic, but neither of us really noticed. We were both too excited and keyed up, unable to tear our eyes from each other.

I stared at Lilac, completely overwhelmed with all the things I wanted—I *needed*—to talk about.

*Okay, breathe, Violet. Calm down, girl. First things first.*

“I need to know what you’ve been through in the spirit world. When you were there, what did you experience? Was it always so unstable?” Despite my desire to remain calm, my questions came tumbling out, one after another.

Lilac stared back at me and paused for a long time. I could tell he was trying to work out how to answer everything. Eventually he cleared his throat and began.

“Violet, it’s… it’s very hard to explain to someone who’s never been to the other side.”

As if there was any way I was going to accept that as an answer.

“Well, try!” I urged. “I need to know.”

He hesitated and started again. “Well I think the spirit world is different for everyone. For me, it was a lot like where we grew up, like it almost recreated it, or put me in a version of it,” he explained. “You know—lots of forests and deep lakes. And there are some strange spirits and demons that you need to look out for.”

A chill ran down my arms. “Are there people there?”

Lilac’s face lit up at my question. “Oh yes! Everyone’s there, our parents—”

I interrupted him, practically screaming with joy and surprise. “OUR PARENTS? WHY DIDN’T YOU TELL ME? Way to bury the lede, dude! Tell me everything!”

Now Lilac was laughing. “I’ve seen them a few times. They’re very proud of you. Of us.”

Lilac blurred and wavered as my eyes filled with tears. I couldn’t help it. So many memories flooded back in an instant.

Lilac and me, picking berries with Dad for a pie. Both of us cramming berries into our mouths, our baskets forgotten. Dad, pretending to scold us, but unable to stop laughing at our stained faces and bulging cheeks.

Mom, her gentle guidance in teaching us both how to shift, never losing patience, showering us with praise and love.

Singing songs together in the kitchen.

Walking home after a run with the family, me on Dad’s shoulders, Lilac holding Mom’s hand.

Teasing and laughing as we started our morning. Mom’s much-needed cup of coffee, Dad making pancakes.

Lullabies as we fell asleep.

The feeling of safety, of being so loved…

I blinked back my tears and swallowed hard. There was something I needed to know.

“And are they…” I cleared my throat. “Are they happy?”

Lilac’s expression darkened. “They were,” he said, his voice grave. “But then something changed.”

I stared at him, but he stayed silent, unwilling or unable to continue.

“You mean the disturbance you were talking about? The closed door?” I eventually pressed.

“Yes, but even before that, there was a… a ripple. Something dark. Something…” He bit his lip and frowned. “Something *wrong*.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” Marta piped up from the floor.

I started. I’d completely forgotten she was there.

“I agree. It’s not good,” I acknowledged reluctantly. “It’s not good at all.”

“Yeah.” Lilac agreed. He looked deeply unhappy. “Basically, everything went to shit when Silas woke up the Orb.”

“Is it true?” Marta was staring at both of us. “Does the Orb really have the power to call spirits back from their world?”

Solemnly, I nodded. “And Silas is the worst person to have possession of it.”

“Yeah, it’s how I was able to move so freely before. But then something happened to close all the doors.” Lilac added.

Marta sat there silently, soaking it all in. For all her previous snide comments and sarcasm, I had to give it to her—she was a really good listener.

“It sounds like the Orb is the only magical object that anyone knows about that’s powerful enough to be causing all of this,” she concluded reluctantly.

I nodded vigorously.

“It’s true. The Orb does nothing but cause chaos. Still,” I added hopefully, “that’s why Big Mac is determined to find it and take care of it.”

Lilac nodded too, but he wasn’t looking at me. I realized that something was really wrong.

“Lilac?” Still, he didn’t look at me. I put a hand on his arm, “Lilac, what’s wrong?”

Finally, he turned toward me. He was clearly trying to be stoic, but my brother’s eyes were bright with unshed tears.

“Violet, I’m not sure how to tell you this…” He swallowed. “But I think if the Orb is destroyed, I could disappear. Forever.”

**Episode 1263**

LOLA

I stared at Emmett, my heart beating frantic and hard in my chest. Was he saying that they would keep me here against my will if I tried to leave? Suddenly, the library seemed dark and scary, and the flickering candlelight that had seemed so beautiful before now only served to cast shadows in every corner.

I started to panic. I braced myself against the bookshelf and took the slightest step away from him, but he moved right along with me and closed the space between us.

“Don’t you see?” he said, his expression still thoughtful. “You’re changing the rules about what is possible—if you stayed with us here, we could learn and grow together.” He looked off into space, as if he could see all the possibilities right before his eyes.

“Irma was a visionary to put this place together,” he continued, growing more and more animated. “She has a view of a bright future where everyone can coexist peacefully, no fighting, no murder—humans, vampires, werewolves, Fae, you name it, all living together in harmony. Can you imagine it? Sharing knowledge, sharing experiences, finding common ground? They could have children together—and those children would grow up together and continue the legacy of harmony until there were no distinctions between us at all. Wouldn’t that be absolutely amazing? Think about all the ways the world would change for the better if things turned out that way,” he said, his voice quivering with excitement.

I watched him closely, mulling over what he was saying. It sounded great—it sounded wonderful, really—but I didn’t buy it at all. He was talking about some sort of utopian paradise, which was completely far-fetched. I knew better than anyone that the animosity between species ran deep, though I had to admit that it was impressive to hear a vampire talking this way.

Most of the vampires I’d met were brooding loners who treated every other species as a tasty nuisance. Emmett’s way of thinking was a bit contagious, and I allowed myself to imagine things the way he described them. It would be great for me if vampires and werewolves got along, for sure. I imagined Jay and myself in the pack house with the others, living together, laughing together, hanging out and partying together, me not trying to drink their blood every chance I got…

Emmett trained his attention square on me. “Don’t you see that you could hold the secrets to a new generation of vampires, Lola? Vampires who wouldn’t have to die, who would be more closely tied to our human kin? You could be the key!” He smiled.

“Wow, *me*?” I spluttered. “Are you serious?”

Emmett cleared his throat. “Oh, forgive me—I get carried away sometimes,” he said. He stepped back and flashed me a sheepish smile. “I was getting a bit too enthusiastic, wasn’t I?”

“Oh, that’s okay. It’s just a lot to absorb,” I replied, relaxing as I calmed down enough to really consider what he was saying. I did like the idea of being special. As a werewolf hybrid, I’d been a liability, but now, as a vampire… To be seen as something special? It sounded like a dream. To think that I’d be the one to usher in this new era of unity between the species. No more living in fear of attack from rival species, no more striking fear into the hearts of humans by merely existing. Emmett was right—it sounded wonderful.

Emmett put a cool hand on my shoulder, sending a zing racing through my body.

“You’re warm,” he remarked. He gave a slight laugh and removed his hand, but the warm feeling remained, coursing through me and making my stomach do a funny little twist that had nothing to do with my nerves. “All I’m saying is, I’m hoping I can convince you to stay and learn with all of us here as a community. Will you at least consider it?” he asked.

I looked up into his eyes, feeling that irresistible pull again. Then I thought of Jay and looked away from Emmett, trying to clear my mind. Well, Jay did want me to stay here until I gained control over my true nature. At least here, I wouldn’t be a danger to anyone, and maybe I’d find some answers, too.

“I’ll think about it,” I promised Emmett. I couldn’t help but wonder what Cali would think of all this. She would probably agree that it sounded too good to be true, but there was no doubt that a world like the one Emmett had described would work in her favor, too. It would work in everyone’s favor, really.

Emmett clapped his hands, his eyes dancing. “Wonderful! In that case, let’s get you back to bed. Irma’s serving pancakes for breakfast tomorrow.”

“What? She serves pancakes at a vampire school?” I asked, surprised.

Pancakes didn’t seem like normal vampire fare. I tried to imagine a vampire sitting before a plate of flapjacks with a bottle of maple syrup in hand, and I nearly laughed out loud at the image.

“It’s all about the blood syrup,” Emmett said with a grin.

That did actually sound delicious in some sickly weird way. Maybe this school was a good place after all.

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The next morning, I sat up in bed and yawned through a deep stretch. I took a glance around, still in awe at how beautiful my new digs were. The bed had been a dream to sleep in, and brilliant rays of sunlight now streamed in between the drapes, casting bright stripes across the plush rugs that covered the polished hardwood floors. If I wasn’t going to be in my own room back at home, this was an amazing substitute.

I thought back to last night and everything that I’d learned. I couldn’t believe it. I was unique! *But what does that mean, exactly?* I decided that I would call Jay and fill him in after breakfast. I’d left him hanging last night, and I knew he’d sent a thousand texts. I felt a little guilty as I thought about him. Emmett had lingered in the doorway before wishing me goodnight, and I’d had the oddest desire to reach up and give him a goodnight kiss.

I threw my blankets off and swung my feet to the floor, determined to shake off all negative thoughts and get started with my day. The people here might not have the exact answers that I needed, but in the light of day, I felt confident that with all their shared knowledge, there was bound to be someone who could help me.

I made my way downstairs to the dining room, where a long table was already filled with vampires—from young to elderly. They were chattering away and passing around heaping stacks of pancakes and—as Emmett had promised—saucers brimming with blood syrup.

It was a vibrant, loud scene, and the vampires looked every bit the big, happy family. I breathed a sigh of relief. I’d been worried that I would get homesick, and I already missed Jay a ton, but from the looks of things, I’d have enough people around to distract me from how crazy I was feeling after everything that had happened.

I found Emmett, and he motioned to the empty seat beside him. He was all smiles as I slid into the seat, realizing suddenly that I was absolutely starving. I wasted no time piling my plate up with pancakes, sausage, bacon, and hash browns. It was a literal feast. I covered everything on my plate with the thick blood syrup, my mouth watering with anticipation.

I was just about to take my first bite of bloodcakes when my phone rang. It was Jay! Instantly, I pushed away from the table, preparing to take the call back in my bedroom.

Emmett frowned at me. “Sorry, Lola, but there’s no phones during mealtimes here,” he said. His expression was neutral, but his words held a tone that I didn’t quite appreciate.

“What? But you don’t understand. It’s my mate,” I replied, still moving to get up. “I have to take this.”

“You do realize that you’re going to have to give up your old werewolf life, right?” Emmett said. I could tell he was trying to add a little gentleness to his tone, but I still didn’t like where this was going.

“What do you mean by that?” I asked.

I was completely taken aback. I was an adult, and I wasn’t keen to let anyone—especially a stranger—tell me who I could talk to and when. I put the phone down and looked Emmett straight in the eye. He held my gaze for a few long, uncomfortable moments before he spoke again.

“I mean that you can’t learn how to be a vampire when you’re holding onto a life that no longer pertains to you,” Emmett said.

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “What are you saying exactly?”

“I’m saying that you’re going to need to get rid of your mate.”

**Episode 1264**

I was in the woods outside the pack house. It was the dead of night, and I couldn’t quite remember how I’d gotten here, or why. I could sense that something was wrong, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on what. Then it occurred to me: the woods were completely silent and still.

At this time of night, all manner of creatures should have been stirring; owls should have been hooting, crickets should have been chirping, the wind should’ve been rustling through the trees. But there was nothing. The air was thick and heavy, and I couldn’t hear a sound.

A voice rose like mist out of the eerie quiet. “You shouldn’t have come after us.”

*Who was that?* My heart drummed against my ribs as I spun around, trying to locate the source.

“Who’s there?” I called out. The voice was unfamiliar—low and deep—and something about it sent a bolt of fear shooting through my heart.

“We didn’t want you to follow,” the voice said. It sounded like it was coming from everywhere. “Now you leave us no choice.”

A twig snapped behind me, and I whirled around just in time to see Artemis step out from the silvery darkness of the woods. Her face was just as blank and strange as it had been when Greyson and I had seen her before. Her hair was still a matted, tangled mess about her face, and her clothes were tattered and covered in mud and leaves. Her cheeks were sunken, and her skin had a deathly pallor to it. I struggled to see any semblance of my sister in this chilling version that she’d become.

I felt faint with fear as I started toward her, calling out. “Artemis!”

I stopped in my tracks. Something was wrong with her jaw. She opened it as if she wanted to say something, but then it didn’t stop. A sickening cracking noise cut through the silence as it dislocated like the jaw of a snake and extended wider and wider until a cloud of thick black smoke poured out and covered me, blotting out my vision. I couldn’t hear, either. I stumbled back as a sharp weakness took over my body, and I felt myself start to lose consciousness…

I woke up. My entire body was slick with sweat, and I was gasping for air. I looked up to see Greyson looming over my bed with concern etched across his face. I bolted upright, still lost in the dream, disoriented, struggling to make sense of where I was and figure out if I was actually at home in bed. I looked around frantically, trying to ground myself in the present, in what I hoped was reality. Everything looked normal, but my heart was still beating like crazy.

“What happened?” I rasped. Greyson stared at me for a second before he spoke. He looked wide awake, as if he hadn’t slept at all, even though it was late.

“I was walking by your room and heard you scream. Were you having a nightmare, love?” he asked.

I flashed back to the horrific scene. It had been Artemis, but not Artemis at all. Her voice had been someone else’s—evil and bone-chilling—and it had frightened me to my core. I could hear it echoing in my head even now, and the smoke… It had suffocated me. I didn’t want to tell Greyson about the dream. I already knew what he’d say. I thought back to Big Mac and her ominous statement—that we would have to stop Artemis by any means necessary.

*No, I can’t tell Greyson about this.*

Last night, Big Mac had been cryptic, insinuating that it was Artemis who had the Orb. That was way too much to process. How had Artemis gotten herself tangled up in all of this?I thought back to our last encounter with the Orb, when Big Mac had been practically ready to kill Artemis if she’d stood in the way.

No, that couldn’t happen again. I knew Artemis better than anyone. She was a little prickly sometimes, but there was no way in hell that she’d purposefully try and steal the Orb for her own power.

*When you first met Artemis, she literally sold you to a monster*,said a little voice in the back of my mind. I shook my head, dashing away the thought. Artemis hadn’t had a choice in the matter back then. She’d been under the Kollector’s thumb, and she hadn’t known that I was her sister, or that her mother was alive. Things were different now. I believed in my sister. She wouldn’t have done this of her own accord.

I just had to find Artemis before Big Mac did.

I took a moment to calm my breathing, taking big, quiet breaths that seemed to smooth out my heartbeat. I turned back to Greyson as he said my name again.

“Cali, are you okay?” he asked.

“Yeah. I just—I’m still pretty tired. I just had a bad dream. I can’t remember it, though,” I lied.

Greyson took my hand. His touch was warm and comforting as always.

“Are you sure?” he asked, his eyes boring into mine.

No matter what, he was always there for me whenever things went sideways, and I wanted nothing more than to collapse into his embrace and have him tell me everything would be okay, that Artemis would best whatever it was that had her in its clutches.

I looked down at our hands and shifted so that his were in mine. I gave them a squeeze.

“I’m fine,” I said. Another lie. Nothing was fine. Everything was falling apart. My sister was gone and had become something deadly and menacing that I didn’t understand.

Nothing seemed to be going right lately, and I wasn’t sure how much more I could handle. I pushed back the covers and got up.

“I’m totally fine, Greyson. I’m so sorry I worried you.” I narrowed my eyes at him, suddenly suspicious. “You just happened to be walking by my room, huh?” I asked.

“Well.” He looked away. “Fine, I wanted to check in on you, make sure you were doing okay after everything that happened yesterday.” He looked into my eyes. “I can’t help but worry about you, Cali. You know that. I care about you, and your sister.”

Warmth spread through my body at his words. I loved hearing him say them, even if they only served to torment me further.

“I know you said that you wanted some space from me and Xavier, but loving you isn’t something I can just turn off. It never goes away,” he said.

I felt my heart break a little at the earnestness in his expression. I wanted more than anything to tell him that I understood what he was saying—better than he could ever know. That was the way I felt about both him and Xavier—I couldn’t turn off how much I loved both of them, even if doing so would save us all from a lot of heartbreak, not to mention the wrath of a deadly curse.

I looked away from him, trying to avoid the surge of emotion in his eyes.

“I know,” I said softly. “That’s why I need space from both of you—for that very reason. Everything is too much right know. Can’t you understand that?”

Greyson answered by stepping closer. The heat of his body washed over me, reminding me of how it felt to be in his arms, to taste his lips, to feel his body against mine. It was exhausting, fighting him and Xavier at every turn, trying to protect the three of us from pain and tragedy by resisting the bond that continued to grow between us. How strong was I supposed to be? How were we supposed to get through this? Would we ever?

I looked up at him, my gaze raking over the strong angles of his face. His eyes looked brilliant in the moonlight, and I gazed into them, unable to avoid them any longer.

“I know that, Cali… I just can’t bear to stay away from you, love.”

He reached out and caressed my face, running the rough pad of his thumb over my lips. I knew he was struggling to honor my wishes, to avoid tipping the delicate balance that we’d all found ourselves in. But, like me, I could tell that he was finding it harder and harder to keep his desires at bay.

And I felt the same way. I held my breath and closed my eyes. I felt safe with him, and I couldn’t muster up the power to tell him that this wasn’t a good idea. Besides, I’d already said it so many times before. He knew it, I knew it, and it didn’t lessen the magnetism between us.

The *due destini* wouldn’t let us forget.

Without another word, he reached out to tip up my chin, and then he leaned down and kissed me.

**Episode 1265**

XAVIER

Through the thick haze of pain and the sharp buzz of all the drugs that I’d been injected with, I listened to Kira and Quinton’s bickering over my less than ideal state. It was strange to hear them arguing over me like they were discussing the marbling on a slab of meat. *Quinton has refined tastes*, I thought bitterly.

Despite the fog drifting through my head, my mind was in complete overdrive as I considered what my next move should be. I’d already tried the one thing I’d thought was a surefire way to get me out of this deadly predicament—shifting to try to break my restraints—only to be sedated again and sent back into this horrific stupor. It was clear that I wouldn’t be able to call up my wolf until I was out of these chains.

Kira had treated my silver wounds with some sort of Fae blood cocktail that she’d claimed would heal my silver poisoning, but it had only left me useless and lethargic and still at their mercy. The burning pain, headache, and nausea of the silver poisoning had subsided, though, I’d give her that. Too bad I was too out of it to enjoy such hollow relief.

I was quickly losing hope that I would be able to escape my chains and overpower this awful vampire and witch duo. I knew that the only shred of a chance I had was through Kira. I had to focus on winning her trust. My mind raced, wondering when I would be alone with Kira again so that we could talk about Garren.

Memories of my mercenary days swam through my head. It was comforting to think of better days. I remembered the time and effort it took to learn everything I could about a target before going after them. I used to spend weeks following them, stalking their social media accounts, learning where they worked, where they played, identifying the people who kept them company. I was damn good at it, and I would be more than happy to dust off my skillset for this.

If this Garren guy was a Rogue, he could be violent and unpredictable, but that was nothing that I couldn’t handle. I’d tracked many Rogues in my career—hell, I’d *been* a Rogue. I knew exactly what made them tick. All I needed was a trail, and then I’d follow it and wipe him off the map.

I looked at Kira. It seemed like she’d finally managed to calm Quinton down. She shot me an empty glance, as if she were looking at a piece of furniture that she’d grown tired of. If I offered Garren’s head to Kira in exchange for my freedom, would she take the deal?I didn’t know, but I had to figure out the right way to play this with her, to convince her that I wouldn’t just run away without holding up my end of the bargain.

And I *would* hold up my end, without a doubt.

I just needed to get Kira to understand that I was nothing like Garren, and that I would be more than willing to help her get her revenge. She’d have to free me first, though.

My thoughts were halted by another sharp pain in my neck. *Shit, she’s giving me another injection.* My eyes fluttered open as a sense of well-being flooded through me. It didn’t last long. The warm feeling gave way to dread when Quinton appeared, looming over me with a cruel smile on his lips. That was more like it.

Quinton shot a glance at Kira. “Now it’s time to test the product,” he said, all but licking his lips. My stomach turned at the thought of his disgusting mouth coming anywhere near me. “I’m not paying until I know that I’m getting the real deal—werewolf blood is absolutely foul if it’s not from an Alpha.”

I struggled against the restraints, using every drop of my all but tapped reserves. The silver chains seared my flesh as I bucked against them, and I went still in defeat. It was useless; Quinton was too quick. He was on me in a flash, his fangs pressing against my neck until they punctured the flesh in one savage movement.

As many times as this had happened (and surely I’d been bitten and drunk from over a hundred times by now) I never quite got used to the sensation. The worst thing about it—other than the fact that I was being used as a werewolf buffet— was that it felt… pleasurable. Lying there in ecstasy while some gross vampire gorged himself on my blood only added to the feeling of being invaded, violated, ravaged. It made it all the more perverse. My stomach lurched as I breathed in Quinton’s putrid odor—he was too close for me to avoid it, and I didn’t have the strength to hold my breath.

My eyes drifted shut as Quinton drank his fill, moaning against my neck as he sucked. He even made slurping sounds a few times and again, my stomach turned in disgust. I couldn’t believe this was where I’d ended up.

I started to get very cold, so much so that my teeth began to chatter. I felt light and floaty, and I realized—somewhere in the back of my mind where my consciousness was still chugging away—that I was losing too much blood. This asshole wasn’t stopping. *Fuck.*

With much effort, I opened my eyes again just in time to see Quinton staggering backward, a handful of his hideous red collared shirt bunched in Kira’s hands as she pulled him away from me.

She glared at him. “You call that a *taste*, Quinton? You practically drained him dry! You’re going to have to pay Iñigo extra for that!” Kira hissed. “And now I have to heal him again! Fucking vampires!”

She turned away to her supplies, probably preparing another cocktail that would give me just enough strength to make me a lively meal for Quinton, or whoever was next in line.

Quinton’s face looked dreamy and satisfied. He swiped the back of his hand over his mouth, eyeing me greedily. “That’s the best I’ve ever tasted!” he said breathlessly. “I’ll pay, no problem there. And I’ll be back.” Quinton gave me one last lingering glance before he left. I couldn’t help but notice how flushed he looked, almost as if he’d aged backward a few years.

“You’re lucky,” Kira said, looking me over, syringe at the ready. “Or unlucky. You’re a hot commodity—they’re never going to going to kill you, but they’re definitely never going to let you go, either.”

My heart dropped as her words sank in. Trapped here forever? Fuck that—there was no way that I was going to stay here forever. *I’ve got to get through to Kira*, I thought*.* I willed myself to shake off the lethargy that was slowly creeping over me as I struggled to keep my thoughts clear and in order. *Get it together, Xavier.* A spike of determination ripped through me. I had to get out of here.

“So, you’re looking for revenge on Garren?” I said. It took every fiber of my being to maintain consciousness and muster up the strength to speak. My head was pounding, my neck was throbbing, and my skin felt raw in all the places that the silver restraints touched.

Kira started, and her gaze narrowed. “You heard that? With what I gave you, you should have been dead to the world,” she said.

“He killed your husband?” I continued, ignoring her shock. I was afraid that if I paused for too long, I’d lose my resolve.

Kira looked away, but not before I saw the pain cross her face, the tears in her eyes. “That’s none of your business, wolf,” she said. Her voice was shaky, and I could hear the anguish in it clear as day. The wounds from her loss were fresh, and that was all the better for me.

“You’re wrong. It is my business, Kira. I can help you take Garren down,” I could feel my strength returning as I spoke. For the first time since I’d opened my eyes in this wretched place, I felt a real shred of hope that there was a chance that I could get out of here. I had to keep going. I had to convince her.

I had to get back to Cali. She was the only person that would really get me through any of this.

“All you need to do is get me out of here,” I said. “If you do that, I can protect you from Iñigo, and I’ll give you my word that I’ll kill Garren for you.”

I looked at Kira, keeping my gaze steady on hers as she seemed to consider what I was saying. My heart beat quickly in my chest. Was I getting through to her? Was she going to take my deal?

**Episode 1266**

GREYSON

I was lost in the feeling of having Cali in my arms again. I knew in the back of my mind that I shouldn’t have done this, that I was thwarting Cali’s attempts to put space between us, but I couldn’t help myself. I was tired of holding back, tired of pretending that I didn’t want to kiss her like this every second of every day—curse be damned.

What made it all the better—or worse depending how you looked at it—was that Cali was kissing me back. Her lips were as soft and sweet as ever. She parted her lips and my tongue darted between them, taking a quick survey of the warmth of her mouth. I couldn’t pry myself away, couldn’t find a good enough reason to stop since it was clear that this was what we both wanted.

Besides, Xavier still hadn’t returned. Classic. It didn’t make any sense that Cali and I should have to hold back, not when Xavier had abandoned her and the entire pack. He was always complaining when I went off on my own, but he had nothing to say for himself when he did the same. I pushed him out of my mind. This wasn’t about him, for once. This was about me and Cali, acting on the feelings that had only strengthened between us as we did our best to avoid them.

I could feel the heat rising in the space between our bodies and, as if on autopilot, I wrapped my arms around her, preparing to sweep her off her feet, lie her down on the bed, and do what I’d been fantasizing about for so long. But just before I could make my fantasy a reality, she stiffened and pulled back. I stopped immediately—I had no desire to push her beyond what she felt comfortable doing.

She looked up at me, her eyes shimmering with tears that hadn’t yet fallen to her cheeks. “I can’t, Greyson.”

“Cali—you don’t have to worry. We’ll figure it all out,” I began, desperate to feel her against me again.

Cali tore her gaze away and held up her hand to stop me. “Greyson, even though there’s nothing I want more than to fall into bed with you, it’s a bad idea, and we both know it. I’m not any closer to knowing what I should do about you and Xavier, and just following my heart hasn’t led me anywhere. I need to start listening to my brain, for a change,” she said. “And my brain is telling me that we can’t do this right now.”

I felt like she’d struck me, but I was sure that my face betrayed nothing.

She reached up and put her hand on my cheek, and her eyes were still misty as she looked up at me. I could see the struggle in her gaze, and I knew beyond any doubt that this was just as hard for her as it was for me. Somehow, that gave me hope. At least I knew that she wanted this just as much as I did, that I wasn’t alone in holding back my feelings. I leaned into her touch, taking what I could get. She lingered there for a moment before she finally turned and left the room.

I stood there for a few seconds, looking after her, my mind reeling, disappointment blooming in my chest alongside a twinge of pain that coursed along the web of black veins pulsing just beneath the skin—yet another painful reminder of the curse that was keeping us apart and ruining our lives.

As much as I was hurting, I did my best to see things from Cali’s perspective. I knew this wasn’t easy for her at all, and that she was just trying to do what was right. I’d essentially done the same thing when I’d left for Portland only to run into Maren—a reunion that had only served to complicate things further. I knew that it wasn’t fair to hold this against Cali, but that didn’t change the fact that I needed her, that I wanted her, and that I always would.

I took a deep breath and left her room. I went down into the living room, where Sabine wasted no time in pulling me aside. I groaned inwardly. I was still recovering from what had just happened and was annoyed at her intrusion on a private moment I’d wanted to use to feel sorry for myself and lick my wounds. She was always trying to have these motherly chats with me, and I was not in the mood.

“Greyson, I want to talk about MacKenzie,” she said. Clearly this time she wasn’t interested in a motherly chat. I could tell from the expression on her face that something was wrong, and I almost wished for the motherly chat.

“What about her?” I asked, frowning slightly. Sabine took a furtive glance around the room to make sure we were alone.

“I’m worried about her,” Sabine said, crossing her arms. “She won’t talk much about it, but she isn’t eating, and she’s having nightmares—and it’s all because of that damned Orb.”

I took this in, feeling majorly unsettled. The *Walking Dead* shit that had unfolded outside last night would make sense if it were connected to the Orb, but I shuddered to think that it was truly the cause of all this. I’d hoped we’d gotten rid of that thing for good.

Sabine was smart, if a bit callous at times, so there could be something to it. She wasn’t one to get worked up over nothing.

“Last night… Does she think it’s the Orb?” I asked, looking hard at my mother, trying to read between the lines to see if there was anything she wasn’t telling me outright.

Sabine nodded. “She’s convinced herself that Artemis stole the Orb, and that she lied to everyone when she said she felt someone take it in the Fae world. She thinks that instead, she kept it somehow, on purpose.”

I considered this. It wasn’t the most ridiculous idea I’d ever heard. I was just glad that Cali wasn’t around to hear this. She was so protective of her loved ones that she’d defend them even if they’d stabbed someone in the back.

I had to admit that none of it sounded impossible, not with all the things that had been going on lately. As much as Cali and Artemis had connected after they’d returned from the Fae world, they didn’t have each other’s full life stories. No one else really knew Artemis all that well, and it was no secret that Fae could harbor secret agendas. My mind flashed back to how strangely Artemis had looked last night as she’d emerged from the woods—the way she’d moved her hand and seemingly called back the undead.

It didn’t sit right with me, though. It just didn’t seem like something she’d do. Not when she’d just found her family again. But I’d seen it all with my own eyes, and she hadn’t looked like herself, hadn’t acted like herself, hadn’t even seemed to recognize Cali and me. I couldn’t rule it out completely.

“I’m not so sure that you’re wrong,” I said slowly, trying to consider my words carefully.

Sabine put her hand to her mouth, her fear apparently strengthened by my statement. I could tell that she was really worried about this and the effect it was having on Big Mac.

“If it’s true, Greyson, then what are you going to do about it?” she asked. “If Artemis has the Orb, she has to be stopped. There’s no other option.”

Before I could answer her, my eyes darted to the window, where I saw the blinding flash of a massive lightning bolt crash down out of the pure blue sky. It exploded only a few feet away from us, turning the front door into a pile of smoldering ash and leaving the front porch exposed.

Sabine screamed and dove behind me as smoke filled the room, obscuring everything so that I couldn’t even see right in front of me.

I was coughing and trying to figure out what the hell was going on when the smoke cleared, revealing a tall, muscular man with flowing dark hair and flashing eyes, standing where the front door used to be.

*Who in the hell—*

Without another thought, I shifted, ready to confront this stranger who’d apparently just blown our door off the hinges to get to us. I leapt into the air, my teeth bared, ready to send this guy back to wherever it was he’d come from. But then the man held up a finger and pointed at me, immobilizing me in the air, mid-jump. I sat there suspended, confused, and surprised, wondering what he was going to do next.

His voice boomed, seemingly shaking the house to its very foundations. “You the Alpha around here? You’re all in for a world of trouble.”

**Episode 1267**

ARTEMIS

I opened my eyes and looked around. I was lying on my back in the damp grass of a field. I felt horrible. I didn’t know exactly where I was, and the dampness of the ground had seeped through my clothes, chilling me to the bone. My head was spinning and pounding like a jackhammer. I pinched the bridge of my nose and winced against the pain, trying to clear the fog from my head.

I searched my memory, trying to make sense of where I might have been just before landing here—wherever here was. The last thing that I could remember clearly was being at the drive-in. Maybe I was still near there?

I stared up at the sky, wracking my brain, trying to think back. *How did I get here?* I couldn’t remember anything that gave me a shred of a clue. Suddenly, a wave of jumbled and disjointed memories cascaded through my brain, so real I could feel them. I remembered the rush of power surging through me while I stood in a cemetery as the ground heaved and pitched around me.

The moon had been high in the sky, and I recalled the sight of decaying, spindly arms jutting up through the dirt, and the disgusting beings that clawed their way out of the graves, sending the sharp stench of death into the air. They moaned at the sky, and their bones creaked and cracked as they moved. Worms slid out of the graves after them, and silvery headstones toppled over into the dirt in their wake. I shook the images out of my head, fear snaking its way around my throat so that it felt like I couldn’t breathe.

*Are these memories, or something else?* I thought.

Suddenly, it was like I was watching everything take place from above, from outside of myself. I saw myself as I moved to touch the drive-in attendant—York—and a surge of energy snaked from my fingers and blasted him into a crumpled mass on the ground. I hadn’t meant to. I’d just wanted to move his hand, to leave, to save him from the danger of my presence.

I watched that same surge of power blast Arlo into the tree branch, impaling him. Killing him instantly. Then I saw the distant, absent look on his face as he pulled himself off the branch, seemingly good as new, but somehow different.

I saw the army of rotting, decaying bodies walking beside me as I made my way through the woods, threading my way through the trees, heading toward the pack house. And then I saw Cali—but I remembered seeing her as if she were a complete stranger standing before me, like I’d never seen her before in my entire life.

Then, just like that, the memories disappeared just as quickly as they’d come. I sat up, gasping. My head spun and throbbed worse than ever. I had to close my eyes as my vision spun back and forth in time with the pulsing in my head.

Could I possibly have done all of that? How could I not have recognized my own sister? How could I have attacked Arlo and York without a second thought?

I moaned, clutching at my stomach as the horror of what I’d done washed over me. I felt like I was going to be sick. I bit back wave after wave of nausea.

*What have I done? This can’t be real. Could someone be messing with my mind?*

I looked around, trying again to determine where I was, how I’d gotten here, hoping that this was all a bad dream or some sort of magical trip. That hope dissolved as I took another survey of my surroundings and realized that all around me in the large field were the fallen bodies of the dead in various states of decomposition.

They were everywhere. Mud-caked skulls cracked in places, or with entire sections missing. Eyes oozing out of their sockets or gone altogether. Rotting yellow teeth, jutting from crumbling jaws. Putrefied muscles hanging from yellowed, mossy skeletons.

I screamed, my body wracked with pure terror. It wasn’t a bad dream. It wasn’t a bad trip. Everything that I’d seen had happened. I’d called them all forth from their graves myself. I’d beckoned to them and walked with them into the darkness. I’d commanded the undead. They’d answered to me.

Even now, I could feel the magic flowing in my veins, slithering beneath my skin like a snake. I remembered how the power had felt as it rushed through my body, leaping from my fingers and killing people only to bring them back to some grotesque semblance of life, communicating with the fiends that were all around me now, manipulating them and making them do my bidding.

Suddenly, there was a voice at my side. “A glorious evening, mistress. Shall we reawaken our army for today?”

I turned to see York, smiling way too wide—like he was unhinged. His lips were cracked and blue, and his skin was a sickly yellow color.

He was even scarier than the actual corpses that surrounded me. His eyes were vacant, and his movements were jerky and unnatural. He wasn’t alive—he was merely reanimated, like a newly dead body that was being pulled by puppet strings. I shrieked and shrank away from him, clawing at the grass as I pulled myself out of his reach.

I cried out, trying to reach the Orb. “I don’t want this! Please, just leave me alone!”

The Orb’s laughter ricocheted through my mind.

*It’s far too late for that. The only direction to go is forward. It’s time to let go of everything and everyone holding you back*, the voice said. I knew it was in my head, but it sounded like it was all around me, coming up from the ground and seeping up from the orifices of the dead things that surrounded me.

My mind flashed desperately to Tom, Orla, and Cali. I missed them so much, and I didn’t want to let go of them. I could feel the Orb in my head, watching me cling to the people I loved.

*That’s exactly what you need to let go of.* The voice dripped with derision. *It’s time they’re eliminated.*

I stood up. My knees were like jelly, and I was unsteady on my feet. I felt like I was going insane with anxiety.

*What have I done?*

My fingers trembled uncontrollably as I pulled out my cell phone, thanking my lucky stars that its mysterious battery hadn’t died.

I could feel the Orb whispering in the back of my mind, trying to regain control, and I used all my energy to keep it at bay. I had to—it was the only way I could protect my family, the only way that I could warn them. I just needed to tell them what was going on so that they could help me.

Cali answered on the first ring. The relief in her voice nearly made me burst into tears. I felt better already. Cali was fearless, and I knew she would help make all of this go away; she’d always been there for me, always tried to make sure I was okay. Today would be no different.

“Artemis, where are you? Are you in trouble?” Cali asked, her voice frantic.

I was about to say yes, that I needed help, that things had gone terribly awry, but I could feel the Orb’s power gaining purchase in my mind. I swayed on my feet as I felt that same unfathomable power from before filling every inch of my body. I was losing my fight against the Orb—its hold over me was too great.

Horror flooded through me as the Orb spoke again. *Yes, yes! Bring her here, to us! We can take care of her!*

“I’m not in any trouble,” I heard myself saying. I couldn’t resist the Orb any longer. It had won.

Cali paused in obvious confusion on the other end. I tried to claw my way back, to regain control of my mind, of my words, but it was no use. I was lost.

“Just tell us where you are, and we can come and find you,” Cali said.

“No. You have to promise to come alone, Cali,” I heard myself saying.

“Can’t you just come back to the pack house? Then we can work it out together,” Cali said, confusion coloring her words.

“I can’t come back. I’m scared, Cali. I need you. Please,” I said, my voice distorted with fear. I knew what the Orb was doing—drawing Cali in, manipulating her—but I couldn’t stop it. I was powerless against it. I knew that she would come. There was no doubt about it.

“Okay, tell me where you are and I’ll be there, alone,” Cali said.

*Yes!* the Orb hissed in my head. *Yes. And then we kill her.*

**Episode 1268**

GREYSON

Could we just catch a fucking break?

Who did this guy think he was, randomly destroying my porch door? Was it an attack? It certainly seemed to be one.

I snarled at him, an Alpha ready to defend his territory. This was *my* pack house, and I needed to eliminate the threat. Kill it. Or at least trap the man on the ground and find out what the hell he was doing here.

The moment I felt Sabine and Violet shift behind me, I lunged toward the man. Instead of seeing his expression change to one of pure terror—you know, since I was a massive beast literally running toward him with my mouth wide open—the man laughed.

The motherfucker actually *laughed*.

What was going on?

Then he lazily flicked a hand toward me and the others. That same instant, a huge gust of wind appeared out of nowhere, twirling around our feet before lifting all three of us—Sabine, Violet, and me—until we were all immobilized, mid-air. Three huge werewolves frozen in the blink of an eye, with the wind keeping us there.

Was this man some kind of witch? Warlock? Gremlin? I didn’t know what the fuck he was, but I needed to break free of his hold so I could defend my pack. If I didn’t, what was he going to do to us? I couldn’t take that risk. Not for any of us.

Not for Cali.

“Hello?” the man said, casually stepping into our house, leaving us all suspended. “I expected a better welcome, not going to lie.”

Was this guy for real?

From the corner of my eye, I saw movement and then heard Rishika’s voice. “Vander?”

Wait. Did Rishika know him? How?

Vander—apparently—turned to Rishika just as she came into my line of sight. “*Oh*. It’s you,” he said. “Delighted to see you again.”

“What are you doing here?” Rishika asked Vander, her brow furrowed with confusion. At least she was asking the right questions.

Vander grinned. “That’s a great question. One I had hoped to answer before your trigger-happy Alpha went on attack mode.”

I wanted to snarl at him again. What had this ridiculous troll *thought* was going to happen when he busted down the door to a werewolf pack house? Had he expected us to ask if he wanted some tea? Maybe invite him in for dinner?

I did not have the patience for this bullshit.

“How about you let them go, though?” Rishika asked Vander, her expression entirely serious.

Vander turned to me, raising an eyebrow. “If you can promise to keep your cool, Wolfy, I will release you all and explain myself.” He gave me a questioning look, and I just stood there, still as a floating statue. How the hell was I supposed to answer him? I couldn’t move. And it was *his* fault.

Whatever he saw in my expression must have given away what I felt, because he waved his hand again and all three of us fell back to the ground. I instantly shifted back to my human form and marched toward him.

“What exactly do you think you’re doing?” I growled.

Vander rolled his eyes at me*.* He then offered a long-suffering sigh. “Trust me, I wish I didn’t have to be here, either.”

Because there weren’t enough people in the living room witnessing this ridiculous charade, several other pack members came rushing into the room—Big Mac, Sage, and Zainab.

Big Mac’s eyes widened when she saw Vander. “*You*! What are you doing here?”

I glanced between them, trying really fucking hard to control my temper. Since when was I the last to learn about anything? Forcing myself to keep my tone as even as possible, I said, “I need someone to tell me what’s going on here. Right the fuck now.”

Big Mac gestured at Vander. “This is the Keeper of All Nature.”

I blinked, taking a moment to process this. Keeper of All Nature? That was a thing? Was the Tooth Fairy going to appear next? I thought the Fae world would’ve been the place to encounter the “Keeper of All Nature,” not right at my front door.

The man narrowed his eyes dangerously at all of the werewolves in the living room. The pack still seemed on edge and ready to fight. All except Rishika and Big Mac, who had moved a little to the side and were still staring at Vander.

“I could be wrong, but I think—I *think*—I’m sensing some hostility in the air,” Vander said with a straight face. “If you’re worried about the door, I’ll just fix it for you.” He waved a hand, and a second later the entrance looked as good as new.

I clenched my jaw. “Why are you here, witch?”

Vander laughed heartily and waved me off. “Oh dear, I’m no witch. I’m much more than that. And that’s why I’m here.”

I looked around, feeling the urge to rub my temples. This man was exhausting.

“What does that even mean?” I asked, as calmly as possible.

“I’m investigating some deeply troubling disturbances in the balance of life and death.”

This caught my attention. Was this about Lilac? Arlo? The Orb? The fucking *zombies* we’d fought?

“And every way I look at it, all the disturbances seem to tie directly back to this pack house, and the motley crew you run with,” Vander continued, staring at me.

“Are you saying that we’re to blame?” I asked him. My voice was even, but there was a sharpness to it that I hoped he realized was a warning.

Keeper of All Nature or not, I was the kind of guy, and werewolf, that would spend every waking moment trying to figure out how to get rid of him if he even thought of harming me or my pack in any way. Everybody had a weakness.

“No, I’m not blaming anyone,” Vander said. “But your pack does seem to be a magnet, doesn’t it?”

“It’s the Orb, isn’t it?” Big Mac said, stepping forward. Her expression was intense. Severe. “The disturbances in the world of the spirits *have* to do with the Orb. It’s why we wanted to go through the closed portal to the Fae world and sought you out.”

Vander turned to her. “I can’t be sure, but the Orb is the only thing that I can think of that could cause this kind of trouble.”

Big Mac scowled at him. “Do you think it’s still here, in the house?”

“Artemis took the Orb from you,” I cut in, eyeing Big Mac. “Wouldn’t we know if it was inside the house? It definitely creates a certain kind of vibe.”

I remembered how it had made us all so irritable. How it had made Ravi stab Big Mac. I was certain there would have been a difference in our behavior if the Orb had been lounging around somewhere. I still remembered, too, the feeling of Silas trying to draw out my wolf with it. It was a dangerous item that shouldn’t have been in anyone’s hands.

“Artemis didn’t just take the Orb from me,” Big Mac said. “She *stole* it.”

“But I don’t think that she would *use it*,” I said seriously. “Even if yes, she did take it.”

Big Mac glared at me, but what else was new? “The fact that she’s your mate’s older sister shouldn’t allow her special treatment, Greyson.”

I thought back to the way Artemis had controlled those zombies. It had been alarming, even by my standards, but I didn’t know whether it meant she was the root of all evil like Big Mac was implying or that something else was going on.

“I’m not giving her special treatment,” I said, annoyed. “We both know that Artemis—”

Vander didn’t let me finish. “Please stop talking, I’m trying to concentrate here…” He cocked his head to the side and closed his eyes for a moment.

What the hell was his problem? What kind of magic was this?

I was boiling with questions but let him do his thing, mainly out of sheer curiosity.

When our dear friend—*not*—opened his eyes, he looked a bit troubled.

“I’m not quite sure about all this,” Vander said. “But there’s a dark energy in this house, and I can sense that there’s destruction headed your way.”

Great.

He said the words so calmly that it took a moment for me to register their meaning. My stomach clenched, stress rising inside me. Still, it wasn’t as though Vander was saying anything groundbreaking—destruction and mayhem did seem to follow our pack, and I didn’t need to be the fucking Keeper of All Nature or whatever to know that. I had a million more questions for Vander, either way—did he think he would just drop a bomb like that and everyone would just casually move along?

I was about to open my mouth to demand explanations when, from the corner of my eye, I caught someone moving outside the window.

Cali, looking furtive, was creeping toward the tree line.

She looked cryptic. She looked guilty. She looked like she knew that she wasn’t supposed to be doing this, running off without letting anyone know.

*Where the* hell *does she think she’s going?*

**Episode 1269**

I was moving across the lawn super stealthily, heading toward the area where the cars were parked around the side of the house.

My gaze darted back to the house as I hoped that nobody had seen me sneak out. I was feeling very uneasy about my conversation with Artemis. She’d sounded really strange.

She’d seemed terrified and confused—nothing like my confident, badass sister. The one who had helped me in the Fae world, sassing me every step of the way. Greyson was right about one thing—the Artemis we’d seen in the woods with those zombies hadn’t seemed like herself. It was obvious, more obvious than ever, that there was something seriously wrong with my sister.

*And what the hell was she doing with those zombies? If that’s what they even are…*

Artemis was clearly in some kind of trouble, and that was exactly why I needed to go to her now. I owed it to my sister to help her. But when I paused for a second to look over my shoulder, just to make sure that I was home free, my heart sank.

Greyson had bolted out of the door and was marching toward me. Naked.

“Caliana Hart, where are you going?” he asked, eyes focused on me.

Of *course* he’d noticed me sneaking out. He probably had, like, an internal alarm that sensed where I was at all times. Not that I could blame him, considering people and things kept trying to kill me, but still. This was a problem for me, because there was no way that he was going to be okay with me meeting Artemis on my own.

In no time, Greyson caught up with me, and the bastard dared to raise his eyebrows. “What’s with the surprised face? Did you think I wouldn’t see you sneak out?”

*God dammit!* I thought. *I was being so stealthy!*

“What do you think you’re doing, Cali?” Greyson asked.

I was a hit with a little bolt of frustration. I didn’t think I owed him an explanation. But then I stared at his face, and my heart softened. He was clearly worried about me, not angry. This was how he always managed to butter me up!

*How problematic*, I internally grumbled.

I hesitated to answer, not wanting to lie. But I knew that the truth would upset him.

Greyson stepped closer to me, interrupting my internal struggle.

In a low, almost gentle voice, he said, “Whatever you’re up to, your timing couldn’t be worse.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Some witch-like being called the Keeper of All Nature just appeared and told us all that destruction is heading our way, mostly likely because of the Orb,” he said.

I swallowed roughly. That had to be Vander, who’d talked to me about Artemis after popping up in the back seat of Jay’s car. I wanted to ask more questions, but Greyson was scanning the woods anxiously. It was obvious he wanted me out of here.

“I need you to come back to the house,” he said, right on cue. “Please don’t ignore me right now.”

He spoke in a pleading, soft tone. It was pretty hard not to be affected by the tenderness and worry in his gaze. And also by the fact that he was entirely naked and looking like a god.

“This is not an order,” he said, staring deep into my eyes. “I’m not talking to you as the Alpha. I’m talking to you as Greyson, your *mate*. Please, just come back with me. If anything happens to you…”

My heart was trying to fly out of my chest, racing at his proximity and words. But before I could respond, I saw Rishika shooting across the lawn to join us.

“What are you two talking about? Where are you going, Cali?” She peered at me. “Is this about Artemis?”

I hesitated. Did I want Rishika to get involved in this?

“*Is* this about Artemis?” Rishika repeated. “Have you heard from her?”

I was touched by the expression on Rishika’s face. I’d been stressing out about the pack losing their trust in Artemis—Greyson saying that she wasn’t the same, Big Mac suspecting her all the time… But Rishika’s expression was all concern.

*I can tell that she just wants to help Artemis too*, I thought. *She really cares about her.*

I took a deep breath. There was no way to get out of this one without telling the truth, especially not with Greyson around, so I just accepted the situation.

“Yeah, I heard from Artemis,” I said. “And she’s in trouble. She needs my help.” I glanced at Greyson, who looked alarmed.

“What exactly did she say? Where is she?” Greyson asked.

As if I would tell him. I didn’t want him *or* Big Mac going after Artemis. I didn’t trust that Big Mac wouldn’t do anything drastic. She had a history of being powerful and reckless and actually quite destructive. Jay’s one eye was an example of that.

“Artemis said that I had to go alone, and I’m going to respect that,” I said firmly. “We don’t know what could be going on, and I don’t want to make anything worse by bringing an entire entourage. I’m going to save my sister, and then I’ll be back. I swear.”

“Just in time for dinner?” Greyson asked, crossing his arms.

“I mean, I might miss dinner, but—”

“You won’t miss dinner because you’re not going anywhere, Cali,” Greyson declared. “I know I said this wasn’t an order, but you really aren’t giving me any choice. There’s no way I’m letting you run off into the woods with everything that’s going on right now.”

I bristled. “I’m sorry, there’s no way you’ll *let* me?”

“Cali, love, *please*. We’ve had this kind of conversation approximately one hundred million times before. Possibly more,” he said. “Literally everything is a trap. You’ll get caught in that trap—”

“Are you saying that I can’t hold my own? Is *that* what you’re saying?”

“You’ll fall into the trap not because you’re not powerful enough, but because that’s how life works. And then I’ll have to come save you. And then, if I can’t save you, I’ll lose my reason to breathe,” he said. “So no, I can’t knowingly let you walk into danger. Please don’t ask me to, love.”

I stared at him, gaping. “That is not—”

I cut myself off. I had no idea how to reply to any of this. Obviously, I didn’t want Greyson to stress about me. Except what would it say about me if I didn’t help Artemis? I’d be the worst sister in the whole freaking world!

“Look, I know you, Xavier, and Colton don’t have the best relationship,” I started, trying to keep my tone level.

“Yes?” He raised an eyebrow before I could continue.

UGH! I wanted to yell at him, but my emotions were so mixed. How was I supposed to have this serious discussion with him while he was all NAKED RIGHT IN FRONT OF ME?! I was getting so flustered, I didn’t know whether I wanted to kiss him or scream at him.

Rishika cleared her throat. “I’m sensing some tension in the air. I can go with her, Greyson.”

Sighing, Greyson shook his head. But I perked up. This was a great idea.

“That’s perfect! Rishika is a strong fighter, and I’m a strong fighter—I’ll be safe with her, and she’ll be safe with me.”

“And then you’ll both run into danger,” Greyson said dryly.

I glared at him. “Stop underestimating us.”

The urge to smack him was equal to the urge this push him on the ground and lick him. All over. *UGH!*

“Stop being annoying. We have to go now,” I told him. “We’re going to be *fine*, Greyson.”

Just then, Maren—of all people—poked her head out from the porch. “Greyson? We need you in here.”

Greyson took a deep breath and glanced at me.

“Don’t worry,” Rishika told him. “I’ll look after Cali.”

“And I’ll look after Rishika,” I said.

Greyson looked up at the sky, clearly exasperated. And then he faced me again, sighing once more. “Try to stay in touch.”

Then he turned his back on me and bounded up the lawn and toward the house.

I scoffed. “And he calls Lola a drama queen.”

Rishika snorted and then turned to me. “Where are we headed?”

\*\*\*\*

“Are you sure this is the place?” Rishika asked me as we walked through the woods. We had parked the car up the road, but the destination could only be reached by foot.

“Pretty sure,” I said.

It didn’t feel right though. We were deep in the woods, and as we continued to walk we came out onto a cemetery. This was where Artemis wanted to meet me? Why?

I swallowed roughly. “This is it.”

Rishika cringed, clearly shocked. “Seriously? Why would Artemis want us to meet her here?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

Suddenly, Artemis herself stepped out of the tree line.

Her eyes narrowed when she saw me, and something about her expression sent chills down my spine. “You didn’t listen to me,” she said. “I told you to come alone.”

**Episode 1270**

LOLA

I was in my room, holding my phone, my finger hovering over Jay’s name.

Staring at his picture make me feel better about everything, but still, it wasn’t the same as listening to his voice or seeing him through video. I’d been super flaky with my texts/calls since our long-distance hook-up that had turned into a night of vampiric discovery. For the hundredth time since breakfast this morning, I tried to decide whether or not I should tell him what Emmett had said.

My thumb moved over his name more decisively, but I knew how upset Jay would be if I told him. If I were in his shoes and Jay told me that some hot girl told him to lose his mate, I’d go ballistic. I was *not* willing to accept that I would have to lose my mate to begin with. It was unthinkable*.*

*Impossible!*

Jay Taylor Young was my sun, moon, stars, shmoopy-poo, Jaybay, baby bear, the whole shebang.

I moved my thumb away from the call button, yet again, and let out a huff of frustration. I scowled up at the ceiling and grumbled to myself, “Get rid of my mate?! Who does he think he is to say that to me?!”

Just then, I heard Jay’s faint voice coming from my phone. “Did you just say *get rid of your mate*?”

*SHIT!*

I was hit with a jolt of panic, because I hadn’t actually realized that I’d called him—My god, I’d called him by accident! What the hell was wrong with me? Could my head be any more in the clouds? To make things a million times worse, without even thinking, I put on a Scottish accent.

“Wrong number, laddie!”

The second the words were out of my mouth, I cringed, wishing for the earth to open up and swallow me whole. Jay could obviously see that it was me calling. What was I doing right now? Had turning into a vampire eradicated all my brain cells?

“Lola? Are you okay?” Jay sounded actually worried. *Great*. I just kept making things worse!

“Yes, all good!” I said, a little too cheerful.

“Then what was with the bad Scottish accent?” Jay asked, baffled.

“Ah, um. I have an explanation for that,” I said, fighting to think of one.

Jay had fallen silent, probably too shocked to speak. I usually liked having that effect on him, but only when I was in new lingerie, not poorly imitating.

“I’m sorry,” I rushed to add. “I just called you by accident; it was a butt dial! I’m just… I’m just doing some team building exercises with the other students here, okay? Call you tonight, love you, bye!”

I hung up, double and triple checking that the call was actually over—I’d learned my lesson—before sinking down onto the bed. Just hearing Jay’s voice made me miss him so much that I felt a little sick.

I thought back to what Emmett had said to me. That if I wanted to learn how to control my inner vampire, I would first have to let go of my inner werewolf. And Jay was a strong part of my inner werewolf. They were connected. But the vampire inside me didn’t mesh with the werewolf part. They were simply not compatible, and Emmett thought that was only going to hold me back.

What a bunch of bullshit.

I felt a rush of anger—Emmett clearly didn’t get it, at all. He thought that mates were something you could just pick up and put down like any old boyfriend or girlfriend, but the truth was that Jay was a real part of me. Losing him would mean losing myself, and the last piece of the werewolf world I could hold onto.

I’d tried to explain that to Emmett, but then I’d gotten too upset and run off.

I realized now that this strategy was not effective—no matter how many times I’d used it in the past—but it was what it was. And now, I needed to get myself ready for my first class, but I was too distracted. I could barely remember what it was called. *Feeding Without Fatalities*? *How to Train Your Inner Vampire*?

There was a knock on my bedroom door.

“Come in!” I called.

Emmett poked his head in. Great. That was exactly what I needed right now. An extremely gorgeous, auburn-haired, green-eyed god, here to chat with me about how much I did *not* need my mate.

I glared at him. “What do you want?”

Emmett looked guilty. Looking guilty should not have been so hot.

“I’m so sorry that I upset you,” he said. “I just wanted to talk before class. Can I come in?”

I stared at him, and he really seemed very remorseful. He also seemed radiant. There was something so magnetic about him… Even though he was just halfway through the door, he seemed to take up the whole room. I wasn’t sure if that was a bad or a good thing, but it was definitely noticeable. It was definitely something that affected me, in one way or another…

Even though I would never, ever, *ever* admit that to anyone.

EVER*.*

*What was wrong with me?!*

“Please?” Emmett pressed gently.

“Why do you wanna come in?” I asked. I was quite annoyed at him. For many reasons. Not only because he’d said that nonsense about me and Jay breaking up, but also because he was too fucking beautiful for his own good, and I didn’t like looking at him. Obviously.

“I just wanted to have a word with you. It will be very brief.” He looked at me pleadingly.

I sighed. “Fine.”

Emmett walked in hastily, like he was worried I’d change my mind. He sat down next to me on the bed.

“I’m sorry again for upsetting you,” he said, in that velvety voice of his. “I shouldn’t have pushed you like that. I know all of this is still new for you, and it’s going to take a lot of getting used to.” He offered me a small, encouraging smile. “You just have so much potential that I got carried away.”

My stomach started to feel weird again. It couldn’t be butterflies… *No way*! I was not getting all moon-eyed over this vampire. It was *not* fucking butterflies!

I was only supposed to have butterflies for my mate!

I looked away, feeling my cheeks getting hot. Was it hot in here? Had I forgotten to leave the window open? I should open the window. Fresh air would help.

I didn’t stand to open the window.

Clearing my throat, I said, “Well, you can forget the part about me getting rid of Jay. I can’t. I love him.”

I could feel Emmett’s gaze on the side of my face. I could feel that he wanted to say more. When I faced him, he opened and closed his mouth, but he eventually just nodded.

He stood up, keeping his eyes on me. “You need to get going if you don’t want to be late for *How to Train Your Inner Vampire*.”

My heart racing because of Emmett’s sheer proximity, I stood up as well and walked him to the door. I didn’t even know why I did that. Like, he knew his way out of the room—he didn’t need me to guide him or whatever. What the fuck, self?

What on earth was going on with me?

Emmett was about to leave when he stopped at the doorway and faced me. I was extremely aware of how close we were. Did he have to be so close? Why didn’t I just take a step back? Why did he smell so good? Was this a vampire thing? I did not like any of this! And I was pretty sure that Jay wouldn’t have liked it either. I knew I would’ve been furious if a hot vampire girl started sniffing around *him*.

“I’m not going to push you about your mate,” Emmett said.

“His name is Jay,” I said, feeling better the moment I said it.

Emmett stared at me. “Whatever his name is. I’m not going to push you about him. I’ve seen this before—the reluctance to let go of your old life and embrace the rebirth.”

Fighting to ignore the way my hands were shaking under Emmett’s gaze, the intensity of it, I stared back at him with my chin held high. “Jay is not a part of my old life. Jay is a part of *me*. I love him.”

But even as I said the words, even if I was certain that they were true, I couldn’t help the shiver that was threatening to break out all over my body, just because of Emmett’s scent.

He smiled knowingly. It was charming, and alluring, and I couldn’t help but be fascinated by it… No! I wasn’t fascinated! I didn’t even find him attractive. Okay, that was a lie. But that was only because I had eyes—it didn’t mean anything. Nothing meant anything!

“Don’t worry, Lola,” Emmett told me in that soft voice of his. “I’m going to help you let go.” A beat of silence passed between us, and then he leaned in closer.

So. Much. Closer.

I was screaming in my head.

*Is he about to kiss me?*

**Episode 1271**

XAVIER

I was fucked. There was no other way to put it.

I was strapped to the gurney, stuck in that same sterile medical room where Iñigo had originally taken me. I still couldn’t believe I’d gotten myself into this kind of situation. I also couldn’t fucking believe that I hadn’t escaped yet. Getting in trouble was my thing, but usually, it didn’t take so long for me to find a way out of it. I was trying to stay optimistic here, but in reality, I wanted to set myself and this entire room on fucking fire.

I should have dealt with Kira in a smarter way.

I’d asked her if she was willing to work with me, to accept my offer to help her get revenge on Garren, and I could have sworn that she had seriously considered it for a moment. There had been something in her eyes… But then, without even responding, she’d sedated me again.

And I’d woken up by myself, back in here. My life right now was like a creepy medical horror movie that never ended. I tried for the millionth fucking time to struggle against my restraints like a caged animal, no longer listening to reason. Because, what was the alternative to not struggling? Just lying there like a zombie, waiting for someone to fucking drain me?

I gritted my teeth against the pain as the silver bit into my flesh. Then I lay back, partly to save my strength and also because it was no use. This was not the way for me to escape. Kira could have been the way, but I had been a dumbass and pushed her too hard too fast. Maybe a lighter touch would have done the trick. I should have been more diplomatic instead of aggressive. Especially since I knew everything that was at stake. I could die here, or even worse, be kept alive for these vampires to sell and treat like a juice box. It would be a slow and torturous ending—and all that without ever seeing Cali again.

I couldn’t do this. I couldn’t give up.

The thought of Cali would have to pull me through this fucking nightmare.

The moment I finished that thought, the door rattled.

Someone slipped into the room, the footsteps light. I couldn’t lift my head enough to see who it was, and I couldn’t smell them because I was so damn weak. But then I heard a very familiar, very unwelcome, voice.

“Xavier!”

Ava was here. The eternal fucking thorn in my side. She was about the last person I wanted to see. Seriously, hadn’t she done enough damage already? What more did she want from me?

A second later, Ava’s face came into view, hovering over mine on the gurney. I groaned, though it sounded more like a growl. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Ava had the nerve to look worried. “I’m here to try and get you away from that vampire,” she whispered. “I already told you that I want to help you. I’m not lying, X.”

I felt like laughing. Maniacally, and right in her face. I thought back to what Iñigo had told me—it certainly didn’t sound like I really was her first priority here. My instinct was to tell Ava to go fuck herself, but I told myself to calm down and think rationally. Whatever game Ava was playing here, if she were willing to help me escape—despite her nefarious purposes—at least I would have a fighting chance at defending myself when I wasn’t strapped down like a lab rat.

I had to do my best to get back to Cali. To my *real* *mate*. She was my one and only, and I would do whatever it took to see her again. I needed to do anything and everything to get out of this situation, even if that meant playing along with Ava’s twisted games.

I softened my voice and stared at her, trying to look like I didn’t hate her guts. “I need your help. Please.”

Ava looked down at me, her face pinched in sympathy. She fell for it so quickly that I had to wonder if her reaction was real or not. Either way, she nodded and said, “I promise I’ll get you out. I just need a little more time.”

I had to fight the frustration, push it down before I exploded again. “You have to do it now,” I said, keeping my tone calm. “I can’t take this anymore. They treat me like I’m nothing but a bag of blood. You said you loved me once… Is this how you’re going to let them treat me?”

Ava swallowed thickly. “You’re the one who broke our mating bond, Xavier. But no matter what, you know that I care for you.”

I definitely did *not* know that, but I had to pretend. I’d broken the mate bond because it’d seemed like an inevitability. I’d thought Ava’s death had fully severed the bond, but when she’d come back… It hadn’t. And it was too late to rebuild anything we’d once had. Too much damage had been done with more being done now.

My mother’d been the one to teach Colton and me how to un-mate from someone. She didn’t want us to ever be in a situation like she was with Silas. He hadn’t even been her mate. But she’d had no way out. Mom had hoped we’d have good mates who loved us, but she always tried to find an escape plan. It’s how she was. It’s what Silas forced her to become.

Looking at Ava before me, I knew I’d made the right decision.

But I needed to use her to get me out of here.

“All I know is that I’m stuck here, in a medical room, like some sort of experiment. Last time the vampire was here, he almost drained me. I know I’m going to die one day, but I don’t think I deserve this kind of ending.”

Ava seemed struck.

“Please,” I said again, almost begging at this point. “You have to help me right now… I just don’t have enough time.”

A shiver ran through Ava. I could tell by her reaction that she was contemplating my words. But before she could respond, the door opened again.

This time, I recognized the footsteps. Certain, assertive, but still very light.

Kira.

My stomach dropped from the adrenaline. What was she going to do? Was I safe with her here? For some reason—call it Stockholm syndrome—I actually felt like I could trust her more than my ex-mate.

“What are you doing here?” Kira asked Ava, walking into my field of view. Her expression was hard. Her eyes were fixed on Ava, intense and unnerving. “You aren’t allowed in this room.”

Kira was so intimidating and imposing that a flash of apprehension crossed Ava’s face.

I had to hide a smile. I found it very enjoyable whenever Ava was taken down a peg. She sure fucking needed it. Nevertheless, the moment was over quickly, and now Ava was glaring at Kira. She marched up to the witch, getting in her face.

I was pretty sure that that was the wrong move.

I could already tell this was going to be interesting, because Ava, a lot of the time, did not know when to shut up.

“And *you* aren’t allowed to tell me what to do,” Ava said, making things a million times worse for herself. “You’re nothing but Iñigo’s witch. He needs me, and if you harm me, you’ll have him to answer to—and we both that know he’s the boss. *Your* boss.”

Kira remained silent, staring at Ava coldly. But the werewolf was still not done digging her own grave.

“You don’t have anything to say, do you?” Ava taunted. “You can’t touch me.”

Kira’s expression went from cold to dark. It was disturbing and entirely fucked up how terrifying she looked in that instant. Without a word, she held up her hands.

Moments later, sparks flew out of them—bright yellow, gold, and red beams of light that crackled in the silence. The blast of energy and electricity sent Ava flying across the room, where she slammed against the wall with a bang*.* The impact was so intense that I felt the entire room shake. Ava slid down the wall, and I held my breath, waiting to see what happened next.

Kira stalked over to Ava, who winced, still looking shocked and disoriented as she lay on the floor. Kira grabbed the werewolf from the lapels of her jacket and dragged her up.

“Let’s get one thing straight. I’m nobody’s witch, and I do what I want,” Kira hissed, right in Ava’s face. “For example, the only reason I’m not killing you right now is because I don’t want to stain my new shoes.”

And then she dropped Ava as if she were a bag of potatoes.

Looking frightened, Ava cradled her head where it had hit the wall and, without another word, ran out of the room.

“Well that was something,” I said, and I meant it.

Kira turned to me, moving toward me with slow steps. For a moment, I was apprehensive—would she blast me as well? But then she hovered over my face and gave me a steely look. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

**Episode 1272**

AVA

I rushed out of Xavier’s room, my heart still in my throat. I’d thought my deal with Iñigo would keep the witch from harming me, since I was no good to him dead. I should have thought about it more before trying to get one over on her. The witch was clearly powerful and ruthless, and she seemed eager to get in my way.

As I hustled upstairs and into the light, I was suddenly very certain that there was more to Kira than Iñigo realized. She was no pawn—nothing like his other employees. There was something more going on between the two of them…

Anger bubbled up inside me. Kira was a threat, and I did *not* like being threatened. Whatever her thing with Iñigo was, one thing was certain: Kira was powerful enough to effortlessly stop me from freeing Xavier. There was no doubt about that. I needed to get her out of the way, and there just might be an easy way to do it.

Like turning Iñigo against Kira.

Intent on my mission, I shifted and made a beeline for the diner.

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After getting dressed in some clothes I’d hidden in the woods—I couldn’t go into the diner naked, too many potential witnesses—I marched into Iñigo’s office. I was still fired up enough that I pushed the door open without even knocking. Iñigo looked up, startled. It was a power trip to see him surprised, but that didn’t last long. He shot me such a cold look that it stopped me short.

However, I recovered fast, charging in and plopping down into a chair. “We have a problem.”

Iñigo’s calculating dark eyes scrutinized my face. In the most indifferent way possible, he said, “I can see that. You just interrupted me.”

“I’m talking about Kira,” I declared, boldly maintaining eye contact.

“And I’m talking about you.” Iñigo stood from his chair, moved around the desk, and came to stand in front of me. His voice was heavy and sharp. “No one—absolutely no one—is to disturb me while I’m working.”

I couldn’t believe this guy. Or I could, but this was getting ridiculous. Who did he think he was?

“Fine,” I said, annoyed. “Next time, I’ll knock. But this is important. I think Kira’s up to something.”

Iñigo scoffed. His posture was relaxed, but he still looked menacing. “That’s what you interrupted me for? You’re being paranoid. Maybe worry about yourself and the Fae you have to get me.”

I stood up, just because I hated feeling like he was looking down on me. “This isn’t a joke. Why is she spending so much time with Xavier?”

He laughed. “Don’t tell me you’re jealous.”

I glared at him. “Despite un-mating, Xavier is *mine*. He’s supposed to be part of our deal.”

*And Kira being around Xavier all the time was not part of my plan*, I added internally.

“Kira is guarding the merchandise—that’s her job,” Iñigo said, taking a step closer. There were just two feet between us now. The angrier he looked, the more I wanted to stand my ground.

“Xavier is restrained—there is nowhere he could possibly go. And she attacked me! You don’t need to have her there when—”

“I don’t want to hear another fucking word from you,” Iñigo snapped. At the same time, he grabbed my wrist and dragged me flush against him. It felt like a collision, and my chest started heaving.

“Let’s get one thing straight, Ava,” he hissed. “Kira’s methods are none of your business. *My business* is none of your business. Do you understand?”

I swallowed, realizing that I’d overstepped here, and it was too late. The worst part was that I didn’t mind being close to him like this. In fact, I enjoyed it, however sick that was. No matter how much of a monstrous asshole Iñigo was, he was hot as sin. Tall, lithe, and broad-shouldered—full of power. His hard grip on my wrists made my whole body heat up.

Fear and lust were suddenly one in the same.

When I didn’t speak, he said, “You seem to be laboring under the misapprehension that you have some kind of power here. Let me clarify that—you do *not*. I’m running things around here, and your thoughts and opinions are uninformed and unwelcome.”

He sounded so calm, so in control, that I started trembling. Despite myself, I was breathing heavily, the rush of him manhandling me working like a drug. This was the vampire effect, and the Alpha effect too. I’d always been attracted to power—that wasn’t news.

I just needed that power in my corner.

The vampire saw the flicker of desire in my eyes and smirked at me. “Now you see where you stand… But maybe you need more of a demonstration.”

Iñigo spun me around over his desk, so swiftly that I yelped.

*Yes*, I thought, unable to stop myself.

He pushed me forward, and I rested my weight on my hands, fighting to keep some sort of balance even though I felt like I was on fire. He grabbed the back of my neck with one hand, the other one moving to flip my dress up. In my hurry to get dressed, I hadn’t worn any panties, which now the sick part of myself was thankful for. When he reached between my legs and felt nothing but slippery skin, his breath hitched.

And then he laughed, low and sharp in my ear.

“Are you this easy, Ava?”

“I could ask you the same,” I said, trembling deliciously. “I’ve barely been here five minutes.”

“No underwear, huh?” he whispered, his words hot against my nape. “You’re just begging for a fuck, aren’t you, pet?”

I couldn’t stop my smile—I had the power I wanted over him. I knew I needed to be careful though. This mutual desire could work against me, too.

But it was difficult to be rational right now.

“Yes,” I said, pressing into him, “are you?"

“Yes,” he said, his fingers finding my clit. Then he sank his teeth into my neck and his fingers into me at the same time. A moan shuddered right out of me, the dual euphoria and deep rhythm of his movements sending me higher and higher as he kept going and going—

As I started to quiver, he stopped as abruptly as he’d started.

“You don’t get to come so easily,” he rasped. “You need to work for it.”

Even though the rational part of my brain wanted to tell him to go to hell, when I heard the buckle of his belt, I whimpered and inched backward, needy and ready.

The impact of his hand landing on my backside was so intense that I fell forward. He grabbed my hair, twisting it in a ponytail to pull me toward him again.

I deserved this. I *wanted* this.

*Xavier, forgive me.*

The wanton sound that escaped my mouth was covered by his heavy tone. “Don’t. Fucking. Move. I run this show. Get it?”

I nodded, my mouth hanging open, my heart pounding in my throat. But I still managed to choke out, “I don’t have all day, though, bloodsucker.”

He laughed, breathy and sinister and sexy enough to make my knees buckle. I cried out at the sensation, at the pleasurable, pounding rush of him as he pinned me to the desk. He shoved me forward till my chest was flush against it, one hand on my shoulder blades, the other at my hip to push me backward, toward him, manhandling me in a way that had me writhing.

A rustle of foil moments later, and he pushed inside of me. He teased me, moving slowly, hitting that same spot inside me over and over, so sharp and right that my whole body started to pulsate. He fucked me through my orgasm, grunting out curses, moving faster and faster as he rode me with rough slides, pushing me toward the feeling once more. Files and folders fell on the floor, the desk shaking with his force, just like I was.

When he finished, it was with a loud groan that I felt right through me.

And then he pulled at my hair again and sank his teeth back into my neck. When he was through, he said, “Good girl.”

We untangled from each other, and I dazedly fixed my clothes.

I looked over my shoulder to see that Iñigo had already moved on. He picked up the folders that had fallen off the desk and didn’t even look at me. In a cold, dismissive voice, he said, “You can go now.”

Humiliation burned me, then anger. Iñigo kept acting as if he didn’t care about me beyond what my body could offer him. Except I knew that wasn’t true. Why else was he thinking about sex the second I walked in the door?

*I don’t care if you used me, because I used you too*, was what I was really saying here.

“It was all right,” I said, cheeks flushed.

He raised an eyebrow as he sat back down at his desk. “You know that’s not true.”

Fuming but trying not to show it, I marched out of his office. Even if he was indifferent toward me, I *shouldn’t* give a damn. I needed another plan if Iñigo was going to keep playing mind games with me. Insurance that Xavier would be all right.

Iñigo was ignorant if he couldn’t see that Kira was trouble. I couldn’t trust that even if I got him to care for me that it wouldn’t take too long. It was clear to me now that he would be of no help in this, so I would just have to deal with it on my own.

I needed to take out Kira by myself.

**Episode 1273**

Artemis turned her gaze to Rishika. Her eyes were narrowed, suspicious. *Angry*.

“You shouldn’t have come here,” she told Rishika.

Rishika looked like she’d been slapped. *Poor baby!* Here she was, wanting to help Artemis, and Artemis was being a dick! I would not stand for this. Rishika didn’t deserve that. I was about to tear my sister a new one when she suddenly turned her back on us.

I gaped at her. She was acting so bizarrely that I couldn’t even get mad at her.

“Of course I came,” Rishika said, coming to stand next to me. Bravely, she added, “I just want to help you.”

Artemis stopped moving. Slowly, she turned to face us again, her expression distant. She was looking at neither of us, just tilting her head to the side as if she was trying to listen to something.

*What in the WORLD is happening right now?* I wondered, freaking out.

I was scared, but I was also annoyed. “Can you just explain what’s going on? What are you doing out here?” I asked. “And why did you want to meet at this creepy cemetery?”

As the words left my mouth, I looked out across the cemetery and realized that, to my absolute horror, it was all ripped up.

The ground was disturbed, like someone had dug something up—*OH MY GOD, CORPSES?*—or something had dug itself out—*OH MY GOD, ZOMBIES! AGAIN!*

I gasped, putting the pieces together. The disturbed cemetery, the zombies that had attacked us so recently, seeing Artemis with the zombies, Greyson telling me that she didn’t look like herself… I couldn’t shake the certainty that in that moment, the zombies had been listening to Artemis. But that couldn’t be true. There had to be another explanation for this situation.

*Right? RIGHT?* I screamed inside my head.

Having an older sister was pretty rough, honestly. Way too much work and anxiety. My voice was shaking, and I felt like crying. Yet again, I asked, “Artemis, what’s going on here?”

She followed my gaze, realizing what I’d seen—the literal empty graves. When she looked back at me, I felt my stomach clench. In that second, Artemis was herself, and she was looking so terrified that my heart broke for her.

“That’s why I needed you to come, to see all this,” she whispered. “I’m so scared. I need your help, Cali. I don’t know who to trust. I don’t know what’s going on, but—”

Rishika jumped in, panicked as well. “Wait, is this where all those creatures came from? Did you see it happen?”

Artemis stared at Rishika now. She still looked like the Artemis I knew; the same Artemis who had saved me time and time again, and who teased me about being clumsy, and who loved my dad’s food. But then, in an instant, her expression changed again.

That vacant look took over her face, and she didn’t respond to Rishika’s question.

I moved closer to my sister and placed a comforting hand on her arm. It was instinctive, to touch her like this. Just to feel that she was real. My throat tight, I said, “It’s okay now. We can help you.”

Artemis glanced between my hand on her shoulder and my face, her expression conflicted. And then she pressed her eyes closed. A second later, she opened them wide and turned to stare at me. She seemed like one hundred percent her normal self, only horrified. She clutched my arm and whispered, “We need to get out of here. *Now*.”

The constant changes in Artemis’s mood had me more worried than ever. Saving her from a troll or a witch or a Dark Fae was one thing—whatever was happening right now seemed to be going on inside her. Artemis wasn’t well, but I couldn’t see any visible enemy around.

And that made me more scared for her than ever.

“Of course,” I said, nodding vehemently. “Let’s go back to the pack house right now.”

I’d barely finished my sentence when Artemis let me go. She squeezed her eyes shut and held her head, moaning. I felt sick to my stomach with concern.

“Artemis!” I burst out.

She shook her head, and Rishika and I exchanged panicked looks. *What the hell do we do now?* I wanted to ask my packmate, but I didn’t have the time.

A man stepped out of the trees, heading straight for us.

He was young, looked ordinary enough, but there was something about him that set me on edge. He stopped in front of us, glancing between Rishika and me. And then he stared at Artemis. “Mistress?”

I stood there, stunned. *WHAT* did he just call her?

“York.” Artemis breathed his name.

The vibe coming off the young man was so bad that I recoiled. Rishika was clearly getting the same uneasy feeling, because she shifted into a wolf and stood guard in front of both Artemis and me. She growled at York.

He narrowed his eyes, settling into a fighting stance. Rishika was ready to lunge at him when Artemis shrieked, “STOP!”

Rishika turned to her, stopping her growling. She looked as confused as I was, even in her wolf form. I stared between the man and Artemis.

“*Who* even is this?” I demanded.

I sounded panicked, but I didn’t give a shit. I couldn’t keep my cool here when all these weird things were happening!

Artemis took a deep breath and shot me a tortured look. Then she gazed at the man she’d called York and simply said, “Go.”

Without a word, he disappeared back into the woods.

I stood there, gaping. It took everything in me not to grab Artemis, shake her, and screech, *WHAT THE HELL?* Did this have something to do with Artemis’s Fae mind control powers? Did it mean that her magic was back?

“Is your magic back? Seriously, what is going on right now?” I managed the questions just as Rishika shifted back to human. She and I shared an equally baffled look before turning to Artemis.

But she was looking off into the woods.

When she spoke, it wasn’t to answer my questions.

“We need to get out of here,” she whispered. “Right now.”

In the blink of an eye, she’d grabbed Rishika and me by the arms and started to drag us off deeper into the woods. As she forced us to run, I could not for the life of me shut up.

“WAIT! Where are we even going? And who was that guy?”

No response.

“What’s happening with the zombies?”

Still nothing.

“And what is going on with your face, why is your face like that? Why do you get all weird and then normal again! ARTEMIS, WHAT IS GOING ON?”

But my sister didn’t give me any answers. She just kept muttering, “We have to get away from here, we have to get away from here, we have to get away from here…”

She kept repeating the words like a mantra, and the only thing I could think of was that if she wanted us to leave this place so badly, then why the hell had she asked to meet here in the first place?

Artemis hauled us forward with surprising strength until we reached a deep, dark part of the forest. All of a sudden, I looked up and saw that the sky was going dark. Unnaturally so.

It was like a storm had come on, but too quickly.

My heart pounding from the running—but also from the fear and a general feeling of WTF?—I opened my mouth to warn the others. But before I could, the storm was on top of us.

An actual cloud of rain was on top of us, above the trees, and the whipping wind made any words I tried to utter fly away. And then, to my shock, it started snowing.

*SNOWING?*

It was a complete shock to have it come on so suddenly, and it just kept getting worse, along with the wind. Both Rishika and Artemis were shouting, at me and at each other. But I could barely hear them; I could barely hold onto them.

I felt my sister losing her grip on my hand. Now, I couldn’t even see her through the howling wind and snow and hail.

*Is this how I’m going to die?* I wondered, utterly confused and terrified. *Is this weird storm going to be the end of me? Because I did NOT see that coming!*

Only seconds later, I was lost in a sea of white.

I tried to hold on to Artemis, hating the idea of losing my sister, but it was in vain. Not knowing which way was up, I was literally buffeted to and fro like a huge lump of flesh, or a sack of potatoes, and then—

Just as quickly as the storm had come up, it vanished.

The sky glistened blue, and the wind died down.

Everything around us was utterly silent.

Panting, feeling like I was about to burst from the adrenaline and fear and confusion, I looked around, ready to call for my friends…

But then I realized that I was completely alone.

**Episode 1274**

VIOLET

The entire pack had gathered around Vander.

Big Mac and Orla were asking him questions.

Greyson was glaring at him.

Sage and Zainab looked intrigued.

Tom seemed friendly enough but also worried.

Maren looked as thoughtful as ever. I was glad that little Fenrir was down for his nap, because that sweet baby didn’t need to be hearing any of this.

As for Marta, she was standing close to me, watching the entire thing unravel. I could sense Lilac next to her. Part of me wished we hadn’t put Arlo’s body back downstairs. I wanted to talk to my brother so badly, I ached with it. I had missed my twin so much that it felt like a part of my soul had been missing this entire time.

Though, I did realize how weird it would’ve been to keep Arlo’s lifeless body in my room… Clearly that wasn’t going to be a reliable way to talk to him if he kept getting forced out of it. We *had* to figure something out.

“So long story short,” Vander said loudly, pulling me out of my thoughts, “I suspect that somehow, the Orb must still be here in this world.”

“Even though we’re not acting hostile toward one another, it could be here in some other form,” Big Mac told Greyson, who shook his head.

“But how the hell does that work?” he asked, clearly frustrated.

“Nobody really knows,” Orla said. “But all the evidence points that way. It’s a powerful piece of magic, so anything is possible.”

Tom arched an eyebrow. “We all saw the zombies, after all.”

Big Mac and Orla seemed to be getting more and more worried; apparently this was the Keeper of All Nature they’d met before. I looked out the window, wondering why Xavier hadn’t returned yet. This seemed like a conversation that needed to involve him. I was feeling extremely uneasy about all this. Vander was going on and on about the disturbance in the spirit world, and how we all needed to fix it.

I didn’t know what exactly that meant. I hoped that didn’t mean anything bad for my brother, but I strongly suspected that any kind of fix for the spirit world would result in Lilac being ripped away from me. Especially given what he’d told me before—that if the Orb was destroyed, he could disappear forever. The wave of sadness that hit me made my eyes feel scratchy. That couldn’t happen. Marta moved closer to me then, nudging me.

“Lilac’s spirit is still here,” she whispered in my ear. “He says he’s uneasy too.”

She had clearly guessed at my train of thought, and a weird jolt ran through me. It was hard getting used to the fact that Marta could see my brother when I, his own twin, couldn’t. But I was grateful to have anything from him. I was grateful for Marta.

I grabbed her hand and gave it a squeeze. She looked at me sadly. “Lilac can’t feel that. That’s not how this works.”

“No, that was for you,” I whispered. “Thank you for helping me.”

Marta gave me a smile that was still sad, but hopeful too.

As Vander, Greyson, and Big Mac kept arguing in the background with Orla trying to make her own arguments and also play peacemaker and the rest of the pack watching with fascination, I felt so anxious I wanted to disappear.

I was freaking out so badly that all I wanted to do was hide from the world and talk to Charlie. Feeling my connection with my mate would work like a calming agent. It would feel like an ointment for the restlessness I felt.

The emotion fell heavy on me, on my shoulders and on my chest, and I felt too embarrassed to tell anyone else about it. Marta knew, but what was she supposed to tell me? “*Don’t worry, your brother won’t vanish if they fix this ‘hole’ in the spirit world*”? She was already doing so much for me. No, talking to Charlie was the best solution.

I pulled up my phone and checked it for the hundredth time, though, and there was still no message from him. He rarely took so long to text me. Usually, he replied to whatever I sent him within seconds. I glanced around, at Vander and Big Mac and Greyson—it didn’t look like their fight was going to deescalate anytime soon.

“One thing I don’t understand is why we should trust you,” Greyson was telling Vander.

“And *I* don’t understand why you’re the Alpha, but I’m not making a big fuss out of it, am I?” Vander replied in the same tone. Ouch.

“Big Mac, does your friend over here want to make me an enemy for life, or what?” Greyson asked conversationally.

This was going to take a while, especially now that more people were piping up—even Maren, who usually stayed out of everything. I didn’t need to be here for this, and honestly, I didn’t want to be. With everyone occupied, I slowly eased out of the living room and toward the stairs. I climbed them without any noise, and when I got to the second floor, I headed to my bedroom.

I sat down on my bed, still staring at my phone. I took a deep breath and decided to just go for it, because I just couldn’t wait anymore. I dialed Charlie’s number, desperate to hear his voice.

He instantly picked up. “Hello?”

I was so relieved that I barely registered the glumness in his tone before I started rambling. “How was the hunt? I’ve been so worried about you, and you haven’t been texting me back… Everything okay?”

Charlie exhaled sharply. “I’m sorry that I didn’t get it in touch sooner. Do you forgive me?”

I lay back on the bed, smiling to myself. “Of course.”

“The hunt was actually pretty amazing,” Charlie said, a little more enthusiasm in his tone this time. “You know how when we fought those vampires, I told you that it was like my body took over and I knew instinctively what to do? The hunt was like that—times a thousand. It was unreal.”

He sounded happy now, and I couldn’t help but grin. Charlie deserved all this happiness and more. “That’s great! I’m very glad for you.”

Charlie fell silent suddenly.

My smile faded a little. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s just that things got a little weird during the hunt when these other creatures attacked…”

“Wait,” I said, blood going cold. “What kind of creatures?”

“They were dragging themselves, all bloody and rotten-fleshed. Some were actual skeletons, with just bits of them left.”

My heart was beating so fast that I felt like it was about to burst.

“Honestly?” Charlie said. “They reminded me of zombies.”

“Like in the movies, right?” I asked, my voice shaking.

“Literally like in the movies. I’d never seen anything like it in real life,” Charlie said. “Wait…” He paused. “How do you know that?”

I took a deep breath before saying, “We fought them too.”

Charlie choked. “Are you okay? Is everyone else okay?”

I explained what had happened and repeatedly assured him that I was okay when he started panicking. I didn’t want to worry him, but at the same time, I needed to make him realize the gravity of the situation.

“You really need to come back to the house, though,” I said. “The creatures are just the beginning. There’s something going on, and I think it has to do with Lilac… I’m really worried about this.”

“What? Did he disappear again?” Charlie asked, sounding concerned.

I swallowed thickly, fiddling with the hem of my shirt. “No. But everyone’s been talking about the Orb. How it’s causing all of this trouble. It’s all very complicated, and I just really…” I sighed. “I guess I could explain all this much better if it were in person. Would you be able to come over? I miss you so much. This is such a tough time for the pack.”

When Charlie did not respond right away, I was immediately alarmed.

“Violet…”

“Where exactly are you right now? Are you staying at a hotel again?” I asked quietly.

I thought of Iris, who clearly didn’t like me. It was quite possible that Charlie was having a hard time convincing his parents to let him come back to the pack house to see me, especially so soon after they’d reconciled. It was all very complicated—especially the part about his mother threatening me.

That was the most complicated part.

Still, though, I didn’t want to make Charlie feel bad.

“If you need a ride, maybe I can borrow one of the cars and come get you?” I asked tentatively. “That’s always an option for me. If you agree, of course.”

When Charlie didn’t reply again, I knew that something was wrong.

“Well,” Charlie finally said, clearing his throat. “About that…”

“Do you need more time to finish the hunt? Is that it?” I asked anxiously.

Charlie paused. “Not exactly. I’m not going to be able to come back just now, though.”

“How much longer then? What are you saying?” I asked, my heart pounding.

Charlie paused once more, but this time it was for an agonizingly long moment that made me feel like I could barely breathe.

Finally, in a shaky voice, he said the one thing I’d never expected to hear him say.

“Violet… We need to break up.”

**Episode 1275**

LOLA

I was frozen, staring at Emmett’s face, so close to my own.

He smelled like heaven. His lips were perfect, just like every inch of his face. I reminded myself that vampires were beautiful on purpose, the same way werewolves were. We were predators. But since I was a vampire too, what exactly was happening between us? *It made no sense!*

I knew that I should take a step back, say something, but my body was betraying me.

To my horror, I found myself swaying toward him, not away.

But just as I was afraid that we were about to cross a line, Emmett pulled away.

He put on a professional kind of face and cleared his throat.

Looking anywhere other than at me, he said, “You’d better get down to class. You’re not going to want to miss your first day.”

Emmett strolled away as if nothing had happened. I stood there for a long moment, trying to get my bearings, trying to realize the gravity of that almost-kiss… My gut was throbbing in sync with my head and heart. Had I seriously been prepared to put my mouth on someone else’s mouth? A mouth that was NOT *Jay’s*?

Had I really wanted to KISS Emmett?

Heat rushed to my cheeks as I realized that hadn’t even been what Emmett had intended. I was the one who’d swayed forward. I was the one who’d felt enraptured. I was the one who’d been so intoxicated by his scent… What the hell was going on with me?

What kind of madness was taking over my brain, my body?

I had always been a lot of things, but unfaithful had never, *ever* been one of them. This was horrible! I thought back to my accidental call with Jay and felt guilt flooding through me. The feeling of self-disgust made me shudder.

I had to get a grip, like, *yesterday*.

I shook my head to clear it, trying to process the situation in a way that didn’t make me feel like a monster. Because only a monster would cheat on an angel like Jay! *UGH!* There had to be some sort of explanation for this sudden attraction—I was a fish out of water, and I didn’t know what I was doing. That was totally what it was. So I just needed to control it.

I needed to be myself, and I needed to remind myself that I adored Jay, because I did. Truly, I did, and I always would.

I breathed deeply and told myself, “You’ve got this.”

I walked back into my room and headed toward the bathroom, thinking that I really had to check out my face and see if I’d turned all red. I stopped short in front of the mirror, though.

“*Shit.*”

Right. I couldn’t see my reflection. This was extremely irritating! How, exactly, was I going to be able to make sure that my eyeliner was on point? Did vampires not wear eyeliner? What kind of heathen species had I trapped myself in? Oh my god, what about red lipstick? Was I never going to be able to wear it again? Had I just condemned myself to a life of lip gloss and nothing else?

I needed to ask the rest of the students here all of these very important questions.

With a sigh, I checked my phone. Time for class. I had to be productive and all that.

Still grumbling, I opened my door and headed out into the hallway, which I was surprised to see was flooded with students. As I dove into the crowd, trying to remember exactly where I was supposed to go for this fricking class, I heard a group of girls gossiping. They had to be teenagers, from the looks of it, but who knew?

Anyway, they were gossiping, and one of the girls said, “Did you see her at breakfast? Sonja heard Professor Laurence telling her that she’d have to dump her werewolf mate, and she started to cry!”

The girls burst out laughing. They sounded cruel but pleased, and my stomach churned. I hadn’t thought I’d put on that kind of show… If anything, I would’ve expected a little more sympathy here. Had these idiots ever met Jay? Did they have ANY idea how kind and sweet and beautiful he was? They’d probably cry at the idea of losing him, too!

Then one of the other girls added, “Werewolves are so freaking weird. Can you imagine being stuck with one partner for your entire life? *Boring*. They’re so repressed. And they smell awful.”

They dissolved into giggles again, and I…

I found myself blinking back tears.

This had never happened to me before outside the werewolf community. Whenever anyone had bullied me or any of my friends when I was a kid, I’d always destroyed them. But here, I felt like a fish out of water. I felt different. I’d been looking forward to starting class, but now all I wanted to do was run back up to my bedroom, pack all my things, and go back to Jay.

I missed him so much.

Suddenly, though, I felt a hand on my elbow. I quickly blinked away the tears, wiping my eyes. I was embarrassed enough already—I didn’t want anyone to see me crying for the second time in one day. Taking a deep calming breath, I turned around to see a young woman, looking at me kindly.

“Don’t worry about them,” the woman said in a soft voice. She was talking about the girls, but I wasn’t sure exactly how much she’d heard.

“It’s fine,” I said throatily.

The woman gave me a smile. “I’m Erasmia, but my friends call me Ras.”

“Lola.”

“Nice to meet you.” She held out a hand, and I shook it, grateful for her kindness. She was probably the first person here who had treated me like… well, like a person.

Ras motioned up ahead, at the giggling girls. “Don’t let them get to you. I personally think it’s really romantic that you have a fated mate, and that you two are so devoted to each other.”

I sighed. “Doesn’t seem like anyone else thinks that.”

Ras shrugged. “Who cares what anyone else thinks? Let them say whatever they want. Their lifestyle works for them, but only you know what works for you.”

Ras’s words were all the encouragement I needed to remind myself of my true feelings. My heart soared—this was exactly what I’d been thinking.

“That’s it, actually,” I told Ras. “Jay works for me. Jay is everything to me.”

Ras smiled again. “He’s the guy Winifred said looked like a pirate, right?”

I blushed. “Right.”

“I bet they all wished they had a Jay for themselves,” Ras said, pointing at the girls, who were now wandering off down the hallway.

I chuckled. Then I frowned, because I did not like the idea of anyone else ever touching my Jay. Kind of hypocritical of me, considering the Emmett incident, but whatever. The point was, he was mine and I was his, and I would kill them if they touched him. That was all.

“Are you a student here?” I asked Ras, changing the subject. “I didn’t see you at breakfast.”

Ras gave me an enigmatic look. “Not exactly. I come and go as I please. I stay here whenever I need a safe place to lie low, or rest… Or when IT needs help with new tech. I just arrived, actually.”

I blinked. “Oh wow,” I said. “Sorry, it’s still weird for me not being able to figure out how old everyone here is. How old are you?”

I instantly regretted the question —I didn’t want to offend this woman. She was basically the only person here who’d been nice to me so far.

“Let’s just say, I’m very old,” Ras said. She had a kind of beauty that meant she could’ve been anywhere from twenty-five to thirty-five when she’d been turned. I wondered if vampires had to use specific moisturizers or if their skin stayed the same way it was when they had gotten turned. Did vampires get pimples or blemishes?

I had to stop myself before I started a vampire skincare line.

As we walked, we went past a classroom and I was surprised that Emmett stood by the door. He was greeting students, and I realized that apart from the fact that I had a mate who I loved, Emmett was also my teacher. So whatever I felt about him—which I would squash—was EXTRA problematic. Gross!

Another thing caught my attention then, though.

When Emmett noticed Ras passing by, his expression froze. At the same time, Ras put her hand in the small of my back and led me down the hallway, away from Emmett.

I glanced between them, intrigued. “What’s going on there?” That had been pretty weird. Or was I reading into the situation?

Glancing over her shoulder, Ras scowled. She stared at me and then back at Emmett.

And then she said, “Don’t trust that man.”

**Episode 1276**

XAVIER

I stared at Kira. Had I really just heard what I thought I heard?

Before I could doubt her and my own sanity, Kira burst into motion. She glanced at the door. “We have to work quickly. We don’t have a lot of time.”

I could barely process my luck, especially because I’d written Kira off as a solution.

“That old crusty vampire Quinton is already itching for more,” she said. “They’ll be wanting me to sedate you for another move any minute now.”

Possibilities started roaming around inside my head. What had caused Kira’s change of heart? Was it what I’d said about Garren? Or did all this have something to do with Ava? But then I decided that I didn’t actually care. Kira was loosening the chains that held me to the gurney, and her reasoning didn’t matter to me.

I would be free.

I would see Cali again, run up to her and wrap her up in my arms. And even though I knew that our mind link wouldn’t work with so much distance between us, I thought, *I’m coming, Cali.*

The chains finally fell loose, and I leapt to my feet.

Wrong move.

I swayed, feeling woozy after all this time lying down—after all the drugs, and the blood these fucking leeches had taken from me.

Kira grabbed my arm, staring into my eyes as she steadied me. Her words mirrored my thoughts. “You’ve lost a lot of blood, and you’ve been on your back for days. You’re going to be weak, but you need to work as hard as you can, because we have to move fast.”

I stared at her for a moment, still trying to balance myself, to feel my feet steady on the ground.

Her voice sharpened. “Do you understand, Xavier?” Her determined face was impressive enough to shake me up. This woman was a force of nature. I could get behind that. “Listen to me carefully, this is what we’re going to do…”

Kira started giving me a rundown of the layout of the building. Listening to her, I no longer felt like I was about to throw up or faint. Standing on my two fucking feet made me feel more like myself, even though my wolf was roaring, still trying to find his footing.

“Any questions?” Kira said.

I shook my head.

“After I open this door, we will have four minutes to make it to the first floor, and then we will be facing vampire guards at the perimeter—anywhere between two to six men, but nothing we won’t be able to handle.”

I took in Kira’s words, my head swimming. Two to six men? Fucking *vampires?* That would have been a piece of cake if I were at full strength, but right now? Right now, I felt like someone had drained the life force out of me and left just enough for me to keep on living.

Literally, that was what had happened to me.

“Are you ready, Xavier?” Kira asked me in a serious tone.

No, I was nowhere near ready to fight, but I clearly didn’t have a choice. And at least I had the witch on my side. I had seen what Kira could do when she’d attacked Ava. She seemed so confident—who knew what magic she could unleash on those monsters. But either way, this was my one goddamn shot, and I wasn’t about to blow it.

I stood up straight. “I’m ready. Let’s go.”

Kira nodded at me decisively, then she strode over to the door and poked her head out.

Two beats of silence.

Finally, she motioned me over. “Coast is clear. It’s go time.”

She threw open the door, and we both rushed out. I was fighting to keep up with Kira as she raced down a long hallway. I looked around and wondered what kind of building this was. There were no windows, which meant we had to be underground. As I passed door after door, I couldn’t help but wonder if there were others trapped in here too.

I thought of the Kollector and his zoo. The animals that had been trapped in there. How I had left Greyson there—even though there was part of me that had believed he’d escape anyway. I was hit by a wave of guilt that I had to ignore, even though I knew that if Cali were here, she would’ve insisted that we stop to help everyone.

She would never have been able to leave anyone behind. I admired that about her—the strength of her soul and her endless optimism. But I was already weakened, and I wanted to survive this day. I wanted to survive so I could see her. I had no time to stop for anything else right now, but I promised to myself that in the future—sooner rather than later—I would return and release all the vampires’ victims.

I’d give Iñigo what he deserved.

“Let’s go!” Kira hissed at me, motioning up ahead to a staircase and a door. I could see the sunlight peeking out from underneath it. The promise of freedom gave me additional strength, additional hope, and I sped up, following Kira up and out of the door. We entered a small hallway, and there were windows here.

There was real light here, and I could breathe again.

Kira quickly punched in her security code, then pushed at the final door we needed to go through. It opened…

But it didn’t *just* open.

The movement set off blaring sirens and what seemed like a million flashing lights.

I couldn’t believe this—what the hell was going on? Was this some kind of fucked up trick that Kira was playing on me? Were these vampires about to let me loose and capture me again like bait, just for fun?

I felt so enraged that I started shaking with it.

I was about to demand explanations from Kira, but when I turned to face her, she looked as stunned as I felt. “Something’s wrong,” she hissed. “They’ve changed the security codes.”

“What the hell does that mean?” I asked, trying not to panic.

Her eyes narrowed, her mouth pursed, Kira looked over my shoulder. “It means we’ve got company.”

I turned and saw vampires pouring out of the hallway, heading toward us.

“Run!” Kira said, pushing me out, toward the exit. We both stumbled out the door, blinking against the sunlight. For a second, I felt rejuvenated, as if the rays were giving me the power that I’d lost…

And then I was greeted by Iñigo’s cold stare.

He stood a few feet away from Kira and me, his arms crossed over his chest. He had this indifferent, almost bored expression on his face, and it fucking *infuriated* me. Right behind him was an army of his bloodsucker minions. They looked strong, even though they were all just glorified corpses.

“Well well well,” Iñigo said, eyebrows raised. “What do we have here? Did the puppy get lost?”

I realized that Iñigo hadn’t seen Kira yet. She was standing right behind me. She was slender and petite, but even weak I was still a hulking mountain compared to her. I didn’t dare to turn and look at her, not when Iñigo seemed to be fixated on me right now.

“You come here with your minions and you think this is a fair fight?” I pointed between us. “Only cowards do shit like this,” I said, even though I knew it was futile.

Iñigo laughed. “Oh, Xavier. You still have some spunk left in you. You need to go right back into your crate, dog,” he said, and lazily motioned for his minions to move forward, to capture me. I immediately tried to shift, all my fury and disgust and absolute boiling rage toward these leeches lending me strength.

But my wolf was too weak. It was hidden deep within me, whimpering.

I had lost too much blood. I had known this from the beginning, but I’d still risked everything. I shot a panicked look over my shoulder at Kira, who said, “I got you.”

A second later, the witch shot some of her electric magic into me.

But where the magic had harmed Ava, on me, it worked like an elixir. It worked like a shot of adrenaline and strength, and I was suddenly filled with both. I shifted with a roar, my wolf proudly announcing his presence after what felt like forever.

I knocked back six vampires, just as Kira blasted another six with her magic.

Iñigo seemed casually surprised when his eyes fell on her.

“Funny thing is, Kira, I’d assumed that I had enough on you to keep you loyal,” he told her in an icy tone. “After all I’ve done for you—”

Kira laughed at him. In that moment, she looked ten times more menacing than he was. “You shouldn’t be surprised. Not after the way you ‘secured’ my loyalty.”

And just like that, Iñigo’s calm indifference vanished.

In the blink of an eye, he was incensed enough to bear his fangs.

It was too late for him, though.

Kira raised her hands again, blasting the minion vampires back—right into Iñigo. The electricity that poured out of her was all shades of purple and red, violent like a bruise. The chaos of the vampires falling into one another like pinballs was enough of a distraction for us to make a run for it.

“Follow me!” Kira shouted.

We both sprinted off into the woods.

And I was finally free.

**Episode 1277**

*What...*

I blinked rapidly, looking around openmouthed. I was in a silent clearing in the woods, fighting to gather my bearings.

*What is happening right now?*

As many times as I wondered the same thing, it did not get old, because I truly had no idea what the hell this life that I was living was. I felt like throwing up, but not really, and I wasn’t sure if it was because I’d just been rolling around in the snow, or because I was just so stressed because of everything else.

*… Is there a chance that this clearing is heaven?* I wondered. *Did I die?*

Where were the hordes of angels to welcome me, then? Wouldn’t I get some sort of snack? The customer service in heaven was terrible—I’d expected a lot better. I would definitely leave them a one-star review.

I grunted at myself, rubbing my throbbing forehead after realizing that my thoughts were ridiculous. It was all so bewildering that I contemplated the possibility of this being one of those weird dreams Greyson and I had been having. But then, as my breathing evened out and my head stopped hurting so much, I looked up at the trees. There was snow rapidly melting off the leaves.

The storm had been totally real.

The freaky, weird, insane storm.

Having lived in Minnesota for most of my life, I was very used to snow, but I’d never seen anything remotely like what had just happened. The speed, the intensity, the way it had just disappeared… None of it was natural, and I was sure about that. This was magic. Whether it was *dark* magic remained to be seen. But either way, it couldn’t be trusted. Because my friends…

Where *were* my friends?

“Artemis?” I called out softly. “Rishika?”

Nobody answered.

Feeling like I wanted to cry, but also to kill someone, I stumbled around. I was confused and actually feeling pretty vulnerable. I was all alone in a strange place. I thought of Greyson, of Xavier, and how much I would have liked them to be here. I loved them both so fucking much…

“Artemis? Rishika?” I called once more, wiping my eyes.

The woods remained utterly silent. Utterly. *Deadly*. Silent. I couldn’t even hear birds singing or leaves rustling, or any bugs buzzing away.

Suddenly, my heart started to race so fast that my chest ached. I continued to pace the clearing, still softly calling for my sister and my friend, looking around for them. I hoped that everyone was okay, because what I would do otherwise? If anything happened to Rishika, it would have been my fault, because I’d wanted to come here. She’d volunteered and put herself on the line.

As for Artemis… What would I do without my older sister?

Fuck. Greyson was right.

“Artemis!” I exclaimed. Because my sister was suddenly a few feet behind me.

*Oh my god, she wasn’t there a moment ago. Where did she come from?* I wondered, both relieved and a little freaked out*.* I should have heard some cracking branches or something, right?

*Right?* I repeated to myself, panicking.

But just as I was working myself up into a proper anxiety attack, Artemis stepped forward. The vacant look was gone from her face—she looked just as scared and confused as I was. Instinctively, I rushed over and pulled her into a hug.

She was alive.

We were together.

And I was so grateful to have her.

Artemis hugged me back with so much enthusiasm that it felt pretty wonderful for a second. But then she hugged me too tight, and I could barely breathe. *Yikes!*

“Whoa, Artemis, you’re hurting me!” I said, pulling back. There was hurt on Artemis’s face when we locked eyes. What was that about? I hadn’t wanted to make her feel bad—I just didn’t want her to squish me till my eyes bugged out. Cuddling was great and all, but there needed to be a limit.

Then again, I still felt bad for snapping at her.

“Are you okay? What *was* that?” I looked around. “And where’s Rishika?”

Artemis shook her head. “I have no idea. One moment I was holding both your hands, and then that crazy storm came up. When it died down, I was all by myself.”

I scowled. “That sounds familiar…”

“I was calling out for both of you, but I couldn’t see anyone until I turned around… And then you were right there.” Artemis sniffled, wiping the corner of her eye.

“That’s exactly what happened to me, too,” I croaked. “Why is this happening?”

Artemis looked up at the sky, her eyes wet. “Everything feels… lost,” she whispered.

“No, we’re not lost,” I exclaimed, pulling her to face me. “I mean, we *are* lost, but we have each other, right? I’m here for you.”

Artemis looked away. It felt like she had a million things to say but didn’t know where to start. I had so many questions for her, but she kept not answering. She kept acting like she didn’t know the truth, even though she was the only person who could possibly have any information here.

A sense of dread settled over me. I couldn’t explain it, but it was like every hair on me was standing upright. A shiver went down my spine.

We needed to get the hell out of here. *Right now.*

“Well,” I said, coughing awkwardly, “we need to find Rishika and get out of here. We have to go back to the pack house. There’s a lot going on, actually. Greyson’s dealing with some nature being who was talking about dark magic, and how the Orb is somehow still here…”

I watched Artemis’s face carefully as I spoke, looking for her reaction. But she didn’t even seem to have heard me. She had her head tilted to the side. I wondered if she was trying to listen for Rishika. Obviously, she was worried for her—they were friends, too. Or something more. Still, Rishika was a wonderful person, and I would hate myself if anything happened to her.

“Artemis?” I said, tugging at my sister’s sleeve. My stomach was twisting up all over again. I didn’t want to throw up on this weird little clearing. I didn’t think the magic would appreciate that. “We need to get out of here—”

“We need to move,” Artemis suddenly blurted out.

I squinted at her. “Yes. Isn’t that what I’ve been literally talking about this entire time? What are *you* talking about?”

Before Artemis could speak, a wind rose from the ground up, raising leaves and pebbles and dirt.

The storm was back, darker and fiercer than ever.

I was so shocked that I froze in place, not believing my eyes. Artemis grabbed my arm, gripping it so tightly that it hurt, but I couldn’t blame her. She was freaking out, and I was too. But I had no idea where she was going.

“Artemis! WHERE ARE YOU TAKING ME?” I shouted.

Artemis responded, but I couldn’t hear anything over the roar of the supernatural storm.

My entire body ached as fear tried to drown me, and I was screaming inside my head, *Don’t let me die today! I haven’t even made a choice about the* due destini*!*

I kept tripping over rocks and branches, and I couldn’t help but wonder how Artemis could see where she was going in this dark wind, in this chaos of nature. If it were up to me, honestly, I would sink down and put my hands over my head, wait for the storm to die down again.

Artemis, though, was determined, unstoppable, as she moved through the storm. She had a clear purpose. And suddenly, we were stepping on stones, not the forest floor. Smooth stones and sharper ones, all kinds.

As the wind suddenly cut out, I realized that Artemis had led me into a cave.

Under my panic and apprehension, I was kind of impressed that she’d managed to find a cave in all that chaos. I could barely see the dim light outside as she pulled me back urgently, heading deeper into the hole in the ground.

Suddenly, I felt claustrophobic.

Suddenly, I felt as scared as I had been outside the cave.

Because my sister was not acting like herself.

She hadn’t been acting like herself for a while now.

“Wait!” I shouted, trying to free myself from her grasp. “We don’t need to go any further! I don’t want to!”

Artemis still hadn’t let me go. But my pulling away had given me an edge. I was about to grab her shoulder, force her to face me, when a tremendous sound shook everything around me—including the ground under my feet.

We were suddenly plunged into utter darkness.

*NO!*

I turned toward the front of the cave. It had collapsed.

Shaking and more afraid than I had been in a long time, I realized that we were trapped.

**Episode 1278**

GREYSON

My head was hurting from all this supernatural bullshit.

Vander was talking to Big Mac and Orla in the kitchen. There was plenty of trouble here that needed attending to, but my worries were with Cali and Rishika. Why had I been so stupid to let her go? Either of them.

I kept trying to convince myself that Cali would be fine. I’d promised her that I would trust her, and I wanted to keep that promise, but damn, it was hard. Cali was practically a trouble magnet, I’d seen it time and again. I was afraid it didn’t matter that I’d sent Rishika with her. Trouble always found a way, and I couldn’t help but feel fear creep through me when I thought of her going after Artemis after we’d seen all those… *things*.

Fuck it. I needed to go after her, bring her back.

I stood, and Big Mac glanced at me. “Care to join us, Alpha?”

This set my teeth on edge, but out of respect for Sabine, I limited my response to a single nod. The reality was that I couldn’t go after Cali right now, and I fucking hated it. But right now I couldn’t lose track of my responsibilities as Alpha to the rest of the Redwood pack.

Fuck. I didn’t want to be here.

I looked over at Vander. “So, this darkness you see approaching, what the hell is it? And how are we supposed to defend ourselves against it?”

Instead of answering, Vander lifted his nose into the air, like he was trying to catch a scent.

This set me on edge and I immediately expanded my own senses. No one had a better sense of smell than a werewolf, and I hadn’t picked up on anything outside. What was he looking for?

Vander finally looked back over to me, his brow furrowed. “I can’t pinpoint it, whatever it is. But it’s strong.”

“Oh, I love a game of twenty questions,” Big Mac said with a roll of her eyes. “I’ll play, how strong is it?”

“Strong enough to cloak itself from me.” Vander raised his eyebrows. “Which makes it *very* formidable.”

Big Mac sighed as she leaned a hip against the kitchen counter. “And we’re pretty sure it’s the cause of these zombies, or whatever they are. So, if it’s the Orb that’s causing all this, we need to get rid of it, once and for all.”

I snorted. “So you keep telling me.”

Big Mac scowled. “It’s what I was *trying* to do when the portals closed.”

“There’s nothing to be gained from pointing fingers,” Orla said pointedly. “What’s done is done. What we need to do *now* is protect the pack house and everyone in its vicinity from those… *abominations*.”

“Maybe an expanded version of my shield spell?” Big Mac asked, turning to Orla.

“That’s a good start. What about the humans in the area?” Orla asked. “They’re not going to have any idea what’s happening.”

Vander rolled his eyes. “Come on. Humans almost *never* do.”

Big Mac snorted. “Nature Boy has a point.”

The three of them were the experts when it came to magic, they were a bit far afield for me to follow with their voices all clamoring over each other. My head was starting to ache with all this magic talk.

“What if—” I started, but my voice was strangely quiet, and all three ignored me. My head had started to spin, and I dragged in a breath, trying to shake off the dizzy feeling overtaking me. What the hell was happening? My vision was going blurry and I blinked, trying to clear it. I was trying to focus on the conversation, but it felt like it was all slipping away.

Finally, Big Mac looked over at me. “Greyson?” She frowned. “Are you okay?”

Gripping the side of the kitchen counter for balance, I opened my mouth to tell her I was fine, but before I could make a sound, darkness closed in and I blacked out.

When I came too, my head was pounding.

“Oh, man,” I groaned, putting my hand to my aching head. I was lying down, so I must have slipped to the floor. But when I tried to sit up, I felt a pair of hands pushing steadily on my shoulders.

“Hang on, Greyson. You don’t need to get up. Just rest for a second.”

My head was a blurry mess, but one thought came through loud and clear: that was Cali’s voice.

I sat right up, my eyes wide open, and stared into Cali’s surprised face.

“*Greyson!*” she said, looking shocked. “Slow down!”

That was when I realized something odd. I wasn’t on the floor of the kitchen. I wasn’t even in the pack house. I was in a back yard, but not one I recognized. It was great, though, complete with a pool, a treehouse, and a picket fence edged with flowering hydrangeas. I looked around, confused. “Wait, what happened?”

Cali laughed and reached out to stroke a sore spot on my forehead. “Fenrir beaned you with the football and you tripped. I guess you hit your head because you passed out for a second.” Her brows furrowed. “Think you’ll live?”

I looked over Cali’s shoulder and saw Fenrir watching me, his grey eyes wide and scared, filled with unshed tears.

Cali followed my gaze and smiled, then opened her arms to the little boy. “Come here. See? He’s okay. I told you everything was fine.” She turned to me. “Tell him you’re okay, Greyson.”

I blinked in confusion. “Yeah, I’m fine, son.”

Wait. *Son?*

Where did *that* come from?

Cali mussed Fenrir’s hair. “See, buddy? Your dad’s fine. Now let’s get back to the game. Family fun day isn’t going to happen without you!”

Fenrir grinned and leapt toward me, throwing his arms around my neck. “I’m sorry, Daddy.”

Caught off-guard, I patted his back awkwardly. “Let’s just go easy on that throwing arm. *Son*.”

He pulled back with a wide grin and ran off to retrieve the football.

I got to my feet and looked after him, watching as he pretended to punt the football, then did an impressive—if gratuitous—touchdown boogie dance.

Cali laughed and wrapped her arms around my waist. “I swear, our son gets funnier every day.”

I was about to respond when something over the fence line caught my eye. It was three figures.

My stomach dropped. This was one of *those* dreams. My eyes narrowed and I started forward to confront the witch sisters, but then I heard a weird ticking sound. It was loud, like it was sounding right next to my ear—or from *inside* my head.

I stopped and looked around. It was getting louder, pounding through my eardrums, making me stagger backward as my vision began to waver. The world wobbled, almost like it was shimmering in a heat haze. The ticking grew louder. It almost sounded like a clock.

Then a voice whispered in my ear. “Our offer is running out…”

“Greyson? Greyson? *GREYSON!*”

I opened my eyes with a jerk.

Big Mac was towering above me, Sabine just beside her, and Orla behind her. Vander was there, too, looking mildly curious but mostly unconcerned.

“What?” I asked, gruffly, sitting up. “What’s going on?”

Big Mac looked at me keenly. “I was going to ask *you* the same thing. You fainted.”

“I can’t sense any injuries,” Sabine said, hovering over me.

Shit, I must have really fainted. *Again*. But—I scrubbed a hand through my hair—what was with that part at the end? That ticking clock? That was new. It sounded like there was a time limit to the offer from the witches, and I needed to make a choice.

But *how* exactly was I supposed to do that? It wasn’t like I wanted this to keep happening. I was trying to run a pack, so it wasn’t exactly convenient for me to be fainting right and left.

On the other hand, I *had* felt pretty peaceful in that dream. The idea of being with Cali without *due destini* hanging over our heads had always been appealing, and this dream had included Fenrir—as my son.

Why had he been there? Was it just because I’d been thinking and stressing out about him so much? Is that the reason he’d appeared? Or… was it something else?

Sabine reached for me, her hand cold on my cheek. “Maybe you should go upstairs and lie down for a bit. You’re pale, Greyson.”

“No,” I said firmly, getting to my feet. “We need to figure out how to protect the pack house from whatever’s coming our way. What happened today was almost a total disaster, and we don’t know if those things are going to come back. We need to be prepared if they do.”

“You’re right about that,” Big Mac said grimly. “So what I’d suggest is—”

But what she would suggest I never found out, because at that moment Maren stormed into the kitchen. She had my cell phone in her hand and rage storming in her eyes. When she saw me, her eyes narrowed to slits.

“How *dare* you!” she hissed.

“What?” I asked, truly alarmed at the expression on her face.

She advanced on me. “How *dare* you do a DNA test on Fenrir without my permission!”

**Episode 1279**

CHARLIE

I stared down at my bag—it was practically empty. I’d grabbed everything in such a rush from the pack house so I had two mismatching socks, one shirt, and only one other pair of boxers. How had I known at the time that my own parents would effectively kidnap me? My dad had given me a few things that were strewn about the bed, but I couldn’t focus on any of this. I was going over every word of my conversation with Violet, trying to remember everything she’d said and *how* she’d said it.

This was all for the best, right?

It was, I reminded myself firmly. I’d been thinking of both of us when I’d made this decision, especially since I felt like I’d really messed up with my parents and had a lot of ground to cover, making things right with them. Maybe if I’d been more upfront with them—told them about being bitten by the werewolf sooner—none of the confusion and anger of the last few weeks would have happened. Maybe I wouldn’t have found myself being forced to choose between the people I loved.

Maybe.

I ran an agitated hand through my hair. I was taking responsibility now, anyway.

But I couldn’t stop thinking about Violet, alone at the pack house, dealing with my decision, so far away from me. And soon I’d be even farther away, when I made it back to Minnesota.

That was why I’d had to call and talk to her—be honest with her. It was the right thing to do for both of us, but it had *not* been easy. For a moment there, I’d thought Violet was going to freak out on me. I didn’t know what I would have done if she’d started crying. But she was weirdly calm by the end.

Though I wasn’t sure if that made me feel better or worse.

I pushed the bag away with a frustrated sigh. I was uprooting our plans—hers and mine. When I’d first arrived in Oregon, Violet and I had been so in love. So in sync with all our plans. We’d been looking forward to starting a new life together. But nothing had gone the way we’d expected, and now I felt like I’d totally ripped apart even the possibility of the life we wanted.

But—what could I do? I was a hunter! I had this whole new part of my life that I’d only just discovered. What other choice did I have?

An impatient honk from outside reminded me that my parents were waiting, so I threw the rest of my stuff into my bag, not paying attention to how it was packed. What the hell did it matter, anyway?

I slung the bag onto over my shoulder and made my way to the car where they were both waiting. Without a word to either of them, I threw my bag into the open trunk and got into the back seat, pulling the door shut after myself.

My dad got into the driver’s seat and turned to look at me. “All set, son?” he asked brightly.

I shrugged.

I was sure he could tell my heart wasn’t fully in it from the glance he shot at my mom, but he didn’t say anything as he started the engine.

We started down the road, and I looked out the window. The deep green of the pines sped up until they were nothing more than a rush of color outside the window, but I kept staring. Everything about this place reminded me of Violet, and it made my heart throb with pain. I loved it here—and more than that, I loved being here *with* *her*. I had to wonder if I’d ever be able to see this place again.

In the front seat, my mom cleared her throat. She turned to look at me. “Charlie,” she started, looking uncomfortable, “I realize this must feel hard right now, but it will be good for you, in the long run.”

I stared at her, not saying a word.

“I know it wasn’t easy—breaking up with Violet. I know you cared about her—especially if she was your… *mate*.”

I rolled my eyes and looked back out the window. The slight derision in her voice was hard to miss, and her tone sent a pang of hurt and anger through me.

My mom reached back and grabbed my hand, giving it a squeeze. When I looked at her, I saw that there was true remorse in her eyes.

“Thank you, Charlie,” she said sincerely, “for helping to protect the hunter legacy. I do realize how difficult this is.”

I nodded, once.

She smiled. “And now that we’re going back, I can tell you that we’re not going back just to be in Minnesota.”

I frowned. “What are you talking about?’

Her eyes flashed. “There’s another reason, Charlie. There’s a place for people like you. A place that can train you—a type of hunter camp. Everyone goes through it before they’re initiated into the Land O’Lakes Defenders.”

“What?” I said, shocked. “Like *bootcamp*?”

My mom shrugged. “A training camp. Your father and I both went.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “You never said other people were going to be involved in my training—”

“That’s how it’s done, Charlie,” my mom said impatiently. “Everyone goes—”

“And how are they going to take it when they find out I’m a werewolf?” I demanded. “Is this the kind of place something like that will go over well?”

My mom’s cheeks flushed. “The person who runs the camp these days is a friend, Charlie. A trusted friend. He’ll help you keep your secret while you’re there.”

“Mom—”

But she shook her head. “As long as you don’t go wolf during track and field, you’ll be fine, Charlie. Don’t worry so much!”

I narrowed my eyes. It was clear that she was trying to convince herself as much as she was trying to convince me. But I knew that look on my mom’s face, and there was no point in trying to argue anymore. I ran my hands through my hair and looked back out the window.

Well, if anything went horribly wrong, at least I could just shift and run my ass out of there.

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Two hours later, my dad eased the car off the highway. “Pit stop,” he said brightly.

As he got out to pump gas, my mom slipped out to “use the little girls’ room,” and I was left alone in the car.

With a sigh, I leaned my head back and looked out the window at the grey sky. I wondered vaguely what the sky would look like when we got back to Minnesota. It was November, so I imagined grey skies blanketing the whole of the country. It certainly matched how I felt at the moment.

My thoughts were running along these happy lines, so I jumped when I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket.

I pulled it out and was shocked to see that I had a text from Violet.

*We need to talk.*

I stared at the words, my heart racing. Just seeing her name on the screen did weird things to my stomach, like a swarm of butterflies had been released, and I felt a flush rising on my face.

“Hey!”

I looked up quickly, nearly dropping my phone, when my dad tapped on my window.

“You okay?” he asked, looking concerned. “Your face is all red. Are you getting overheated back there?”

I slipped my phone back into my pocket.

“I’m fine,” I said, then pushed open the door and stood. “I think I just need some air.”

My dad nodded. “I’m really glad you’re coming with us, Charlie.”

I couldn’t stand this fake “I’m totally fine” routine a second longer. I had to get out of here, even if it was for just a moment.

“I’ll be right back. I’m just going to stretch my legs,” I said, gesturing vaguely down the road, away from my dad and the gas station, where my mom was now looking at snacks.

My dad nodded, and I walked away.

When I had gone a safe distance, I pulled out my phone and started to type a response to Violet, but I kept deleting everything I wrote. Nothing sounded right. What I wanted to say to her should really be said in person, but if that wasn’t possible, I at least needed to hear her voice, and she needed to hear mine. I shot a glance over my shoulder, making sure my dad was far enough away to not overhear the conversation, then dialed Violet’s number.

“Charlie,” she answered, picking up halfway through the first ring. “I’m glad you called. I really need to talk to you.”

Just hearing her voice made the muscles of my shoulders un-knit, and I found myself smiling into the phone like an idiot. “I needed to talk to you, too, Violet. It’s only been a few hours, but—god—I already feel like it’s going to be impossible to be away from you.”

Violet laughed. “Well get it together, Charlie, or you’re going to get us caught.”

“I know, I know,” I chuckled. “I’m no good at this. I’ll need a better poker face if I don’t want my parents to find out we’re still secretly dating.”

**Episode 1280**

XAVIER

The trees on either side of me turned to specs of green around me as I raced through the woods. The snow on the ground was fresh and crunched lightly beneath my paws as I sprinted across it. More snow was falling, sifting through the canopy above, which meant the air must have been cool, but I was burning hot. Adrenaline was coursing through me. I’d *escaped*, with Kira’s help. I could hear her, running just behind me, but we had no time to celebrate. We had to find a place to hide and lie low, or Iñigo’s vampires were going to track us down.

Instinctively, I found myself heading back toward the pack house. I knew that if we could make it back to the others, we’d be safe. Even if we only made it close enough to be within range of a patrol, we’d have a chance of some backup, so I headed that way.

But then a flash of movement in my peripheral vision caught my eye.

*Shit*. Was it someone from Iñigo’s crew? How had they found us so fast?

But, no, that was no vampire. I saw the movement through the trees again: that was a *wolf*. Maybe it was someone from the pack!

My heart thumped hard as I veered closer to get a better look, trying to recognize the markings.

*Oh* *fuck*. I recognized those markings, all right.

It was Ava.

With a snarl, I leapt over a fallen tree toward her. She’d spotted me too, and she raced toward me. I dropped my head and prepared for the impact of her teeth and claws.

But it never came.

She growled, and I looked up to see her flying over my head, leaping onto something—or *someone*—behind me. I heard the impact of something solid hitting the ground.

I spun around—was she attacking Kira?

But Kira was fine, holding onto a nearby tree for support, breathing hard and watching as Ava landed on a vampire that I hadn’t heard coming up behind us, taking him down hard. In a moment, Ava had torn his head off and tossed it across the leaf-strewn forest floor. Then she turned to me, her large eyes flashing.

*What the hell do you think you’re doing?*

Ava’s wolf stared at me. *What does it look like, Xavier? I’m saving your life!*

Kira, who hadn’t heard a word of our mind linked conversation, gasped. “Um, guys? I don’t know what you two are doing, but can I get a little help here?”

We both turned to see another vampire backing Kira against the tree. She narrowed her eyes and murmured under her breath, using her power to push him back, slamming him into another tree. I leapt forward, ready to rip his throat out.

But before I could get to him, the vampire jumped to his feet. Kira’s spell must not have truly stunned him. Quick as lightning, the bloodsucker disappeared into the trees.

My adrenaline was still pumping as I turned to face Ava.

She took a step back. *I don’t want to fight you, Xavier.*

I took a step toward her. *Fine. That’ll make killing you easier.*

In a moment, Ava had shifted back to her human form. She held up her hands. Naked and vulnerable. “I’m not here to hurt you, Xavier.”

A low growl rumbled in my throat. It would be *so* easy to take her down now. A leap, a bite, and she’d be out of my life forever. *Again*.

But my honor stopped me; I couldn’t fight someone at such a disadvantage. I begrudgingly shifted back as well.

“So why the hell are you here?” I demanded.

“I came to help you escape.” Like that made any sense coming from her.

I ground my teeth. “Yeah, sure. And rainbows fly out of my ass.”

Ava rolled her eyes. “I just *saved* that ass, didn’t I?”

I glanced quickly around the trees, checking the perimeter for approaching vampires. “Yeah, and that was some kind of trick, I’m sure. You’re working with those vampires, Ava—”

“I’m *not!*” she protested. “And I just took that guy down,” she said, gesturing to the dead vamp on the ground, “and that other bloodsucker is going back to Iñigo right now to tell him what I just did.”

I sneered. “Better hope that’s not going to make things awkward with your boyfriend.”

Ava narrowed her eyes. “Listen, my ass is on the line as much as yours now, Xavier.”

My jaw worked silently as I stared at her. That seemed to be true, but I just didn’t trust her. How the hell could I, after everything she’d done to me and everyone I loved? It wasn’t like I hadn’t tried—I’d given her second, third, and *fourth* chances, and she just kept screwing me over. I shook my head. I had to stop this sick cycle.

“Listen, is there any way you two can have this conversation somewhere else?” Kira asked, her voice high and tense. “You know, somewhere that’s not in the middle of a forest full of vampires? Perhaps with clothes on?”

With one last look at me, Ava turned to Kira. “I know a safe place.”

Kira looked over to me, a question in her eyes.

I really didn’t want to go through this again, trusting Ava only to be betrayed later. Especially because I’d just broken our mate bond, which I knew had pissed her off. If I had it my way, I’d get myself as far away from Ava as possible. But that didn’t seem to be in the cards, because at that moment, I heard the sound of running feet behind us.

“Dammit,” I muttered. “That vampire was fast getting his backup.”

“Xavier?” Ava looked at me. “Are you going to trust me or not?”

No choice. I hoped I wasn’t going to live to regret this. “Fine.”

Ava nodded and shifted. I shifted too and followed her away from the approaching vampires and up a goat trail I hadn’t noticed until that moment. It was steep, and we had to go more slowly than I would have liked, so Kira could keep up. We were heading straight up the face of the mountain, and the way was rocky. After a few switchbacks, Ava started nosing into shrubs, like she was looking for something.

“What is she looking for?” Kira asked me.

I didn’t know, but I was starting to worry that maybe Ava wasn’t looking for anything. Maybe she was just killing time, waiting for the vampires to catch up with us.

But, before my suspicions had a chance to crystalize, Ava pushed behind a large bush and made a satisfied noise. Behind the shrubby growth was a large hole.

She pushed her way inside and, taking a chance, I followed. Behind me, Kira had to get onto her hands and knees to crawl into the low space.

“I hate to be the downer here,” Kira huffed, “but hiding isn’t going to do us much good if we’re just going to get eaten by whatever bear lives in this cave.”

Ava’s only reply was an annoyed-sounding huff.

The cave was damp, pitch-black, and seemed to be growing smaller as we moved deeper. It was starting to feel claustrophobic, and Kira’s breath was beginning to grow more agitated when suddenly, the cave opened up into a cavern, the size of a huge room.

A harsh light flicked on, and I saw that Ava had shifted back to her human form. She was holding a battery-operated lantern in her hand. The light spread around the damp floor and onto a wooden trunk near one end of the cavern, which she opened. It was filled with clothes, and she began to rifle through them.

“What is this place?” I asked, shifting and looking around. Beyond the trunk and the lantern, there was a sleeping bag rolled up against one damp wall, a small cache of canned food, and—in the middle of the cavern—evidence of a fire. It looked like she’d been hiding out here.

“I found it by accident. But someone used to live here, by the looks of it.” She pulled a pair of jeans and a flannel shirt from the trunk and tossed them at me. “I’ll start a fire.”

“How are you holding up? You did just try to keep pace with two werewolves after all,” I asked Kira as I pulled on the jeans.

She dropped down to sit on a low rock. “I’m okay.” She shrugged. “I’m used to taking care of myself.” She nodded at Ava. “And your angry wolf girl doesn’t scare me.”

I glanced over at Ava, who was pulling more supplies out of the trunk: a winter coat, boots, a length of rope…

“She’s not mine,” I said. “But we should definitely keep our eye on her.”

“Don’t worry,” Kira said grimly. “I am. No one will ever take care of me but me. I learned that the hard way.”

I pulled on the soft flannel shirt and looked at the witch curiously. “Is that why you were involved with Iñigo? Because you just take care of yourself and you don’t care about all the shit he does?”

Kira frowned. In the harsh glow of Ava’s lantern, I could see a shadow pass over her face.

“What?” I asked. “What did I say?”

Kira shook her head.  
 I stared at her. “What does Iñigo have over you?”

**Episode 1281**

ARTEMIS

The inside of the cave was dark as hell. I shouldn’t have been able to see my hand in front of my face, but somehow, I was able to still see Cali’s rough outline in the darkness. I reached out a shaking hand—a hand ready to throttle her, ready to rid myself of this last obstacle standing in the way of full control. It was simple, really. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t seen it sooner. I just had to kill everything that gave me hope. First Cali, then Orla.

But then pain shot through me, and something inside me fought back.

*No! I won’t let you do this! I won’t let you kill everyone I love. I won’t let you kill my family!*

From deep within me, there was another voice. This one was low and sinister and filled me completely, blocking out all other sound—the drip of water from the cave, the sound of Cali’s approaching footsteps… It even blocked the sound of my own heartbeat.

*You can’t stop me!*

The pain of the battle within me was excruciating—it felt like I was being torn apart from the inside—but I kept fighting. I *had* to.

*NO! I won’t let you!*

By sheer force of will, I wrenched back control of my right arm. Then, gritting my teeth, my left.

*Wait, what are you doing?*

I dragged in a breath, then managed to regain control of my left leg, wiggling my toes just to be sure. Then, using all my strength, I took back my right leg and took a halting step forward.

“Artemis?” Cali called out desperately, looking blindly into the darkness. “Artemis, is that you? Where are you? I can’t see you.”

I wanted to speak—I *tried* to speak—but I couldn’t. I couldn’t even open my mouth. I was using all my strength and will to keep control of my arms and legs. So, with a guttural grunt, I spun around and sprinted away—deeper into the cave. My run was ungainly, but I went as fast as I could, far away from Cali. I didn’t know how long I was going to be able to hold onto myself, or when the Orb was going to wrest control back. Control, as it turned out, was the least of my worries as the ground opened up beneath me and sent me sprawling down into darkness.

As I fell, it occurred to me I must have fallen into some kind of an old mine shaft, but before I could process this information, I landed at the bottom with a thud, and a sharp, electric pain ricocheted up from my ankle.

“*Dammit*,” I muttered, trying to look where my ankle throbbed. But it was too dark to see anything clearly. I felt my way down my leg, probing with my fingers, and hissed with pain when they hit what felt like a swollen knot. That wasn’t good.

I tried to pull myself up and gingerly tested my balance, but the effort made me cry out in pain. That was not good at all. I had succeeded in getting away… and now I would have to get comfortable with my new surroundings because this broken ankle wasn’t going to let me out anytime soon.

I glanced upward. Yep, it was a mine shaft, maybe eight or ten feet long. It would’ve been no problem to climb back out of if my ankle hadn’t been a throbbing mess.

*Now look what you’ve done! We’re useless now!*

Anger flared up within me, along with a harsh satisfaction. “I don’t care,” I spat. “As long as you can’t hurt Cali, that’s all that matters!”

*You fool! You stupid, short-sighted girl! I’m offering you ultimate power, and you keep throwing it away! Do you know how many people would give their right hands for what I’m offering you?*

I shook my head, refusing to respond. I reached out, feeling around for support. There was a wall within reaching distance, and I leaned against it gratefully, even though it was cold and wet and slightly slimy. I tried to move, putting as little weight on my ankle as possible, but the very best I could manage was a half-hearted hop that was more of a hobble. It hurt like hell and moved me forward about half a millimeter. That was… not great. How was I going to be able to climb out of here if I could barely walk?

I dropped down to the ground. “I don’t want this!” I shouted, my voice echoing around the damp darkness. “Can’t you see that? I *never* wanted this!”

Deep within my head, the Orb started to laugh. But *laugh* wasn’t the word, because the sound had no warmth, no happiness. It was cold and hollow, filled with anger and bitterness. It was a cackle. *That’s not what you were thinking when you lost your Fae magic, was it? You were so lost without it, and I helped you. I helped you, didn’t I? And you were grateful then, weren’t you?*

“This does *not* help!” I shot back, angry now. “I don’t want this kind of help!”

*It doesn’t matter. It never does. I always get what I want in the end.*

I shook my head, gritting my teeth against the pain in my ankle and the anger coursing through me.

“No,” I said. “Not this time. You don’t know me. You don’t know what you’re up against. I will do everything I can to stop you. I’m stronger than you think. I’m stronger than you. I can push you out of my head. I can defeat you.”

The Orb’s laughter rang through my head.

I put my hands over my ears, trying to block the sound, but that only amplified it.

*That’s what they all say!* it crowed, almost gleefully. *In the end, I always win.*

Tears pricked at my eyes, but I bit my lip, determined not to let them fall.

“Artemis? Where are you?”

It was Cali. She was somewhere above me, calling my name.

I could feel the Orb trying to take control of my mouth, trying to reply to Cali and draw her toward me, but I held firm, clamping my jaw shut. I *was* stronger than this thing—whatever magic the Orb possessed, I was stronger. I was Artemis, and I had fought through everything I’d ever faced. This was no different. I just had to keep telling myself that. I just had to keep resisting. I *had* to. This time, I had a family—a real family—waiting for me on the other side.

This thought filled me with something warm, like a drink of that sweet coffee Cali liked so much, and I felt the Orb’s power slip. It was just a little slip, but I felt it, and it filled me with hope.

Maybe I *could* win. Maybe I really *was* stronger. I’d never had a family before, so I’d never even thought about the kind of strength I could gain from having people to protect.

I closed my eyes and thought of Cali and the stupid way she was always running headlong into trouble to protect other people—to protect me. I balled my hands into fists. I’d only just found this crazy sister of mine. I was *not* going to lose her.

And it wasn’t just her. I thought of Orla and the way her eyes looked like mine when she laughed. And Tom, who was always making sure I had enough food on my plate, and that my socks were neatly matched and folded.

Without warning, the image of Rishika’s shocked face flashed through my mind, and the memory of what had happened during the storm came rushing back to me. A sob ripped through my body, echoing through the cave.

“Artemis?” Cali’s voice came again. “Artemis? Is that you? Where are you? Hold on! I’m coming!”

I slapped my hand over my mouth, holding in another sob.

*Rishika.*

I hadn’t stopped the Orb then. I hadn’t been strong enough then. But I was stronger now. I *had* to be.

*You’ll never be rid of me.* The voice was smooth as silk, snaking through my mind like poison. *Try as you might. We’ll kill your sister, together.*

My heart thudded. Sweat broke out on my forehead. My stomach contracted painfully. I was starting to panic. I had to do something. I couldn’t let the Orb make me hurt anyone else. Especially not anyone I cared about.

But what the hell was I going to do? I was powerless and now in possession of the most powerful object in the realms.

“Artemis?” Cali’s voice was growing closer. “Say something! Call out, so I know when I’m getting close.”

Dark or not, her footsteps were getting closer. I reached out, desperate, trying to find something—anything—to help me. I couldn’t let her come near me in my current unstable state, not when this *thing* inside me wanted to hurt her. My hand closed around a large rock, and in that moment, I knew what I had to do.

Without letting myself think about it, I took a deep breath and slammed the rock into my temple. Stars blossomed in my vision, so I did it again. Then again. And again. And I kept hitting myself until darkness descended.

**Episode 1282**

LOLA

*Don’t trust that man.*

Ras’s words about Emmett were ringing in my ears as I headed into my first class of the day. What the hell could she have meant? I mean, Emmett did seem… oddly interested in me, but was that suspicious? He’d only been helpful so far, if a little intense—even if he’d advised me to get rid of my mate. I looked up at the number on the door, then down at the class schedule I’d found in my orientation packet. I’d glanced at it to see where I should be going, but I hadn’t really looked at it, and I was startled to see that my first class of the day was titled *Everyday Undead Life*.

I rolled my eyes. Seemed a little kitschy for a high-end boarding school like this, but what did I know about vampire style?

But I took a deep breath and walked through the door. As I looked around the room, I saw students of all ages standing around, leaning on desks, talking, and gossiping. The room was large, like a university lecture hall with tiered rows of seats. Everything looked old-fashioned, but apart from the lack of padding on the wooden seats, the room reminded me of college back in Minnesota. For a moment, I was struck at how that far away that felt. That life felt so distant and remote—like something I had read about, not lived.

I suddenly became aware that I was still standing—frozen—in the center of the aisle. Everyone else seemed so comfortable. They’d all been here for years, and it showed. Cliques had obviously formed, and being here as an outsider felt painfully familiar. It reminded me of being a kid and feeling like I never belonged, because I was only half werewolf.

I took a deep breath. I was *not* looking forward to being an outcast again.

There was a sharp tap on my shoulder, and I turned around. Then I looked down.

A girl stood behind me, no older than nine and a good foot shorter than me. “Would you mind taking a seat?”

I frowned. Her attitude was *not* necessary. “That’s what I was about to do.”

The girl rolled her eyes, looking irritated. “Well, can you hurry it up? We don’t have all day.”

I stared at her, then I glanced around at the rest of the students in the room. *No one* was sitting in their seats. “Hey, I’m not the only one not sitting down.”

The girl looked me up and down, sizing me up, her derision clear. “Yes, but *you’re* the only one who’s in my way.”

I couldn’t remember the last time someone had been so rude to me—and right to my face, too. The girl, who didn’t look the slightest bit embarrassed or ashamed, gestured impatiently for me to move out of the way. Automatically, I stepped aside, and the girl moved past me.

Scowling and fuming, I dropped into the first empty seat I saw.

The dark-haired boy next to me, who looked around twenty, leaned over. “Have you had a class with Professor Wiggins before? I heard she’s a hard-ass.”

“No,” I muttered, not looking at him.

The boy, apparently realizing that I wasn’t in the mood to chat, turned back to his friends.

I rubbed my head. When was this class going to get started? Better question: when was this class going to be *over*? I was trying to give this place a try, but between Ras’s cryptic warning and that weird confrontation with the little girl, I was already ready to call it a day.

From the front of the lecture hall came the sound of someone clearing their throat, and the chatting died down as people began to take their seats.

“All right class, let’s gets started—”

“We can’t see you, Professor!” someone in the back row called.

“Oh, yes, sorry.” There was the sound of a chair being dragged along the wooden floor, and then a small, dark head popped up behind the lectern.

I gasped. It was the little girl who’d yelled at me.

“Hello, class. I am Professor Clarice Wiggins, and this is *Everyday Undead Life*.”

“*You’ve gotta be joking*!” My whole face flamed with embarrassment. I hadn’t meant to say anything out loud, but I was so shocked.

Professor Wiggins gave me a cool look, then turned away and addressed the class as a whole. “It seems we have some new vampires who don’t realize that vampirism does not discriminate by age, and that perhaps they’d be well served by leaving their mortal assumptions at the door.”

The class sniggered at this, and I slouched down in my seat, wishing I could just disappear.

Professor Wiggins went on with her lecture, which seemed to be about how to exist in the normal world without exposing your secret by killing a bunch of humans when you got mad. Everyone else was doing it, so I pretended to take notes, but I wasn’t really listening. What was the point? I felt like I was already failing—at least at fitting in.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I pulled it out. It was a text from Jay, and my heart fluttered at the sight of his name.

*How’s it going?*

*I think I’ve made a mistake. Maybe I should just come home*, I replied.

*Lola, we talked about this. You said you were going to give it a chance.*

My throat grew tight, like I was about to cry. Jay usually was so understanding, but it felt like he wasn’t getting what I was saying at all.

*I am giving it a chance, Jay, and it sucks. I want to come home.*

*Don’t give up so quickly.*

This stung like a slap*.*

*I’m not giving up. I’m telling you I’m miserable.*

*Lola. You promised you’d try.*

Before I could respond to Jay, my phone was snatched out of my hand.

“Hey!” I looked up to see Professor Wiggins standing next to me, holding my phone and looking at me with eyes as dark as storm clouds.

“No phones in class,” she said coldly.

My face flushed hot. “That was important.”

She raised an eyebrow. “More important than my lecture?”

I stood up, towering over her. “Maybe. You know, some of us have successfully existed as supernatural creatures in the real world already.”

Professor Wiggins’s eyes narrowed, and she looked deeply offended. “Well, then I guess *some of us* don’t need to be in this class.” She shoved my phone back at me and pointed to the door.

Feeling every eye in the room on me, I snatched up my bag and stomped out of the room.

Well, *that* was a huge disaster. I’d just been booted from my first class, and I was pretty sure I was in a fight with Jay. Well… maybe not a fight-fight, but even a disagreement was enough to send my mood plummeting below the earth’s core.

I sighed as I pocketed my phone. It was not going to be easy to balance this new reality with my relationship with Jay—I needed to figure out a way to make it up to him. I looked down at my schedule and rolled my eyes. My next class was up on the fifth floor.

There was no elevator, and it took me a while to find the winding staircase, but when I made it to the top, the fifth floor room was a long one with huge windows that let in the late autumn sunlight. Half of the large space was devoted to a greenhouse, so the roof was all glass, and I walked over to stand right in the light. It felt so nice to feel the sun on my face. I looked around. No one else had made it up yet, but I was pretty early, so I took a seat at one of the old-fashioned wooden desks.

I took my phone back out and looked at it, toying with the idea of texting Jay back. I knew I should, but maybe a phone call or a FaceTime call would be better. I would do it later, when I got back to my room. I slipped my phone into my bag and looked around again.

Why was no one else showing up? I knew I must have been early due to my rather abrupt forced removal from my previous class, but still. Maybe I was in the wrong room? I looked down at my schedule. Yep, fifth floor. Maybe I should go ask someone.

I shouldered my bag and walked to the door. I swung it open and ran into something large and solid.

“Leaving already?” said a low voice.

“Emmett,” I breathed, looking up, feeling slightly off-balance.

He smiled down at me, putting his hands on my shoulders to steady me. “Yes. Are you all right?’

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I said quickly.

“Were you going somewhere?” he asked, frowning.

“I-I think I might have the wrong room,” I stammered. “Do you know where room 503 is?”

“Yes, you’re in it,” Emmett said as he walked past me into the room. “You’re in the right place.”

“Oh,” I said. I watched as he placed his leather bag on the large desk at the front of the room. “I got confused because no one else was coming in. Is anyone else coming to the class?”

Emmett frowned up at me as he pulled a book from his briefcase. “No, Lola. This is your mentorship class. It’s just you and me.”

**Episode 1283**

My eyes were slowly starting to adjust to the darkness of the cave. It was crazy dark, but there was enough light that I could make out general shapes and shadows if I strained. I was careful as I reached an unexpected drop-off in the cave floor. It looked like a shaft of some kind, and I peered into it.

“Oh no!” I gasped. There, at the bottom, I could make out a still form. “*Artemis!*”

There was no response, and no movement either.

My heart pounded. Was she okay? Was she alive? I could barely see her, and I couldn’t just wait around up here for anyone else to do what needed to be done.

Every instinct I had warned me against climbing down a mine shaft in a dark cave, but what choice did I have? I moved slowly, trying to hold on as I climbed carefully down the side of the pit, but my left foot slipped just before I reached the bottom and I fell the last few feet, landing with a thud, but unhurt.

I scrambled to my feet and hurried to my sister’s side. “Artemis! Are you okay?”

But she still didn’t respond. She was unconscious. I looked up at the shaft, thinking hard. The fall must have done it. She must have not seen the hole, and must have hit her head when she fell. As I cradled her head in my hands, I felt something warm and sticky on my palm.

“*Dammit, Artemis*,” I hissed. It was blood, and it was seeping from her temple. I pressed my hand against it, but the blood continued to ooze out from between my fingers.

The darkness felt like it was closing in, and I could feel myself starting to shake. I took a deep breath, trying to keep my heart rate steady. I couldn’t afford to panic. I had to stay calm. I had to think. I groped around in the dark and grabbed the bottom of my shirt. I ripped off a strip of fabric and, folding it carefully, pressed it to Artemis’s head.

This seemed to help a little—I couldn’t feel the blood gushing anymore, at least—and I leaned over, trying to see her face in the darkness. “Artemis? Can you hear me?”

She didn’t move, but I could feel her breathing, so at least I knew she wasn’t dead. But I had no idea how hard she might have hit her head, or how long she’d be unconscious. I looked around, into the blackness. I had to get out of here, but there was no way I wasn’t taking my sister with me. I felt tears prickling painfully in the corners of my eyes. I’d only just found her—I wasn’t about to lose her.

“Hello!” I called, my voice cracking. “Is anyone there? *HELP!*”

But the only answer was the echo of my own voice against the stone walls.

I was on my own.

With a deep breath, I gathered Artemis close and pulled myself to my feet. I shifted Artemis, trying to get her weight distributed across my back. But she was heavy, and her body was unwieldy. I looked up the shaft, eyeing the slick sides. How the *hell* was I going to get back up there?

I was just going to have to try. I reached up, grasping for the sides of the pit, trying to brace myself and use my weight to wedge myself in. It kind of worked, and I made it a few feet up—struggling with all my might to keep Artemis from slipping off my back—before I slipped and fell.

As I crashed to the cave floor, I landed underneath Artemis and took the brunt of the drop.

“Oh my god, you are so not as light as you think you are, Artemis,” I groaned. This was worse than the first fall. This time I was being crushed, too. “Okay,” I said, climbing out from under Artemis and struggling to my feet again. “You are totally going to owe me for this when we get home.”

Unsurprisingly, Artemis didn’t answer. But it helped a little to talk to her. I had stay motivated if I wanted to get us out of here. I looked up at the shaft again. Going up was much harder than going down. And with Artemis on my back… How the hell was I ever going to do this?

Wait! *My magic!* Could I somehow use my power to get us to the top?

When we’d been in Xavier’s car and the brakes had been cut (thanks for that, Ravi), both Artemis and I had used our magic to try to slow the car down. So maybe I could use it to get us out of here. But I was going to have to be careful—I didn’t want to use too much and accidentally bring the whole cave down. I’d never tried to do something like this before. Maybe I could levitate us, or pull a staircase out of the ether… or just have it all explode in my face, more like.

“Okay,” I said, pulling Artemis onto my back again. “Here we go.” I looked at her still form for a moment. “You gotta wake up now, Artemis, and help me out here.”

Nothing. Artemis was still out cold.

I shook my head, then took a deep breath, gathered myself, and summoned my power. Then I sent all that power directly into the ground.

I popped off the cave floor like a rocket.

Years ago, my mom had dragged me out one Saturday morning to a yard sale and—to make it up to me—had allowed me to buy a doll from a bin of discarded toys. I’d chosen a fairy that you released from a base. She spun like a top and sailed high into the air.

Right now, I was soaring through the air just like my cotton-candy-pink Skydancer. It would have been funny if it hadn’t been so fucking terrifying. I clutched Artemis tight and aimed toward the edge of the pit. I was relieved as hell when I managed to roll her off my back and onto the upper level of the cave floor, but I was left hanging in the air, scrambling as I clung onto the pit’s edge.

I was panicking, but luckily, I found my footing just before my powers faltered. My footholds weren’t perfect, but they kept me from slipping right back down to the bottom.

What I hadn’t counted on—unfortunately—was how tired I was. The effort of holding Artemis and the huge expenditure of my power had left me *exhausted*, and I clung onto the side of the pit with what felt like my very last of my strength.

But it wasn’t enough—I could feel myself starting to slip. I groaned. I was going to fall. Even if I landed unhurt, I was going to have do this all over again. I didn’t have the time for it, and I sure as hell didn’t have the strength.

“CALI!”

My heart leapt. “Rishika! I’m over here!” I yelled. “Hurry.”

I heard her running feet as she hurried over, then felt strong hands under my arms as she hauled me up over the lip of the pit.

“Are you okay?” she asked breathlessly.

Lying prone on the ground, I nodded. “Are you?”  
 “Don’t worry about me, you look terrible.”

“How’d you find us? And hey, let’s see if you look better after falling down a mine shaft,” I said. “It’s pitch-black in here.”

“I picked up on your scent,” Rishika said. “What happened?”

“Like I said, I fell. Down that mine shaft thing. A few times, actually. Artemis is over there,” I said, pointing vaguely. “I brought her up.”

“Oh god.” Rishika hurried over to Artemis. “Is she okay? Artemis! What happened to her? She’s out cold!”

I hauled myself to sitting. “I know. I think she hurt herself in the fall. She’s bleeding, too. We need to get her back to the pack house as quickly as we can.

“One of the entrances is blocked; I had to clamber up another side in order to get in,” Rishika reminded me. “I think I found another way out, but it’s not easy to get to. And it’s started to snow, and there’s already a lot of snow built up.” She looked at Artemis, her expression grim. “It’s not going to be easy with her like this…”

I rubbed my head, which had started to pound. “I don’t know what we’re going to do, then,” I said, starting to feel a bit hopeless. I thought hard, but my brain was feeling sluggish, and it took some time. “What about that nature being?”

“Vander?” Rishika asked.

“Yeah. Vander!” I reached into my pocket and pulled out the badge she’d given me. “Vander! Can you help us?” I shouted into the badge. Then I waited. Nothing happened. I looked up at Rishika, who was looking dubious. Then, the badge in my hand began to heat up. I could see Rishika’s eyes lighting up with hope.

We both watched, shocked, as the badge started to glow in the darkness.

A thin blue line formed above the badge, stretching into the air. It zig-zagged through the cave, away into the darkness.

I looked at the line in confusion.

“What the hell is that?” Rishika asked.

Then it dawned on me. “It’s our path out.”

**Episode 1284**

XAVIER

Oh, Kira did not look happy at my question. She gave me a hard stare. “What makes you think Iñigo has anything on me?” Based on that question alone I knew the vamp must have something pretty strong over her.

“Because I’ve been watching you,” I told her, “and you’re smart. Too smart to get caught up in all his bullshit without a good reason.”

A dark shadow flickered across her eyes. “You don’t’ know me. My husband was a vampire.”

“That doesn’t mean you needed to get mixed up with a guy like Iñigo. No.” I shook my head. “There’s something else.”

Kira’s expression hardened into a scowl, and she looked down at the cave floor, jamming the toe of her boot into a crevice in the stone.

I watched her carefully. Maybe I’d pushed her too far, asked too many questions, but I needed to make sure I could trust this witch. One way or the other, I’d made a deal with her, so I had no other options. I meant to keep the promise I’d made to her—my honor was on the line—but I still wanted to figure out her story. I just wanted to know what I was dealing with.

Finally Kira looked up at me. “Iñigo has a way of finding leverage.”

I frowned. “And what leverage does he have over a witch like you?”

“I have a past, same as most,” she shrugged.

Did I have to drag the answers out of her piece by piece?

She took a breath. “He found out that I have a bounty on my head.”

This surprised me. “A bounty? Why?”

Kira looked down at the damp floor. “There was a time when I wasn’t so careful about who I used my magic against. Iñigo has the power to protect me, or to let my enemies know where I am.”

I stared at her. “And you still helped me? Knowing Iñigo would tell people where you were?”

Kira looked up at me, then gave a jerky shrug. “How long could I live like that? I was practically a hostage. Besides, getting justice for my partner is more important than a few bounty hunters on my ass.” She eyed me curiously. “And everyone always seemed so boosted after drinking your blood—you must be really strong, when you’re on top of your game.”

“I am,” I growled.

She raised her eyebrows. “You’d better be. Don’t let me down.”

“Are you two done flirting yet?”

I looked over at Ava, who was glaring at Kira and me. Ava looked annoyed, but I couldn’t have cared less. What *did* interest me was the soft glow of the fire she’d built. Hearing the crackle of the flames reminded me how fucking cold I was. The stone cave was damp and chill, and the ceiling above had narrow crevices that let in a sharp draft, as well as…

“Snow?” I asked, looking up. I held out a hand and caught a snowflake on my palm. Snow wasn’t unheard of for this time of year, but it wasn’t normal, either. I sighed. It was just my luck that I was riding out a snowstorm with a secretive witch and my evil ex.

I walked over to the fire and held my hands out to warm them. “When it’s safe to go back out there, we need to head back to the pack house.”

“*What?*” Ava looked up at me. “No way! They hate me there!”

I gave her a cool stare. “Did I say anything about inviting *you* back? *I’m* heading back to the pack house. If you want to head off on your own, be my guest.”

Ava gaped at me for a moment, then turned away, frowning, but didn’t say anything more.

“Why are we going to your pack house?” Kira asked, walking closer. “You promised you’d help me get revenge.”

“Yeah, and if I’m going to help you do anything, then I need to get my strength back. That last freak drained a lot of my blood. And I’m still recovering from the silver poisoning.” I glanced at Kira. “Don’t worry about the pack, I’ll tell everyone to take it easy on you—”

“I can take care of myself,” Kira said shortly.

*Says the witch with bounties on her head.* I blew an irritated sigh out through my nose. “Then you don’t have anything to worry about, do you?”

Kira looked down for a long moment, clearly thinking. “Fine. We’ll go to your pack house. You can gather your strength, we’ll collect some supplies, and then we’ll find my partner’s killer.”

Without waiting for an answer, she turned and strode back across the cavern.

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The fire was burning low, almost nothing but embers.

“Might want to toss on a few extra logs before we freeze to death,” I said, looking over at Ava.

She was sitting on a low stone, glowering at the glowing coals. She didn’t look up. “If you want a fire, do it yourself.”

I narrowed my eyes. “This is your place—”

“Yes,” Ava snapped, glaring up at me. “It *is* my place, in which I’m graciously letting you hide. You’re welcome, by the way.”

I could feel my temper rising; it was almost enough to keep me warm. “Why do you have to make everything so goddamn difficult?” I demanded through gritted teeth. “I’m only in this fucking situation *because* of you!”

Ava rolled her eyes as her face flushed with anger. “Oh, that’s right, because Saint Xavier has *never* made a mistake! It’s not like you *killed* me or anything!”

“Don’t tempt me to try again,” I shouted, getting to my feet. “I swear to god, breaking that damned mate bond is the best decision I ever made—”

“*Hey!*”

Ava and I looked over at Kira, who was standing just outside the circle of light cast by the fire.

Her hands were on her hips, and she was glaring at us. “Calm down, both of you. We have more important things to do right now.”

“Like what?” Ava snapped.

“I was able to magically scout outside the cave, and I didn’t sense any vampires. I think we’re good to get moving. Unless you’d rather stay here shouting at each other until we freeze?”

“Finally,” I breathed, relieved, and started out the way we’d come in. I was about to shift when Ava stopped me.

“Let’s take the back way out,” she said. “It’s easier.”

I narrowed my eyes. “If it’s so much easier, then why didn’t we come in that way?”

Ava rolled her eyes. “We were in a rush and were coming in from the south. I didn’t think you’d be interested in taking the scenic route, Xavier, but next time I’ll be sure to ask if you’d like a tour before I save your ass from a gang of bloodsuckers.”

I gritted my teeth against the tidal wave of her sarcasm, but her logic was hard to dispute. “Fine.”

Ava led the way through the back exit. It was still narrow and twisting, but at least we could all walk through it upright, and it never required me to be pushed into a tight space with Ava. Soon enough I saw the muted glow of daylight up ahead and pushed past Ava toward it, taking a deep breath of the fresh, cold air as we emerged onto the mountain. I hadn’t realized until that moment how cooped up I’d been feeling in that cave. It probably had a lot to do with the last few days I’d spent tied down as a prisoner.

I rolled my head and stretched my arms wide. It felt damn good to be free from the vampires, even if I still wasn’t free from my ex.

But I must still have been on edge, because when I felt hands on my shoulders, I spun around and grabbed them, gripping them tightly. “What are you doing?” I growled.

Ava’s surprised face stared back at me. “Xavier, cool it. I was just going to tell you that you have to be careful. The paths here are dangerous, and the safer routes may be obscured in the snow.”

I glanced down at the narrow footpath. On one side it hugged the mountain, and on the other it dropped off sharply, slopping steeply downward to a treacherous drop.

“Alright, message received, now get off me,” I said dismissively, and let go of her hands.

But she gripped mine all the tighter. “Listen, I’m sorry.”

“I really don’t care,” I snapped.

“Xavier—”

I pulled out of her grasp. “I don’t want to listen to any more of your lies, Ava.”

She took a step closer to me. “You don’t have to, but I still need to say it—”

Anger was pulsing through me. “Whatever garbage you’re about to spew, it’s not going to change a damn thing.”  
 Ava’s eyes flashed. “God, why do you have to be so *stubborn*, Xavier?”

My heartbeat was pounding in my ears. Everything about her made me furious, and I was about to tell her so when, behind me, I heard the snap of a twig. I spun around to face the approaching attacker, ready to shift into my wolf at the first sign of danger.

The sound of footsteps grew louder, and then Rishika emerged from the trees, carrying an unconscious Artemis in her arms. And leading them both was Cali, shivering and streaked with dirt.

*Cali?* My mind was on fire with how the hell she and the others had gotten out here and why. The wolf in me didn’t care, the only instinct that mattered was seeing my mate. She was cold, shocked, and looked just as startled to see me as I was her. Her mouth moved, and I saw her whisper my name. That was all the invitation I needed to grab her, pull her close, and press my lips to hers without a second thought.

**Episode 1285**

GREYSON

Maren held the phone up to my face and I stared—shocked—at the ID on the screen: *DNA Wellness Center.*

My mind spun, wondering what the hell that text message contained, but before I could even begin to parse out the possibilities, Maren was advancing on me, her dark eyes flashing with fury.

“In case you’ve forgotten, *I* am Fenrir’s mother, Greyson. He is *my* son. How *dare* you overstep like this? You need my express permission to take my son’s DNA. I have no idea how you even managed to get a lab to do the test without the signature of his legal guardian, who is—again—*me!*”

I glanced quickly around. “Can we not do this right here?” I asked through gritted teeth.

Maren’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “Fine. Lead the way.”

I strode out of the crowded kitchen and into the small office off the living room.

“What were you doing looking at my phone?” I asked, shutting the door and rounding on her.

She stared back at me, clearly shocked. “Are you *kidding* me? That’s really the road you want to take here? Fine. You left it in my room when you were playing with Fenrir, Greyson. I saw it going off. I tried to ignore it, but it wouldn’t stop pinging, so I got up to shut it off and happened to see the message.” Her eyes were hard as flint. “I know it would better suit you to be able to flip the script and have a reason to be pissed at me, but I wasn’t snooping on your phone like some nosy little teenager.”

She had me there. It would be much easier to turn things around on her, but that wasn’t going to happen, and it wasn’t going to make her anger disappear either.

“So what is this?” she demanded, holding up my phone again. “You ordered a DNA test on Fenrir? I told you you’re not his father. My word wasn’t good enough for you?”

I let out a bark of a laugh. “You didn’t even want to do the test to begin with, did you? You lied to me—*again*—and didn’t even bother submitting it. Was I just supposed to think that wasn’t suspicious? What did you think I was going to do?”

Maren hesitated. Something about what I’d said had thrown her off.

Good. I wanted her a bit unbalanced, because, if I was being honest with myself, there was a big part of me that was so *sure* Fenrir was my son. Why else would Maren be so squirrely about getting the DNA test?

She glared at me. “Well, I didn’t think you’d steal my son’s DNA and do a test behind my back, that’s for damn sure.”

“Well, then, what are you hiding?” I demanded.

“I’m not hiding a damn thing!” she shot back.

“Then why didn’t you go through with the test?”

The room seemed too small for all our anger, but I stayed firm, holding Maren’s furious gaze. I was pissed. Had that dream just been mocking me? That image of a family? The idea that I could have it all? Was that all just fantasy? Of course it was. It was a fucking fever dream caused by those damn witches. This was the real world, and if I was a father, I was damn well going to find out for sure so I could take responsibility, unlike my own godforsaken father.

Maren’s eyes glittered dangerously, and she thrust the phone into my chest. “Fine. Check it. But I already know what the result’s going to be.”

I looked at her, but her expression gave nothing away. I pulled the phone from her hand and opened the message. But instead of the results, it was just a delivery update.

*Thank you for using DNA Wellness Center. Your confidential results will be ready in 2–3 business days.*

So much for the confidential part.

“I told you that he’s not your son,” she said coldly. “Why are you doing this?”

I raised my eyebrow. There was no way to sugarcoat it. “Maren, you have to admit that Fenrir looks a lot like me. The eyes, the hair—how do you explain that? And if you’re so damn sure, then *why* didn’t you go through the with the test the first time, like we’d agreed? That’s not sitting well with me.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “You’re not the only werewolf in the world with those eyes and that bone structure, Greyson. You’ve met Aiden, but you’ve never seen his sister, or his mother. Maybe I just have a type. Did you ever think of that?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but no words came out. Maybe she was right. Maybe I had misread the whole situation and overreacted. Genetics could be weird. It wasn’t like I was the spitting image of Xavier or Colton. But Fenrir… There was just *something* there. I could feel it, and I couldn’t let it go.

I kept thinking of that dream of Cali and me having kids. In it, Fenrir had also been my son. And I just couldn’t bear the thought of having a son out there and being an absent father. The very idea of it triggered something in me—I suppose that was what came of having Silas for a father. But I wasn’t going to admit that to Maren.

She must have seen something happening behind my eyes, though, because she looked at me keenly. “What kind of example are you setting for my son, Greyson? To lie? To deceive?”

I raised an eyebrow. “I guess I could ask you the same thing.”

We both turned at the knock on the door.

Big Mac swung it open. “I hate to interrupt a good fight, but we have a problem.”

I ran a hand through my hair with a sigh. No breaks for the Alpha today, it seemed. “What now?”

“The nature guy is gone.”

“*What?* How could you let him leave?” I demanded.

Big Mac narrowed her eyes, giving me one of her patented glares of disapproval. “I didn’t *let* him do anything. He just disappeared from the middle of the living room. And he left this behind.” She held up a golden maple leaf.

I dropped my head back with a groan. “So, he came here to give us a vague warning with no real information or solutions, and then he bounced. Is that it?”

Big Mac shrugged. “Looks like it.”

I heaved an irritated sigh. “Man, I’m getting really sick of magical beings just popping in and out of this pack house and bringing their ominous little warnings that are of no help whatsoever.”

And then, as if on cue, Astrid and Torin appeared in the doorway.

Torin looked excited—as usual. “Hey! Have you tried a salted caramel mocha? It’s *divine*! It’ll turn that frown the other way around.”

Astrid shook her head. “I don’t think that’s the way the saying goes.”

“No, I think that’s it,” Torin retorted.

“It’s really not—”

“Hey,” Jay said, crowding into the doorway. “I’m glad I found you. I just wanted to—”

“*Enough!*” I exploded, stepping away from the mosh pit at the doorway. “Could you all at the very least form a line? One at a time, please.”

Everyone went silent, their looks ranging from confused to concerned. Jay glanced around, then slowly raised his hand, as though he were in class.

I sighed. “Yes, Jay?”

“Yeah, I just thought you should know that I just got back from patrol and there’s a group approaching the house.”

“*What?*” I asked, immediately on full alert. “Okay. Grab a squad, get ready to defend the house. Get Sage and—”

“I don’t think that’s going to be necessary,” Jay said.

This stopped me. “What do you mean?”

He smiled. “Sorry, I probably should have led with this—it’s Xavier and Cali.”

Everyone in this pack was pushing on my last nerve today, but at the very least I could forgive Jay for burying the lede when it contained such good news. I pushed through the crowd—spilling Torin’s coffee—and sprinted out of the office. I ran through the house and onto the back lawn, down toward the lake.

Xavier and Cali were walking up the incline together. They both looked tired and filthy, and Xavier looked pale. Behind them, Rishika was carrying Artemis, who lay unconscious in her arms. Behind Rishika was a woman I didn’t recognize, and following her was Ava, who was looking around nervously.

Ava’s presence immediately set off alarm bells for me. “What the hell is *she* doing here?” I demanded, looking at Xavier.

At my words, Ava dropped her gaze and slipped in behind Xavier, almost like she was hoping she could hide. Xavier looked furious, but he didn’t say anything.

I stared at him as he drew closer, fuming. I couldn’t believe him. What the hell did he think he was doing, bringing Ava here—*again*? But before I could start in on Xavier, I heard the swish and slam of the sliding back door behind me.

Glancing over my shoulder I saw Big Mac storming down the lawn toward the haggard group, her face grim but determined.

She lifted her arm and pointed at the unconscious Artemis. “She’s not coming in here. Get rid of her.”

**Episode 1286**

My heart started to race as Greyson burst out of the pack house and ran down the lawn toward us. After everything that had happened with Artemis, I was still shaken up. Not to mention the added surprise of finding Xavier—and that kiss. My lips hadn’t stopped tingling from it.

I’d been so shocked to see him, and I’d barely had time to register my surprise before he’d grabbed me and pulled me against him. Instinctively, I’d responded, until I’d remembered where I was and what I was doing. Then I’d pushed him gently back. “We have to get out of here,” I’d said. He hadn’t said much since then.

My face burned with guilt. It wasn’t like I’d initiated the kiss, but I hadn’t exactly put a stop to it right away either. I’d left here without Greyson’s blessing. He’d sent Rishika along with me, but that had been as more of a fail-safe, and I knew it. And then—of course—the reality was that Greyson had kissed me too, not that long ago…

I closed my eyes. How did this keep happening to me? I was supposed to be taking a break from both brothers, and now here I was, back in the exact same confusing and complicated place. I sighed. Maybe I should never have come back to the pack house.

I opened my mouth to say something, but then I stopped, watching Big Mac as she stormed over, her eyes on Artemis’s still form. I could feel my hackles rising. This wouldn’t be the first time Big Mac set her sights on Artemis, and I was starting to wonder if this place was safe for my family. “She’s not coming in here. Get rid of her.”

But before Big Mac could do or say anything more, my mom sprinted past her and rushed over to cradle Artemis’s head in her hands. “What happened to her?” she demanded.

“She fell, in a cave. She’s been out for a while. We need Torin,” I told her, my panic starting to return.

“Of course,” my mom said, her face pale with fright. “Bring her inside.” She turned and led the way inside. Rishika followed her, carrying Artemis. Big Mac did not look pleased to be overruled, but in that moment I didn’t care. My sister was in trouble, and she needed me and our mom. Like hell I would consider kicking her out.

I sighed, relieved that my mom had taken over. She would know what to do. But when I turned around, I found Greyson and Xavier both looking at me. I glanced away, not sure where to look. My eyes fell on Big Mac, and I gritted my teeth. That needed to be dealt with, so I might as well start there.

“What’s going on with you?” I asked the witch. “Why are you being so hostile toward Artemis? Can’t you see she’s been hurt?”

Big Mac gave me a cool look. “Artemis is dangerous—”

“That’s preposterous—”

“The Keeper of All Nature just told us so,” Big Mac said, narrowing her eyes.

“What?” I asked, shocked.

“No,” Greyson said, though his eyes were on Xavier. “That’s not exactly accurate. That keeper person said that the Orb was dangerous and that something was wrong with the *Orb*—not that it was Artemis.”

“Wait,” I said, confused. “Vander was *here*? At the pack house?”

“Yeah,” Greyson said, looking over at me. “You know him, too?”

“*Him*?” I asked, confused again. “Jay and I met a *woman* named Vander, who said she was the Keeper of All Nature.”

“The Keeper is a powerful being who can shift into any form they please,” Big Mac asserted irritably. “You think assuming different human forms is out of the realm of possibility? That’s not what matters now—what did they say to you?”

Okay, *rude*. Though she was right. “They gave me this badge.” I pulled the badge out of my pocket to show the group. “It saved our asses in that cave. Showed us a way out. When they gave it to me, Vander told me Artemis might be in danger.”

Big Mac shook her head dismissively. “They said that because Artemis *is* the danger.”

I ground my teeth. “My sister isn’t dangerous. If anything, *you’re* the threat right now. I’m not turning my sister away when she needs me.”

The words felt tough coming out of my mouth, but that quickly deflated as Big Mac laughed at all my bravado.

Greyson stepped between us, and Xavier edged over, but when I looked over at him, he looked away. Something was… off.

*Are you okay?*

If Xavier heard my mind link, he didn’t acknowledge it, and he didn’t reply.

“Let’s look at the facts, Caliana,” Big Mac snapped, drawing my attention back to her. “Artemis disappeared, and then the undead attacked us.” She raised her eyebrows. “I don’t think that’s a coincidence.”

I chewed the inside of my cheek nervously. “I know something is… *off* with her.” The way Artemis had lured me to that graveyard, then that look in her eyes, like she’d been scared of something—like she’d been scared of herself…

Big Mac doubled down. “And Artemis was also the last person to have the Orb in her possession. I saw *that* with my own eyes.”

“Well, it seems like there are a lot of questions that need answers,” I said, trying to sound reasonable. “And once Artemis wakes up, I’m sure she’ll be happy to clarify things.”

“So, who’s this?” Greyson asked, pointing past me.

I spun around. He was pointing at the woman standing next to—*ugh*—Ava. I frowned. Yeah, who the hell *was* that woman? After Xavier had kissed me, we’d just started back toward the pack house without another word, but now that I thought about it, I had a lot of questions. What the hell was Xavier doing walking around that mountainside with not only his evil ex, but *another* beautiful woman?

Had he run off with Ava and started a throuple?

I looked over at Xavier for a response but was completely distracted by the sight of blood on his neck.

“What happened?” I asked, stepping toward him. “Are you okay?”

Xavier frowned and pressed his hand to the cut on his neck. “I’m fine,” he growled. “Or I will be. Eventually.”

“How long ago did that happen?” Greyson asked, looking concerned. “Did it just happen, or is it taking you longer than usual to heal?”

Xavier shot him a poisonous glare. “Nice of you to decide to care now, brother. Where the hell were you when I disappeared for days?”

Greyson looked surprised. “Disappeared? I thought you were just gone.” He shrugged. “I thought you were having a temper tantrum, like always.”

This response did not seem to appease Xavier, and he narrowed his eyes. “Fuck you.”

We didn’t have time for more of their usual spats. And I was far too worried about Artemis that it was spilling over into everything else. I’m sure that was why I felt shakier than usual. As I took another step closer, I noticed that Xavier’s shirt was stained with blood below the cut. How long had he been bleeding?

“Is that a wound from a vampire?” I asked slowly, with dawning realization.

Xavier glanced at me, then quickly looked away.

Guilt washed over me like a freezing wave, and I felt sick to my stomach. I should have known. For days, I’d been feeling something—a whisper in my head that things weren’t right—but I’d ignored it. I should have listened. I should have gone after him. I should have told someone and made them listen to me.

I reached out for Xavier, to move his hand away and look at his neck, but he jerked back.

“Don’t worry about me; I said I was fine,” he snapped and stomped up the porch steps and into the house.

Greyson started after him, but I put my hand on his arm.

“Please Greyson, you know I have to see if he’s okay. I’d be doing the same for you, if you were hurt.”

Greyson looked less than pleased, but he nodded.

I went inside and listened for a moment. There was the sound of running water from the small bathroom just off the laundry room, and I pushed the door open experimentally.

Xavier stood at the sink, the first aid kit open on the counter, dabbing at his neck and wincing in pain.

“Let me,” I said, stepping into the small room. I took a clean cotton round from the kit and soaked it with hydrogen peroxide.

Xavier hissed as I put the cotton to his neck.

I leaned forward to blow on the skin, hoping that would ease the pain a little. That close to him, I could smell the peppery scent of his skin. It was such a familiar scent—and so intoxicating. I took another breath, breathing him in.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I should have known you were in trouble.”

Xavier leaned on the counter and looked down between his hands. “And I shouldn’t have left like that, but everything here… It’s just too hard.”

“What is?’ I asked quietly.

He looked over at me. “How much I love you, when I can’t be with you.”

I looked into his eyes, trying to remind myself of the promise I’d made to myself—that I was going to give myself some space. But the way he was looking at me, with so much love in his eyes… And he was hurt, and maybe it was kind of my fault. I’d pushed him away and then ignored the signs that he was in trouble.

So, when he leaned down to kiss me, I reached up to kiss him back.

**Episode 1287**

ARTEMIS

The darkness around me was complete. It was everywhere, pressing in on all sides, squeezing me tight. Pain throbbed through my whole body, echoing into my head and shivering down my spine. I tried to move—tried to stretch my arms, tried to point my toes—but nothing happened. I tried again, smaller movements—squeezing my eyes tight, clenching my fists. Again, nothing. *Damnit.* What was happening to me?

My blood ran cold. Was I not in control of my body? Was it the Orb? Had it taken me over *again*?

Fear shot through like a bolt of lightning, and I sat straight up, gasping out a scream.

“Artemis!”

In an instant, Rishika was at my side, reaching for my hand.

I was almost surprised to see her, before all my recent memories fully filtered back into my brain. Her voice was low and soothing as her fingers stroked up and down my wrist, calming the panic that was firing through my body.

I looked over at her, my eyes wide with fear. I didn’t even know if I was in control of my body. I opened my mouth, wondering if I could even speak.

“Rishika?” The sound of my voice nearly brought me to tears. *I* had just controlled my voice. Me, and no one else.

Rishika patted my hand, looking alarmed. “Thought we lost you for a minute there,” she tried to smile.

“*Rishika!*” I shouted, so loudly that she jumped. “You’re okay!” I pulled her into a hug so rough that we both tumbled back onto my bed.

Rishika gasped in surprise and braced herself, barely keeping us from rolling off the other side of the bed and onto the floor, but I didn’t care. I tightened my grip on her as relief flooded through me. The last thing I remembered of Rishika was her shocked face when I—or whatever sick version of me the Orb controlled—had knocked her out with a tree branch during that storm. I’d been so worried that she was out there hurt or sick, or that she’d even frozen to death in that storm, but she was here! Whole and safe and alive. My throat felt tight as I hugged her close.

“Artemis.” Rishika’s voice was slightly muffled against my shoulder. “It’s okay. We’re back home now. You’re safe.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said, and I felt tears falling down my cheeks. “I should never have let that happen to you, Rishika.”

Rishika braced her hands on either side of me and heaved herself up. She looked down at me, clearly confused. “Let what happen?” She shook her head. “To be honest, I’m not even sure *what* happened out there. We got separated in the storm, and then I guess the wind was so strong that I got knocked out.”

I stared at her. “Is that all you remember?”

“Yeah, kind of.” She frowned down at me. “Should I be remembering anything else?”

“No,” I said quickly. I shook my head, which was a mistake, as it made the pounding worse. “No, no, you’re right. I think I’m just… confused by everything that happened. Especially because Cali and I were stuck in that cave. And then I fell, and I guess I was out for a while. I didn’t know if I was ever going to see you again. Any of you.”

I was trying to hold everything in, but my voice cracked, betraying me. I gritted my teeth as the pressure built in my chest. I couldn’t cry. I needed to keep it together. I needed to be strong. I didn’t know what was happening, and I didn’t know if what had happened before was going to happen again.

Rishika nodded. “It was touch and go back there, but hey, it’s alright now.”

I sat up and took her hand in mine. “Listen, Rishika, there’s something I need to tell you.”

Rishika got to her feet. “Okay, but first you need to rest. Lie back down. I’m going to go get you some water—”

“No, hang on,” I said, trying to hold onto her hand. But she pulled it from my grasp easily. I hadn’t realized how weak I was. “Wait, Rishika, no, I need to tell you—”

“Artemis,” Rishika said, rolling her eyes. “I’ll be right back. But you need to drink something. You’re so pale. I don’t want you going into shock because you’re dehydrated. Give me two seconds,” she said, striding toward the door.

I watched her leave with a frustrated sigh. I really needed to talk to her. I had to tell someone about the Orb. Didn’t I? They were all in danger with me here. Except… were they? I thought for a moment, listening within my own head. I didn’t feel the Orb’s presence. Could that be? Was it finally defeated? Had I done it without realizing? Maybe I had. Maybe the strength I’d summoned in my fight for Cali—for someone I loved—had been enough.

For the first time, I glanced around my room. It looked the same as it had when I’d left—which was strange, in its own way. Everything was just as I’d left it—empty glasses littering the table next to the bed, a tangle of clothes spilling out of the dresser drawers—but it all looked strange and foreign after everything that had happened. But I was glad to be back, and I sank back into my pillows with a relieved sigh. Whatever happened next—whatever I had to fight—at least I knew I’d have people to fight with me.

I shifted my shoulders, trying to get comfortable. I twisted around and punched the pillow. I slid down, then up, but nothing helped. I just couldn’t relax. My body was still too wired. My neck was tight as a fist; I rolled my shoulders back, trying to unknot the tension. That was when I saw it.

A leaf.

It was on my bedside table, shoved in between the empty glasses.

I frowned. What was that doing there? Had Rishika left it there? Why would she have brought a leaf into my room? And where had she gotten a maple leaf that size? All the trees around here were pines and aspens.

Confused, I reached for the leaf, but when I picked it up, I nearly dropped it again.

“*Dammit*,” I hissed. The leaf had shocked my skin, the pain almost like being zapped with a sharp volt of static electricity. I looked closely at the golden leaf and spun it between my fingers. There was something funny about this leaf—it looked normal, but kind of… *buzzed*, with something alive. It reminded me of the blade of grass Vander had given me.

And, like I’d summoned something with that thought, there was a low rumble of thunder and a snap like the crack of wood, and a beautiful dark-skinned woman appeared at the foot of my bed, swathed in a bright blue wrap.

I was confused for just a moment, before I recognized the eyes. “*Vander?* What the hell are you doing here?”

Vander raised their eyebrows. “You called me, Artemis.”

“No I didn’t,” I countered, baffled.

Vander nodded at the leaf in my hand. “Of course you did. You used the leaf I left behind.”

I stared down at the leaf. “Is it that simple to get a hold of you? Can I just go out to the woods and start shaking the leaves down from the trees whenever I wanna have a chat?”

Vander shrugged one bare shoulder, stifling a laugh. “I wouldn’t advise it, but you are more than welcome to try.”

I rolled my eyes. I was so sick of the vagaries of the nature spirit. “Whatever.”

Vander frowned at me.

“What?” I asked, feeling suddenly insecure. “What are you looking at?”

Vander took a step toward me, then another. They sat down on the bed next to me and laid a cool hand on my cheek. “Something ails you, Artemis.”

Vander’s gaze was intense and deeply scrutinizing, and I suddenly felt like a butterfly pinned underneath a rather large scope.

I wanted to squirm but managed not to. “What do you mean? I’m fine.”

Vander shook their head. They leaned in. “There’s something strange here.” They leaned closer. Then closer. Then Vander’s face was a breath away from mine.

“Maybe it’s because I’ve been lost,” I said softly.

Vander’s eyes looked into mine, intense as roaring fires. “Yes, Artemis, you are definitely lost.”

I did not like the implications of their words, but I wasn’t given any time to counter them before Vander moved in, pressing their lips to mine.

I tried to be still—tried not to react—but it was useless. My lips softened beneath theirs and my hand came up to rest on Vander’s smooth, cool shoulder, their skin soft as satin. This moment—strange as it was—was the first time I’d felt relaxed in days.

Vander pulled gently back with an interested hum.

My head was spinning from the kiss, and I opened my eyes slowly, savoring the afterglow of the moment. But all that warmth died away when I saw Vander’s eyes on me, fixed with a grave expression.

“What?” I asked nervously.

Vander shook their head. “Oh, Artemis. This isn’t good.”

My heart sank. “What are you talking about? Am I that bad of a kisser?”

Vander gave me a long look, my joke missing the mark by a mile. “I know exactly what it is you’ve done.”

**Episode 1288**

Xavier’s lips pressed against mine, gently at first and then firmer, like he was trying to brand himself on my lips. My hands found his chest, not to push him away, but to ground myself—my head was spinning, and I felt like I was about to float away with want. Xavier’s hands anchored on my hips as he pressed himself against me, and I deepened the kiss. I hummed a happy little sigh against Xavier’s lips, and I felt his groan of desire in return.

*I missed this. I missed* him*.*

It felt amazing to be with Xavier again, to taste his mouth and feel his firm body against my own. To forget about everything else and create this moment of quiet desire, a little bubble with just the two of us.

When I’d seen him in the forest, battered and bruised and flanked by Ava and that other woman, everything had happened so fast. And the kiss had been almost too much to process on top of seeing him again after so long, and worrying about Artemis.

But this? This was perfect. This was wordless communication, a safe space to let loose everything we’d both been holding back.

In one swift movement, Xavier’s grip on my hips tightened and he lifted me to sit on the edge of the bathroom counter. He pressed himself between my legs, and I wrapped them around his hips, pulling him even closer. Always closer.

My arms twined around his neck, my bicep brushing against one of his many bruises, and his body tensed for a split second. I almost pulled away to make sure he was okay, but then he doubled down, pushing against me with an even hungrier groan, his lips and teeth and tongue demanding my response.

A new wave of desire flooded my body, but I couldn’t quite fall back into that pool of longing. Another feeling began to worm its way through me: regret. Why hadn’t I looked for Xavier when he’d left? Why had I been so quick to assume he was off doing his own thing and that I should give him space—even when I’d had that nagging feeling that something was terribly wrong?

*I failed you, Xavier. And I’m so, so sorry.*

If I’d looked for him, even for a little while, would I have been able to keep him from being attacked by a vampire? Would I have been able to prevent all of this from happening?

And I still didn’t even know what *this* was, I realized. Xavier still hadn’t told me the truth about what he’d endured while he’d been gone.

*I can’t blame him. If he abandoned me when I needed him most, I wouldn’t be particularly forthcoming about the details either.*

Xavier broke away from my mouth and started trailing his lips over my jaw. It was the kind of move that normally made me swoon, but I’d already gone cold. I couldn’t pretend that things were fine between us, that this was okay.

*I shouldn’t be doing this to him. It’s not right. It’s not kind.*

My palms, still flat against his chest, pushed him back. “Stop.”

He dropped his head against my neck with a frustrated groan and then stepped back. “What now?”

“I’m sorry.” I sighed. “But I’m trying to keep my distance from you and Greyson, remember? This isn’t exactly distance. I promise I’m not trying to hurt you, Xavier. I just don’t want to make things between us any worse.”

“And what about what happened in the woods?”

Heat rushed into my face. *Oh, that.* The truth was, when that kiss had happened, I hadn’tbeen thinking—not about my decision to keep my mates away, not about the *due destini*, and not about Greyson. I’d been so relieved to see him that my love for him had overwhelmed everything else.

“That was a mistake,” I managed, though from the weak tone of my voice, I knew he wouldn’t believe me. *I* didn’t even believe me.

“Cali, this keeps happening between us. It must mean something. So why do you want to keep pretending it doesn’t?”

*Of course it means something*. *But the exact same thing keeps happening with Greyson. So* that *must mean something too. It means I’m an idiot to keep throwing myself at both of them and I shouldn’t be kissing either of them!*

*Get a spine, Cali.*

I sighed. When it came to throwing myself at a monster or going on some epic quest, I knew I would rise to the occasion and figure things out. But literally just staying at the pack house and spending time around my mates without lip-locking at the first opportunity? That was impossible, apparently.

But… I wasn’t the only one struggling to accept all of this. And was it truly my fault if Xavier and Greyson were the ones who kept kissing *me*?

Other than the foot of space he’d given me when I’d pushed him away, Xavier hadn’t moved. He was still too close for my liking—especially since I was trying so hard to think logically while my lady parts kept yelling at me to give my mate everything he wanted.

I sidled away from the bathroom sink, avoiding Xavier’s gaze. “You still haven’t told me about what happened to you. Or why you brought Ava back here.”

My eyes were still glued to the wall behind him, and even then I could have sworn I *felt* his eyes roll. He knew a desperate attempt to change the subject when he heard one, apparently.

“I was captured by that vampire, Gregor, and he gave me to another vampire to be used as a blood bag,” he said flatly.

“You were *what*?” I gasped, picturing Xavier being fed on by an unending line of vampires. For a moment, I could only see red. *How dare they do that to my mate?* “Where are they now? We need to go after them—”

Xavier just held up a hand. “Kira, the other woman I came back here with, is a witch, and she and Ava helped me escape. But I also suspect that Ava played a part in me getting captured in the first place, so don’t assume this means she’s trustworthy.”

I folded my arms over my chest. “You should know I’d never trust Ava. I hate that she’s even here.”

“I know. I’m not crazy about it either.” He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “But I hope you realize that *you* are the only reason I’m back. I couldn’t just give up and accept my fate because I knew that would be giving you up too. The thought of coming back home to you gave me the hope and strength to get out of there.”

Tears pricked at my eyes, and I just barely held myself back from jumping into his arms. No matter how hard I pushed him away, even if we were never together again, I knew I would always be connected to him.

“I know you broke up with me, but I still love you, Cali.”

*I love you too.*

The words were right on the tip of my tongue, but I held them back. Of course I loved him.

I loved Greyson, too.

I knew this had to be so frustrating for Xavier. Hell, it was frustrating for me too. Xavier was still pale, but I could see the heat in his gaze. He’d kiss me again if I let him. But I wasn’t going to make that mistake.

“You should get some rest,” I said gently.

He shook his head. “I want to be with you.”

Before I could respond, loud voices sounded in the hallway. I poked my head out to find Greyson and Big Mac arguing about Artemis. Leaving Xavier in the bathroom, I stepped outside. “What’s all of this about?”

The witch didn’t even look at me. “You need to stay out of this.”

Pfft. Did she know me at all? There was no way in hell I was just going to stay out of anything that involved my sister. I raised my eyebrows at Greyson. “What are you doing?”

Greyson looked like he wanted to be just about anywhere else. “We—”

Big Mac cut him off. “We’re doing what we should have done before.”

*God, she’s so annoying.* I kept my eyes on Greyson. “Tell me.”

He looked away. “I need to talk to Artemis.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m trying to do what’s best for the pack,” the witch said. “Listen, I know she’s your sister, and I don’t want to be the bad guy in all of this. You should know better than anyone else that I’ve always stood up for the pack’s best interests—and that’s why Artemis has to go.”

I frowned. “Go, where, exactly? You can’t just throw her out.”

“I’m not asking you. This is up to the Alpha.” She turned to Greyson. “So, what’ll it be?”

I looked at him, incredulous. “Whose side are you on?”

**Episode 1289**

ARTEMIS

Staring at Vander, I could still feel the ghost of their lips against mine. Even now that they had drawn back, watching me with those eyes I would recognize anywhere, I still felt lost in the kiss, the feelings it had brought forth. It took me a while to grasp what they’d just said.

*I know exactly what it is you’ve done.*

The haze disappeared and was replaced by confusion—and dread.

“Wait…” I blinked. “What did I do?”

I knew I’d done my fair share of terrible things, but what were they referring to specifically? All the people I’d hunted for the Kollector? The food I’d stolen as a young orphan, fighting for survival? Kissing Greyson even though I’d known he had something going on with Cali? Could Vander see all of that?

Suddenly, I wanted to dive underneath the blankets and hide until Vander left. I didn’t want to face them, knowing the many terrible things that they had to know about me—my whole life was probably on display for them to judge.

They tilted their head to the side, and a crease appeared between their eyes. “You summoned the dead, didn’t you?”

Oh. They weren’t talking about my long history of gigantic—and often willful—mistakes. They were talking about what had happened in the graveyard, and with York. Panic punched its way into my chest, and I looked down at my lap.

“That wasn’t my fault,” I insisted. “I didn’t mean to do it. I didn’t know what was happening. Not entirely.” I thought back to that time, to the moments when I’d been fully aware of the things happening around me, and all the times I hadn’t been.

It had been like I was underwater, watching everything happen through a murky lens. I’d fought so hard to escape my watery prison, but time and time again, I’d been unable to surface until it was too late.

I swallowed. “The truth is, I have trouble remembering what happened. Everything is still so hazy.”

I forced myself to meet Vander’s gaze, expecting anger and blame. Instead, their expression was sympathetic.

“I’m not accusing you of anything,” they said. “I understand the powers at work here better than you know, and I think it’s entirely possible that you may not be fully responsible for what’s been happening to you. Dark magic has been released into this world—and I think it’s drawn to you.”

Though I’d suspected as much, hearing the confirmation from the Keeper of All Nature themself sent another frisson of fear through me.

“Why me? What did I do? Is this…” My fingers curled tight around the edge of my blanket. “Is this some kind of punishment for the work I did for the Kollector?”

Vander shook their head. “No, Artemis,” they said gently, putting a hand on my shoulder. “I think it’s something else—perhaps because you are different. You’re both Dark and Light Fae, after all. Something very special and rare. It makes sense for dark power to covet you.”

Warmth radiated from their touch, and I felt my body relax just a bit. The panic churning inside me slowly eased.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Vander added. “You’re here now, and you’re safe. You have people who care about you.”

The ghost of a smile tugged at my lips. I still had no idea whether or not I could truly come back from this, but it was a comfort to know that the Keeper of All Nature was looking out for me. That had to mean something, right?

*Not to mention that kiss.* The first time they’d kissed me, they’d shrugged it off as a “healing kiss.” Whatever that meant. *But this one felt different. Vander must have felt it too…*

*Is nature itself falling for me?*

“There are many questions we have to find answers for,” Vander said, and it took me a moment to realize they weren’t actually reading my mind. Heat rushed into my cheeks, and I looked back down at the bedsheets.

*Slow down, Artemis. You’ve got bigger things to worry about right now.*

“Where do we even start with something like this?” I asked.

“I don’t know exactly what is happening to you, but I suspect it has something to do with the Orb of Letifer. Perhaps we should start there.”

My eyes snapped up to Vander’s, and I felt a chill run down my spine. Hearing those words out loud… They resonated within me. There was an undeniable truth to them.

“I thought I lost the Orb in the Fae world,” I said slowly. “But I’m beginning to wonder if that really happened. Can you tell if the Orb is here, in this world?”

Their face clouded over, and after a long moment they finally said, “I don’t know. And that troubles me. It’s my business to know these things. My responsibility. And yet here I am, in the dark. It all began when the portal closed—and since then, everything has been so difficult to pin down.”

So not even the Keeper of All Nature knew what was happening? I rested my face in my hands, slowly shaking my head. *What have I done? Is all of this my fault? I was the one who stole the Orb to return it to the Fae world… Did I inadvertently release the Orb* and *its power into this world in the process?*

“I just wanted to help,” I said softly.

“I know.” They squeezed my shoulder. “Please don’t blame yourself. There are still too many questions, too many unknown variables, for you to bear this burden yourself.”

I looked up at them. “Are you sure?”

They nodded. “You’re a good person, Artemis. With a good soul. Never forget that.”

They pulled me into a tight hug. I wasn’t usually a hugger—my upbringing had literally beaten that out of me—but I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been in such desperate need of comfort. I clutched Vander tightly, breathing in their scent—fresh grass and the scent of the forest right after a rainstorm. My heart slowed from its all-out sprint.

Everything would be okay.

Vander pulled back and gave me a sweet, lingering kiss on the forehead—another expression of affection I wasn’t used to but savored all the same.

Suddenly, the bedroom opened and Rishika walked in—and stopped short. “Oh, sorry.”

Now red-faced, I pulled away from Vander. My eyes were glued to Rishika, and I watched a slew of emotions cross her face—shock, embarrassment, displeasure, and maybe even hurt? Something like guilt nagged at me as I scooted back from Vander.

“It’s okay,” I said. “You weren’t interrupting anything.”

The words tasted like a lie. Did Rishika believe me? Or did I just look guilty for pulling away from Vander so quickly? Did I even have anything to feel guilty about?

Vander stood up and nodded at Rishika. “Perfect timing. I was just leaving. Goodbye.”

They disappeared in an instant, without another word. I blinked, staring at the place they’d been sitting, still trying to keep up with everything.

With Vander gone, silence set in between Rishika and me, and it wasn’t a comfortable one. The werewolf had insisted that there was nothing serious going on between us, but what if she was lying? And how did I feel, stuck in the middle? Sure, Vander was sweet and all of nature, but they weren’t Rishika.

Rishika was the very first real friend I’d made in the human world. And we had a connection.

*Life was so much simpler when I was just a bounty hunter.*

“I was going to ask how you were doing,” Rishika said, giving a pointed glance at the space where Vander had been, “but clearly you’re doing all right.” She set down the glass of water on the bedside table with a loud *clunk*.

Okay, so I wasn’t imagining the jealousy then.

“Rishika,” I began. “I—”

The bedroom door swung open and Cali stormed in, followed by Greyson and Big Mac. They all looked angry, but more at each other than at me. Warning bells started going off in my mind.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Big Mac thinks you have the Orb,” Cali blurted out, then glared at the witch. “Which is ridiculous, by the way.” My sister turned back to me. “She wants to throw you out, but they have no proof.”

“I can *get* proof,” Big Mac countered. “I’m a witch, remember?”

My sister crossed her arms over her chest. “Oh, I am well aware of your abilities and what they cost. So you’re going to make Artemis do some spell that could, you know, potentially kill her?”

A headache was beginning to pulse behind my eyes. “Guys—”

“Or, let me guess,” Cali continued. “You’ll do a spell and at the end, Artemis won’t be Fae anymore!”

“Goddess above, Cali!” Big Mac spat. “You think magic doesn’t come with risks? With a price? We both want answers, and this is the way to get them!”

They kept bickering, with Greyson adding a few points here and there that only made Cali angrier. My sister would hate to hear me say it, but Big Mac was probably right. If I was truly a danger to myself and others, then I had to know.

“HEY!” I shouted.

Everyone stopped to look at me.

I took a deep breath. My mind was made up. “Do it. Do the spell.”

**Episode 1290**

XAVIER

Moonlight streamed down between the trees as I followed Ava through the woods. Leaves crinkled under my bare feet, and soft moss cushioned my steps. Even without the full benefit of my wolf senses, I knew exactly where to step, where to avoid low-hanging branches. I had the strangest feeling that I’d been here before.

I passed a pile of fabric draped over a tree branch. Ava’s shirt.

A few yards ahead of me, Ava smirked and continued forward, slowly peeling off her clothes as she went. Despite myself, a frisson of want slipped through me. I kept moving, silently following her through the forest, passing various items of her clothing along the way—her jeans strewn across the path, her camisole draped over a large rock, and then her bra half-hanging out of the hollow of a tree.

I glanced away from the tree to see Ava standing in a patch of moonlight, her curves bared to me, a sultry smile tugging at her lips. All she had left was a single slip of lacy fabric—her panties. Lust simmered low in my belly while dread trickled down my spine.

I knew this place. That was the only thing that could account for the sheer familiarity of the scene in front of me. I had definitely been here before.

But rather than being comforted by the familiarity, I shuddered. Something bad had happened here.

Ava cocked her head, her sexy smile taking on a taunting edge. “I helped you, Xavier. How are you going to pay me back?” She hooked her fingers under the waistband of her panties and eased them down her hips. They fell in a heap at her feet.

*Fuck*. I wanted nothing more than to close the distance between us and press myself against her, fuck her against the nearest tree until she was screaming my name. But something held me back. Some voice in the back of my mind, perhaps the same voice that told me this place was dark and terrible, screamed at me to hold back. To refuse to give in to Ava.

“What is this place?” I asked instead. “Where are we?”

Ava sauntered forward and pressed a finger against my lips. “Shh.” Her hands slid into my hair, and she pulled me in for a deep kiss, a heady thing full of teeth and tongue—the kind of kiss that never failed to make me lose my mind.

Then her teeth sank into my bottom lip, sharp enough to draw blood, and I pulled back with a hiss. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been this hard.

“It doesn’t matter where we are,” Ava whispered, her fingers still twined in my hair. “We’re alone now. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

It was, and it wasn’t. While part of me still wanted to lose myself in her, I held back. Those warning bells were blaring in my head now, and I flinched backward when the metallic scent of blood, of death, slipped into my nose.

“Why are we here?” I pressed.

Ava just smirked and turned to look back. Maybe if I saw where I’d come from, I’d remember why I was here. But nothing came to mind, just the hazy recollection of following Ava through the forest.

When I turned to look back at her, a scream caught on my lips.

Ava was covered in blood.

I stumbled back with a cry, and I hit the ground hard enough to make the air whoosh out of my lungs. I gasped there for a moment, my eyes watering until I forced my lungs to unclench. When I looked at Ava again, she had my mother by the throat.

“No!”

With a feral grin, Ava sank her teeth into my mother’s neck. Her eyes locked with mine, even as my mother’s blood poured into her mouth. I heard Ava’s voice slip into my mind.

*This is what you want.*

No. No! I’d never wanted this. What was she doing? I’d never asked for this! Fury and desperation took over, and with a primal scream, I lunged at Ava—

I lurched upright, cold sweat dripping down my neck. And I wasn’t alone.

Kira sat in a nearby armchair, her arms crossed over her chest, glaring at me. For one terrifying second I thought I was back on that gurney, at Kira and Iñigo’s mercy. But then I realized I was lying on a very familiar couch, back at the pack house, and my dazed, shocked expression shifted into a scowl.

How many times was I going to wake up to this witch staring at me? And how could I make it stop?

I lay back with a groan, blinking slowly. Slowly, things came back to me.

I remembered being in the bathroom with Cali, kissing her, pleading my case when she’d tried to put distance between us again. And then I remembered Cali leaving the bathroom to find out what all the commotion was about.

I’d tried to follow her, but I’d been too tired, too low on blood. My body still wasn’t healing properly. I hadn’t even made it up the stairs, and in the end I must have passed out on the couch.

I rubbed my sweat-slicked face, avoiding Kira’s gaze. “What are you doing here? Do you get off on watching me sleep or something?”

She scoffed. “I want to get out of here. I fucking hate werewolves.”

Seriously?

After I’d brought her to the pack house for safety, this was how she was going to act? After everything she’d done to me, Kira didn’t get to bitch at me like I was responsible for solving all her problems. She might have helped me escape, but even that had come at a price for me. As far as I was concerned, she still owed me big time.

“Leave then,” I said. “And don’t let the door hit you in the—”

“We made a deal,” she interrupted. “And I fulfilled my end of the bargain. I risked my ass to save you—now it’s time to pony up. When are you going to do what you promised and kill Garren?”

“It’s on my to-do list,” I deadpanned. “Right after regaining my strength—which, for the record, this conversation isn’t really helping with.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You’re a werewolf. You’re supposed to heal fast. So heal already.”

If only it were that easy. I would’ve *loved* to bounce back to full strength, even if it turned me into her errand boy-slash-contract killer a little sooner than I’d like. But between being repeatedly drained of blood and poisoned with silver—even if she’d healed me—I was surprised I was even conscious. I was probably lucky to be alive, all things considered. But going Hulk on this Garren guy? Yeah, not an option right now.

She must have misinterpreted my silence, because she leaned over and got in my face. “If you even *think* about going back on your word, you’ll be sorry. What Iñigo and Gregor did to you will seem a like a walk in the park compared to what I have planned.”

“Relax. That’s not my style.” I forced myself to sit up. The room tilted sideways for a moment, but I did my best to breathe through it until everything righted itself. “Why don’t you start by telling me everything you can about Garren—including where you think I might be able to find him. It’s hard to kill someone you can’t find.”

“I will. How are you going to kill him?” she asked. “I want him to suffer, just like my husband did.”

“We can discuss that later. First, there’s one thing I want to understand. Why did you change your mind and agree to help me escape?” I couldn’t simply trust that she’d had a change of heart.

Kira frowned, and her shoulders curled forward a bit. “After my husband died, I accepted Iñigo’s help. But his help always comes with strings—too many strings. And while I despise werewolves, I saw the way he exploited you, and I realized that was exactly what he’d been doing to me. He claimed he was helping me when all along he was just using me, exploiting me. I knew I had to get away from him.” Her expression turned ice-cold. “Don’t think for one moment that I did what I did because I felt sorry for you. I did it because I wanted to get out, and you offered to do what Iñigo promised but never delivered on.”

I nodded. “I get it. I once took revenge on Ava for killing my mother.”

I’d killed her. Exactly the type of revenge Kira wanted for Garren.

“Ava?” Kira’s eyebrows raised. “Let me offer you some advice about her: she’s not to be trusted.”

I snorted. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

She seemed to mull something over for a moment, and then said, “Do you know the details of the deal she made with Iñigo?”

**Episode 1291**

VIOLET

I was still smiling as I slid my phone in my pocket and headed downstairs to find Marta. It was so good to get to talk to Charlie again. I wasn’t sure how it was possible, but I already missed him so much. I had no idea how we were going to get through his hunter training.

At least he missed me too.And I couldn’t deny how much of a thrill it gave me to know we were sneaking around behind his parents’ backs. Especially Iris.

I had genuinely tried to like both Paul and Iris, even after finding out they were hunters. But it seemed like they would never see me as anything more than a distraction at best and, at worst, a monster who needed to be put down. They’d acted like everything was fine and then had pretty much stolen Charlie away and pressured him to break up with me. If he weren’t such a sweet, devoted mate, I had no doubt in my mind that Charlie’s parents would have been successful in separating us.

So, if nothing else, helping Charlie con them almost made the separation worth it.

*I wonder when I’ll be able to see him again. To hold him, and kiss him, and spend time together without his stupid parents hanging over our heads.*

I didn’t know exactly how long his hunter training would take, but I hoped he’d be able to wrap it up soon. He was so strong and smart and capable, and I was sure his wolf side only enhanced those qualities. He’d be through before we knew it.

Still, it didn’t seem fair that we’d been through so much together, only to be forced apart again.

*And if Paul and Iris ever try to take Charlie from me again, I won’t play so nice the second time around.*

I found Marta in the kitchen, wolfing down some brownies Tom had whipped up this morning.

“Hey.”

She spun around, bits of chocolate sticking to the corners of her mouth. “Oh, hey. You want one?”

I shook my head. What I really wanted was to talk to my brother again. “If it’s okay with you, I’d like to see if Lilac’s okay. I’m still… unsettled by all the strange stuff that’s been happening around here, and all the talk about things gone wrong in the spirit world. Do you think we can talk to him?”

Marta grabbed a paper towel and wiped her mouth, then nodded at the empty space next to her at the counter. “Lilac is right here. He can hear everything you’re saying.”

I smiled, but it felt weak. Great—the invisible ghost of my brother could see me and hear what I was saying and apparently hang out with Marta while she inhaled half a pan of brownies. But that didn’t comfort me much. I wanted to talk *to* him, not to air. I wanted to hear his voice and see for myself that he was here and he was doing all right.

I knew Big Mac suspected the Orb of Letifer was behind everything going on, and was hellbent on putting an end to all the spirit world craziness that had been happening lately. And yeah, those zombies were terrifying, but would fixing all of this mean the end of Lilac being here? Would he get sucked back into the spirit world, leaving us unable to talk, ever again?

I couldn’t let that happen. Not if I could help it. I’d already lost my brother once—I wasn’t going to lose him again.

I forced some cheeriness into my tone and tried to focus on the spot Marta had indicated. Maybe if I played along, it would still feel like we could talk to one another. “Lilac, how are you doing today?”

Marta turned to look at where Lilac allegedly was standing and tilted her head as she listened to him, then she turned back to me. “He’s fine.”

My smile disappeared. “That’s it? That’s really exactly what he said to you?”

She shrugged. “Yeah.”

Marta didn’t have any reason to lie to me, yet I still couldn’t quite bring myself to believe her. If I could actually *hear* my brother, I’d know the truth. This was like watching my favorite K-drama with subtitles that didn’t always match what the character was actually feeling. Maybe we could try a different approach?

“How about we sneak down to Arlo?”

“I’m in, I guess.” Marta balled up the paper towel and threw it into the waste bin. “I don’t mind playing translator between you and Lilac, but I think you and I both prefer when you can talk to him directly.”

We hurried down to the basement, taking great care to not be spotted by Cali, Greyson, Big Mac, and Artemis as they all argued about something on the landing upstairs. I heard the words “spell” and “Orb,” and I shuddered. Looked like we might have even less time than I feared.

“Is there always this much drama going on here?” Marta whispered.

“Pretty much.”

We slipped into the basement and quickly closed the door behind us.

Arlo was exactly where we’d left him, lying on the hard cement floor on his back, staring blankly up at the ceiling.

*I really wish there was a slightly less creepy way to communicate with Lilac.*

I stepped closer to Arlo and then crouched down next to the body. “Are you in there, Lilac?”

I jumped back and let out a tiny squeak as Arlo took a sharp breath and sat up, fixing his bright-blue eyes on me.

He grinned. “Hi, Violet.”

I smiled back. Was this super creepy and probably somewhat problematic to be doing this through a seemingly zombified werewolf? Yes. But would I still gladly take this opportunity to be with my brother? Hell yes.

“Hi, Lilac.”

My arms tensed. I wanted to hug him, but it would be weird, right? This wasn’t Lilac.

*But it’s all I have.*

Arlo’s face softened. “I’m so sorry. I know this must be so painful for you.”

His gentle voice, even in a body that was all wrong, proved to be my undoing. I threw my arms around him and hugged him tightly. His body was cold and stiff, so different from the Lilac I remembered.

A sob burst out of my chest. I wanted to hold my *brother*—not some shell his ghost could slip into as needed.

*It’s not fair! Why can’t he come back to me? If Ava could cross over, then why can’t Lilac? He never hurt anyone. He was kind and good, and he didn’t deserve this!*

Lilac rubbed my back with Arlo’s hands. “It’s okay, Violet. I’m here.”

“But you’re *not*. Not the way you should be.” I sniffed and turned to Marta. “Can we bring Lilac back? Not just as a ghost, but for real?”

Marta’s eyebrows disappeared beneath her bangs. “That is so far out of my wheelhouse, you might as well have said it in Greek.”

“But it’s not impossible,” I pressed. “I mean, Xavier tore Ava’s throat out. She was dead for *years*, and now she’s running around like nothing ever happened. Not to mention the zombies out there—including Arlo.” I patted Arlo’s arm, even though I was sure he couldn’t actually hear me. “No offense.”

“Violet, I understand why you want this, but you shouldn’t get your hopes up,” Lilac said with a grimace.

I frowned. Why was he not jumping on this idea? Lilac’s life had been cut short before he’d even really been able to live it. He’d had his whole future ahead of him—a plethora of things to experience, milestones to achieve. Didn’t he want another chance at all of that? And didn’t he want to experience all of it with me? We had so much lost time to make up for.

“Don’t you want to come back?” I asked. “Don’t you miss me too?”

“Of course I do! I miss you every minute of every day. But what you’re wishing for… We don’t know how to do it, or what could happen if we try.”

“I don’t care!” I snapped. “We didn’t even know you could inhabit Arlo’s body until a little while ago. There’s an entire ocean of knowledge between what we know and what’s actually possible, so excuse me for not letting a lack of knowledge hold us back!”

His face went pale, and I softened my voice.

“You never should have died the way you did,” I said. “If anyone deserves a second chance, it’s you.”

Marta blew out a breath, and I could see the wheels in her mind spinning. “I mean, I *would* love to be untethered from Lilac. Don’t get me wrong. He’s nice and all, but really, it does get a little tiresome playing monkey in the middle for you two.”

“Okay.” I nodded. This was the right thing to do. I could feel it. I looked at Lilac. “Whatever’s going on in the spirit world, whatever trouble is brewing, you won’t be a part of it. Because I’m going to find a way to bring you back.”

**Episode 1292**

“Artemis, no!” I said, throwing my hands up. “You don’t have to agree to any of this. You are a part of this pack, and let me tell you right now, witch spells don’t always do what they’re supposed to.”

I tossed Big Mac a dirty look. How many times had she promised to help us? That she could use her magic to provide a solution to some huge problem? And how many times had fixing said problems gone off without a hitch?

Last I checked, Jay was missing an eye, Lola had lost her wolf, Greyson and Xavier were cursed to drop dead the moment I used the word “choose” incorrectly, and, oh yeah, I was going to lose my mind.

So much for Big Mac’s help!

I turned back to Artemis. “She’s kind of a hack, and there’s no warranty for when things go wrong.”

Artemis frowned. “What’s warranty?”

“*I’m* a hack?” Big Mac repeated. “You ungrateful little—”

Greyson stepped between me and the witch, holding his hands up. “Enough!”

I smirked at Big Mac, and then my smile disappeared when Greyson shot me a pointed look.

“Cali,” he said. “This situation is different, and you know it.”

“Seriously?” I scoffed. “You *are* on her side, then. Good to know!”

He sighed and shook his head. “I’m not on anyone’s side.”

Big Mac wagged her finger at me. I was sorely tempted to bite it off. “Listen, girl,” she said. “What happened with Greyson and Xavier was not my fault.”

“You were supposed to break the curse!” I screeched. I’d come in here ready to defend Artemis, but between Big Mac’s apparent bloodlust and Greyson refusing to do a damn thing about it, I was ready to lose my fucking mind. “And instead, one of my mates is doomed to die! Tell me—whose fault *should* that be?”

“Yours! If you’d just made the hard choice for once in your life, instead of looking for a loophole when things didn’t go your way, then you three wouldn’t be in this situation! I tried to help you, Caliana, so don’t you dare blame me for not being able to fix all of your problems.”

My vision went red. “And what about Lola? You sure didn’t help much with her problems! She lost her wolf because of you!”

The witch rolled her eyes. “She knew the risks, and she consented. And you don’t see her raging at me for ruining her life. In fact, you also don’t see her running around and losing control of her wolf anymore either, do you?”

“And what about Jay’s eye?! You took it!”

“He made the deal. He knew what he was giving up.” Some of the witch’s anger seemed to cool, and she cocked her head to the side. “Your friends, your *mates*—they all knew the risks and accepted them when things didn’t turn out the way they’d hoped. You could stand to learn a thing or two from them.”

I spun away and faced my sister. I couldn’t listen to Big Mac anymore. “Artemis, you don’t have to do this. Don’t let them force you.”

On the other side of Artemis, Rishika nodded. “You’re still recovering. You shouldn’t be pushing yourself through anything right now.”

“Nobody is forcing me to do anything,” Artemis said. “I want to do this.” She looked down at her blankets. I’d never seen my sister look so tired, so utterly defeated. “I need to understand what’s happening to me,” she finally said. “And if the witch can help, then I’m willing to accept any and all risks.”

Big Mac huffed. “I’m glad someone in this house is capable of seeing sense.”

I’d opened my mouth to reply when footsteps stomped up the stairs and the door swung open again. My parents rushed in. Mom took in the room, and her eyes narrowed. “What the hell is going on in here?”

I pointed to Big Mac. “She wants to do a spell on Artemis.”

Mom rushed over to Artemis’s side, standing in front of her like a shield. She glared pointedly at Big Mac, and then at Greyson. “Nobody is doing anything to my daughter.”

I resisted the urge to smile. *Mom to the rescue!* I knew firsthand exactly how terrifying she could be when she was angry. It was good to have that energy on our side.

Greyson shook his head. “I’m sorry, Orla, but it’s not your decision. It’s a pack decision, and most importantly, Artemis’s.”

My jaw dropped. How could he do this? “I’m part of the pack, too! And I say Big Mac and her shitty magic aren’t going to touch a hair on my sister’s head!”

“You wanna say that again?” Big Mac growled, her voice promising violence.

“You heard me!” I snapped, just as my mom pushed me behind her.

“If you touch either one of my daughters, it’ll be the last thing you ever do.”

I liked this side of my mom.

There was a knock on the doorframe.

“What now?” Greyson muttered.

Mrs. Smith walked into the fray, a bright smile on her face. She was holding a tray of white chocolate mochas.

“My goodness,” she said, “the entire pack house can hear you! I think everyone needs to calm down. Here, have a drink.”

If this were literally any other time, I’d have jumped at the offer of a cup of Mrs. Smith’s favorite drink. But since we were kind of in the middle of fighting for my sister’s future, having a calming drink together wasn’t exactly high on my priority list.

I smiled sweetly at Greyson. “You heard her. Why don’t you and Big Mac have a drink and leave us alone? This is family business, and you’re not welcome.”

Greyson looked like he’d been sucker-punched, but I ignored the guilt tugging at my stomach.

Big Mac stepped forward. “This is happening, Cali. Your permission is not required.”

And then the room dissolved into chaos.

“My daughter has been through hell,” Mom said. “You are not casting a spell on her!”

“She’s been through hell? Or she’s the *cause* of all the hell?” the witch countered. “I’d sure like to know!”

“Artemis hasn’t done anything wrong,” I insisted.

“Cali, that’s enough.” Greyson tried to reach for me, but I skittered back. Mom and Big Mac were still bickering. I was focused entirely on my Alpha.

I glared at him. “How could you do this to my family? You’re my mate! You’re supposed to be on my side!”

“Jesus Christ,” he muttered. “There are no sides here, Cali. The pack is in danger, and—”

“And you want to blame my sister for it?”

“I’m not blaming anyone! I just want answers!”

Artemis stood up. “STOP!”

We all jumped and turned to face her.

“I need to know what’s going on with me,” Artemis said, quieter this time. “Especially if it’s putting all of you in danger.” She turned to me. “Thank you for looking out for me, but this is my decision and my decision only.”

I just shook my head. I couldn’t believe she was going along with this. I looked over at Big Mac, and then at Greyson. And I couldn’t believe my pack had turned against me. I turned on my heel and stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind me.

I didn’t stop until I’d pushed through the front door, crossed the porch, and could feel the cool grass on my bare feet. Hot tears of anger slipped down my cheeks as I headed for the lake.

I heard the door open behind me. “Cali!” It was Greyson. The absolute *last* person I wanted to see right now. I quickened my pace.

But I should have known there was no outrunning a werewolf. He stopped me with a hand on my shoulder before I’d even made it a few steps. I shook him off and tried to keep moving, but he stepped in front of me.

“Cali, we have to talk.”

“You’ve talked enough!” I snapped. “You sold out my sister.”

I brushed past him.

“*Stop*.”

Something firm and unyielding in his voice made my body freeze. A fresh wave of tears tracked down my cheeks.

“That’s not what I’m doing,” he said.

Slowly, I turned around to face him. “Then what *are* you doing?”

He gritted his teeth. “I’m doing what’s best for the pack, for everyone. And while I love you, you have to understand—”

“Oh, I understand. I understand all too well. What *you* don’t seem to understand is that Artemis is my only sister. A sister I’m only just beginning to know. I don’t want to lose her, and there are always consequences for witch spells.”

“Nobody said Artemis would be at risk—and even if there are risks, Artemis still agreed. She wants this too. Why can’t you accept that?”

Tears blurred my vision. “How can I? My only sister might be possessed by the Orb, my best friend is learning how to deal with being a vampire, the dead are walking, and I’m *still* being tormented by loving you and Xavier. I feel like I’m losing my mind already!” A sob wrenched its way out of my throat.

Greyson closed the space between us and pulled me into a tight hug. At first, I pushed back. But then I settled into the hug. We stood there for a while as I gradually calmed down. Then Greyson lifted my chin, forcing me to meet his eyes.

“What’s wrong, love?” he asked. “What aren’t you telling me?”

**Episode 1293**

LOLA

*Um, exsqueeze me?* I was taking a mentorship class—*alone*—with Professor Sexypants?

Why hadn’t anyone told me this? The humid air of the greenhouse classroom wrapped around me, leaving a clammy film on my skin, and I looked down at my schedule again. Two new bits of information suddenly became apparent.

1. During school hours, Emmett should apparently be addressed as Professor Laurence.
2. The class I had thought was called *Membership*, and which I had assumed focused on becoming part of the vampire community, was actually called *Mentorship*.

That last one was on me for misreading the schedule… Mostly.

But it was an honest mistake!

I looked up at Emmett, who was watching me with an expression I couldn’t quite figure out. Was he kind of annoyed? Or amused?

And did it matter how he felt? That woman Ras that I’d met had told me not to trust him…

Emmett walked around the desk and slowly approached me. That same (probably) friendly look was plastered onto his face. “I hope you’re not disappointed?”

My face felt hot, and I knew I probably looked like a tomato, but I couldn’t help it. Here I was, alone with Emmett in this gorgeous greenhouse that smelled so nice and felt so warm and intimate and did exactly *nothing* to quell the desire simmering in my belly.

*You have a* mate*, Lola!* I reminded myself for what felt like the millionth time. But the more I used that reminder to cool my lust for Emmett, the less effective it was. Somewhere in the back of my mind, there was a little voice answering, *So what?*

I mentally growled at the voice to mind its own business and then tried instead to focus on the super-sexy vampire standing in front of me and… What were we talking about again?

“Oh. No, it’s fine. You’re fine.” My blush deepened. “I mean, you’re great! I just misunderstood, I guess. What exactly are you supposed to be mentoring me in?”

His lips curved up into a full smile, and he leaned against the side of his desk, propping one hip against it and looking more like a sexy professor than ever. Really, it should be a crime to look that good and be a teacher—how were any of his students supposed to focus?

“Think of this mentorship as an opportunity to learn more about your new world and to become an expert on a particular facet of life as a vampire,” he said. “Typically, students who take this class propose their own independent study project, and I offer guidance and feedback. But since you’re completely new to all of this, I suggest we take some time to help you adjust to your new life here.” He brushed a stray lock of hair away from his face with his long, slender fingers. His eyes on me were playful, almost teasing, like he somehow knew how difficult it was for me to focus on what he was saying—and *why* it was difficult.

Humiliation mixed with that maddening sense of arousal, only rather than cooling it, somehow it turned me on even more. I had to be radiating enough heat to melt iron, but still Emmett was polite enough not to do anything but smile.

“The mentor program was created as a way for students to find themselves,” he continued. “To discover their interests. Sometimes new vampires are driven by their impulses…” His eyes gleamed. “I believe it will be utterly fascinating to help you discover what those impulses are.”

I was feeling an impulse all right—an impulse to kiss him, and probably a hell of a lot more.

But I couldn’t. It would be wrong to shove Emmett against this desk and pour every ounce of pent-up frustration into the kiss. I needed to push it away…

Except, wasn’t that exactly what an impulse was? A thing you knew you shouldn’t do, but that you couldn’t really stop?

“Right now, for instance,” Emmett said, pulling me out of the horny merry-go-round of my thoughts. “If you could do anything right now, what would it be?”

His eyes were still playful, but darkening with something not so innocent. His lips had never looked so inviting, and all I wanted to do was bury my fingers in his hair and kiss him to within an inch of his unnatural life.

My mouth went dry, and when I spoke, my voice was so low I almost didn’t recognize it. “Are you telling me to give in to my impulses?”

He took a step closer, so that only a few inches separated us. “Yes.”

In a blur of movement, I closed the distance between us and grabbed Emmett by the collar of his pressed shirt, pulling him down to meet my lips. His lips were as soft as I’d imagined, and I moaned against his mouth as I deepened the kiss.

*Going with impulses might be ill-advised, and maybe even a dangerous, but who cares?* This was everything I’d wanted since the moment I’d laid eyes on Emmett, and judging from the way he kissed me back, he wanted it too.

His lips trailed down my throat, nipping and sucking as he went, and then his hands tightened on my hips and he spun me around and lifted me to sit on the edge of his desk. I let out a yelp of surprise that quickly turned into a moan when he pressed himself between my legs. Only a few layers of clothing separated us.

Fuck, yes.

A new impulse drove me forward. Kissing Emmett was perfect and wonderful, but it wasn’t enough. Now, I needed him inside me, fucking me on the same desk where he probably graded papers, and making me scream his name.

His clever fingers skimmed up my legs and brushed against my very wet panties. The sound of approval he made against my mouth almost made me come all on its own. He broke away from my lips.

“Panties off,” he ordered.

I practically ripped them off in my haste. The sound of his belt buckle sliding open was music to my ears. Then he was hooking his arms beneath my bent knees and pressing forward and—

Oh, Christ on a cracker, he was inside me, filling me to the brim with his thick cock, fucking me hard and fast, like he needed me just as much as I needed him, like we were two creatures ruled by our impulses—

“Lola.” Emmett’s voice was stern, and it lacked the sexy, breathless quality it had possessed seconds earlier.

I blinked. Emmett was still standing next to his desk, a foot or so away from me. He wasn’t touching me, and he certainly wasn’t fucking me. Horror spilled into my stomach.

Oh my god. *Did I just have a sex fantasy about someone other than Jay?*

“Are you even listening to me?” he pressed.

I nodded quickly. I didn’t trust my voice.

He watched me with raised eyebrows, like he couldn’t decide whether or not to believe me, whether or not to press the issue. Finally, he sighed. “I do hope you’ll take your mentorship seriously. It can be a very rewarding experience.”

“Y-Yep!” I stammered, forcing a bright smile onto my face. “I will. I mean, I do!” *Pull yourself together!* “I mean, I’m excited to get started. To learn more about the vampire world.”

He nodded. “All right then. Why don’t you take a seat, and we’ll begin.”

I grabbed the first seat in the first row and pulled out my notebook. Emmett sat down behind the desk and launched into a more detailed explanation of the class, including how often we’d be meeting, the parameters of the independent study project, and even the ways he was considering altering the format to better suit my “unique needs.”

I did my best to pay attention. Really, I did. I copied down everything he said and responded to the questions that weren’t rhetorical. But all of that felt more like an autopilot setting than anything else.

What my mind *really* wrestled with was my sexy daydream, and the guilt that was quickly eating away at every ounce of pent-up lust in my body. Had I betrayed Jay by fantasizing about being with another man?

Ras’s warning still echoed in my head. What was I doing fantasizing about someone I shouldn’t trust?

When the bell finally sounded, I couldn’t get out of there fast enough. I threw a goodbye at Emmett over my shoulder and darted out of the room and into the hallway. I looked down at my schedule. I had another class to get to, but first I needed to talk to Jay. Did I have enough time to call him before my class in ten minutes? Did it even matter if I had time when I needed to hear his voice so badly?

I walked down the hallway and turned the corner, thinking I could at least head in the direction of my next class and then maybe sneak away for a quick phone call—and then I collided with Ras. She was the exact person I needed to speak with.

She brushed herself off. “You look like you’re in a hurry.”

I bit my lip. “What did you mean when you said that I can’t trust Professor Laurence?”

**Episode 1294**

GREYSON

I could see it written in Cali’s eyes, just as plainly as if a giant sign were flashing at me. Something was wrong. Something was bothering her, and for reasons I didn’t fully understand, she was keeping the truth close to her chest.

“Cali, please,” I said, trying again. “What’s going on?”

Her gaze fell to her feet. She crossed her arms over her chest, her shoulders hunched forward, but she didn’t answer. I gently wrapped my hands around her wrists.

“Why do you think you’re losing your mind?” I pressed. If she were anyone else, I’d have been berating her into submission, into telling me the truth. But she wasn’t just anyone. She was Cali. My love. My mate. And I would be gentle for her. Always.

When she still didn’t respond, I tried another approach. “I can only imagine how difficult all of this must be for you. People rising from the dead, Lola gone, Artemis…” I stopped myself. I didn’t want to backslide into another argument. “All I’m saying is, it’s no wonder you’re feeling out of sorts—”

She jerked back with a scowl. “No, you don’t understand, Greyson.”

She was still fighting me, still burning bright with anger. I kept my expression neutral, my tone soothing in the way I knew she loved. “Why don’t you explain it to me, then? I’m here to listen.”

Her lips tightened, and then she blew out a long breath. “I spoke to Cassandra.”

“Who?” I blinked. As far as I knew—and it was my job to know these things—there were no Cassandras around here.

“Cassandra from the *due destini* story. *The* Cassandra.” Her gaze flicked down to the ground again. “Believe me, I know how it sounds…”

*It sounds like she really is losing her mind.*

But, no. That wasn’t happening here. She was just stressed, right? Or maybe she’d just had a strange dream that had felt real? I’d certainly experienced my share of those lately.

“Cassandra spoke to me through Marta during a séance,” she explained.

My eyes widened. “What? When?” Another variable flashed through my mind, and my eyes narrowed. “And why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want to worry you.” She sighed. “There’s so much going on right now—even beyond Artemis and the Orb and the zombie things…”

“Like what?”

“Like you maybe having a son, for starters. Like your ex-girlfriend hanging around. All those vampires that just won’t leave us alone. And… me trying to end things with you.” She looked away. “Besides, the message was for me. It wasn’t for the pack, so I didn’t think it concerned you.”

I reached for her again, but she stepped out of reach at the last second. I huffed in frustration. “Love, if it affects you, it concerns me. Don’t ever think otherwise.” I rubbed the back of my neck. “So, what did Cassandra say?”

There was a long pause. “She said that if I don’t choose between you and Xavier, I’ll lose my mind. Like, become certifiably crazy.”

My eyes widened, and it felt like the breath had been wrenched from my lungs. “What?” The new terms of the curse were pretty fucked up, but I’d at least taken comfort in the idea that Cali was safe, no matter what else happened.

Except apparently, I’d been wrong about that.

“Did Cassandra say when?” I asked, panic crawling up my spine. “How long do you have to decide?”

She shook her head, and a few rogue tears escaped, cascading their way down her cheeks. “I don’t know. Cassandra didn’t say.” She looked at me, and the fear in her eyes cracked my heart in two. “What if it’s already happening?”

I pulled her into my arms and kissed her forehead. “You’re not losing your mind, love.” Her arms wrapped around my back, and she hugged me tightly. I wanted nothing more than to kiss away those tears on her cheeks. And then kiss those gorgeous lips and drink her in. Lose myself in her taste, in the sweet sounds I could pull from her body…

Instead, I drew back just far enough to meet her red-rimmed eyes. “Let me worry about everything, okay?”

I still believed that we would have our time, Cali and me. When all of this was said and done, we’d be together. In every way. But now was not that time.

She gave me a sad little smile. “You can’t promise that I won’t lose my mind.”

I knew that, and it scared the shit out of me. What if Cassandra was right? What if Cali did eventually lose her mind?

“If I go crazy, will you still love me?” she asked. “Will I even know who you are?”

Horror froze me in place. What if Cali forgets me? Forgets who she is and everything that makes her, her?

The thought sent chills down my spine. Never in my life had a possibility terrified me more. I would face down my father a thousand times before accepting a world in which my beautiful, kind, courageous mate lost everything that made her who she was. I couldn’t even think about it without wanting to vomit.

No, I couldn’t let this happen.

I glanced out over the lake. I had a deadline of my own approaching—the one the witches had warned me about. They’d told me I’d lose the chance to change my fate if I didn’t take them up on their offer soon. They’d made it clear.

The thought had always been tempting, and with this new horror hanging over us, it was even more so. What would it be like to live without the *due destini* curse? To simply *be* with my mate, the way we were always meant to? To not constantly be two wrong steps away from death, or worse? To not be at war with my own brother?

God, I wanted all of that so badly it hurt. But it seemed too good to be true. Too good for me.

Was it worth the risk, though? If it meant saving Cali from going mad?

A dull pain throbbed behind my eyes. I couldn’t be rash right now. Not with everything else that was going on. I needed some time to think this over.

I forced a smile. “We should go back inside. I know it might seem impossible, but try not to worry about Cassandra right now, okay? We’ll figure it out. I promise.”

Her smile looked just as pained as mine felt. “Okay.”

We headed back to the pack house in silence. I wanted to reach for her, to hold her hand, but I knew that would probably just make things worse. What better reminder was there of the impossible choice she had to make than having one of her mates constantly pushing to be with her?

As much as I wanted to be the one she chose, I didn’t want to put her in that position.

Just being with her, walking next to her in silence, was comforting in its own way. If I didn’t have those things, I wouldn’t know what I’d do.

We walked into the house just in time to see Big Mac making her way toward the front door, followed by Artemis, Orla, Rishika, and my mother.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Big Mac is going to do the spell,” my mother responded.

I felt Cali stiffen, and she looked up at me. “I’m going with her. She’s not going to face this alone.”

That seemed like a reasonable compromise, though considering Cali’s tone and the dirty look she threw at Big Mac, it was clear she wasn’t asking permission.

Before anyone could take another step, the basement door opened and Arlo appeared at the top of the stairs.

I tensed, watching him for signs of aggression. *What the hell is he doing up here?*

But he looked… normal. For a dead guy, at least. Then Violet and Marta appeared behind him. Neither one of them seemed alarmed.

“Don’t worry,” Arlo said. “It’s me, Lilac, again.”

Oh. The kid’s ghost was back inside Arlo’s meat suit. It was fucking weird, but okay.

Jay popped his head in from the living room. “What’s going on?”

Violet stepped in front of Arlo. “I want to talk to Big Mac.”

“About what—” I began, then stopped as Arlo began to walk away.

“Lilac?” Violet asked. “Where are you going?”

Arlo—or Lilac—didn’t respond. He just kept moving toward the door.

*Where is he going?*

But instead of opening the door and walking out of the house, Arlo stopped right in front of Artemis.

Violet peered around me. “Lilac, what’s wrong?”

Arlo began to visibly tremble, and a blast of frigid air blew the door open. Something—I wasn’t even sure if I saw it, or just felt it—emerged from Arlo’s body. What was going on?

“Lilac!” Violet screamed. “Come back!”

Arlo stumbled to the side and righted himself. Then he looked up at us, his eyes glowing orange.

**Episode 1295**

Arlo’s bright orange eyes landed on me, and my body went rigid. Replacing the blue of Lilac’s eyes, Arlo’s gaze looked like something straight out of a horror movie. *Oh my god! What’s happening?!*

We were all sort of crammed together in the foyer—me, Arlo, Greyson, Big Mac, Mrs. Smith, my mom, Artemis, Jay, and Violet—but we all stood still, sort of staring at Arlo in various stages of shock. Nobody seemed to know what to do.

“Lilac!” Violet kept calling. “Come back! Get back in the body!”

There was a time when that sentence would have been the strangest thing I’d ever heard. Sadly, that was no longer the case.

“God dammit,” Big Mac cursed. “This is why you leave the undead vessel in the basement and don’t take it out for a field trip!”

“How was I supposed to know this would happen?” Violet asked. “Lilac was in there. He was just fine until we came upstairs!”

I didn’t know whether to laugh, cry, or run screaming from the creepy zombie-fied Arlo, who was still in a staring match with Artemis.

*Wait, is it happening? Has the madness begun? Is any of this even real?*

I pinched myself, hard, and grimaced. It sure felt real.

Not a totally comforting thought, either.

My sister had frozen like the rest of us when Arlo had approached her, but now she was in motion, probably snapping out of the shock of seeing a zombie try to challenge her to a staring contest. Instead of backing away, though, she raised a hand in front of her.

*Is she trying to reach for his hand?*

I jumped between them and smacked Arlo’s outstretched hand away. My sister was still weak, still healing—I wasn’t going to let her get hurt, trying to face Arlo alone.

But Artemis didn’t even seem to notice I was there. She was staring beyond me, at Arlo.

I recognized that look. I’d seen it back when Greyson and I had spotted her in the woods after the zombie attack. She’d had that same faraway, emotionless, unsettling look. It had creeped me out then, and it was sure as hell creeping me out now.

*Should I slap her to try to snap her out of… whatever this is?*

Footsteps sounded in the hallway, and into the crowded foyer walked a still-pale Xavier and his tagalong witch, Kira.

Xavier scanned the group with frown, and then his eyes settled on Arlo and he froze. “What’s going on here?”

I wished I knew. I wished *any* of us knew.

Arlo was the one to break the silence. “It’s so good to see you all again.”

A collective gasp ripped through the group. It sounded just like Arlo’s voice. Was he… Was Arlo’s spirit back inside his body?

Greyson gently put his hands on my shoulders and tugged me away from Arlo. Then he stepped protectively in front of me

“Arlo? Is that you?” Greyson asked.

Arlo turned to him with those vivid orange eyes. “No. He’s not here right now.”

Goosebumps rose on my skin. Then who the hell was in Arlo’s body?

“Who are you?” Greyson demanded.

Arlo’s head cocked to the side. “I’m what you’ll become.”

And then Arlo launched himself at Greyson, his hands reaching for Greyson’s throat.

Greyson was fast, faster than me, so he caught Arlo’s hands and tried to push them away, but the undead werewolf wasn’t giving up. He kept attacking, kept grappling with Greyson, alternately trying to throttle, claw, or bite at him. It was all Greyson could do to keep Arlo’s teeth from sinking into his skin and to keep those hands from wrapping tight around his throat.

Artemis was the closest to Greyson, but she still stood there, frozen. Mrs. Smith tried to pull Arlo off, but he knocked her down with one powerful shove. He did the same thing to Jay and Big Mac. I raised my hands, thinking maybe I could use my Fae magic to knock Arlo away, but I didn’t want to risk hitting Greyson.

“Someone stop him!” Mrs. Smith cried.

“Lilac, come back and kick him out!” Violet called from her place on the edge of the group.

Finally, it was Xavier who managed to elbow his way through the group. He was every bit as fast as Greyson, and he managed to grab Arlo around the waist and pry him off his brother. Of course, Arlo immediately went on the attack again, so the best Xavier could do was try to pin him to the foyer floor while the undead creature snarled and snapped and tried to escape.

“A little help here?” Xavier grunted. His hold was weakening—Arlo wouldn’t be pinned down for much longer.

*Xavier must not be fully recovered from his ordeal. Should he even be fighting right now?*

Arlo’s thrashing arm bumped into Artemis’s leg, but she still didn’t move. Couldn’t she feel it, or was she completely insensible right now? Unable to hear or see or feel?

*What is going on with my sister?*

“What do we do?” Greyson demanded, looking to Big Mac for guidance. “Do we kill him?”

Big Mac shook her head. “He’s already dead!”

Jay joined Xavier on the floor, helping to pin down the struggling, hissing Arlo. “Does he *look* dead to you?”

*What are we supposed to do? I wish I could do something to stop this!*

Kira, who had been hovering on the fringes of the group, stepped forward until she was standing in front of Arlo. She waved her hand and muttered something under her breath in a language I didn’t recognize.

Arlo let out a horrifying, guttural scream that sent chills down my spine. Kira pulled out a dagger, seemingly from absolutely nowhere, and, edging in between Jay and Xavier, plunged the blade into the middle of Arlo’s chest.

His body went still, and the orange light in his eyes flickered and went dark.

My jaw dropped. “Oh my god. Did you really kill him?”

Shock rippled through the group, and Kira looked up at us with a frown. “What? You were all too afraid to do what needed to be done.”

Greyson shook his head. “Arlo was a member of the pack.”

Kira pulled out the knife, wiped the almost-black blood off on her shirt, and then slid the dagger back into a sheath at the small of her back. “That wasn’t Arlo.” She eyed the scratches on Greyson’s neck. “And you’re welcome.”

“Then who was he?” I asked.

The witch glared at me. “You must be the mate.”

I blinked, acutely aware that both Greyson and Xavier were watching me, probably waiting to see what my response would be. *What does me being their mate have to do with anything?*

“I asked you a question,” I pressed. “If that wasn’t Arlo, then who—or what—was it?”

Kira shook her head. “Not something any of you want to mess with. It was a revenant.”

A what?

I looked around the group. *Am I the only one who doesn’t know what that means?*

“What the hell does that mean?” Rishika asked.

Kira rolled her eyes. “Do they teach you werewolves *anything*?”

The blank stares she got from the rest of the group seemed to answer that question pretty darn quick. She let out a deep, long-suffering sigh, muttered something that sounded very much like “idiots,” and then explained. “A revenant is a dark entity from the spirit world that exists to create chaos.”

“And these revenants,” Big Mac continued, clearly the quickest study in the group, “they’ll find a body to occupy? So when Arlo went unconscious, it probably fought him for control, and Arlo lost.”

Kira pretended to clap. “Bravo. You must be the brains of this filthy dog commune.”

Big Mac’s eyes narrowed, but I was still stuck on the whole “dark entity from the spirit world just waiting to swoop in and use you like a puppet” thing. I shivered.

“So, again, you’re welcome.” Kira looked down at Arlo’s corpse with disdain. “I suggest we burn the body.”

Big Mac nodded. “The sooner, the better.”

I looked over at Greyson and Xavier. They were wearing matching “what the fuck?” expressions, but they nodded all the same. It didn’t seem like anybody wanted to take the chance of another revenant sneaking into Arlo’s body.

Jay and Rishika carried the body outside, and the rest of the group followed. I grabbed Artemis’s hand and led her into the front yard. She was still quiet, but she seemed to slowly be coming back to herself. Maybe the whole thing with Arlo had been so frightening that she’d just kind of checked out?

I hoped there was a good reason for her trance, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that something dark was happening to my sister. To say nothing of what Kira had just told us.

Revenants? Really? Now we had ghostly body snatchers on top of everything else? I looked across the yard. Was that what all the other undead zombie things were, too? Empty vessels possessed by dark spirits?

I hated to even think it, but I missed the time when vampires had been our worst problem.

I watched, dread in the pit of my stomach, as Rishika, Greyson, Xavier, and Jay built a fire and placed Arlo’s body on it. Soon, the stomach-churning scent of burning flesh filled the air. I grimaced.

*What a horrible end.*

There was a movement along the tree line. Someone was approaching.

The whole group went on high alert as a young human man staggered toward us. I recognized him—I’d seen him when I’d met Artemis in the graveyard.

He stood in front of our group, his body listing this way and that before he collapsed. “I need your help.”

**Episode 1296**

LOLA

Ras looked at me like I’d gone crazy.

Maybe I had. That little mental porno I played out back in my mentorship class was not regular behavior for me.

It had been a pretty wild few months, to be fair. My life had been turned upside down time and time again, culminating in me turning into the creature I had once considered a mortal enemy. And now I’d been shipped off to live among the vampires, to learn to be one of them. So, yeah, it was a lot. I was probably losing it a bit.

But that still didn’t explain why Ras had warned me about Emmett. What was going on there? Did I have reason to fear him? Should I ask for another mentorship professor? Maybe one I found slightly more repulsive?

“You told me I couldn’t trust Professor Laurence,” I repeated. “Why not? What did he do? I need to know.”

Ras frowned and then sighed. “We were in a relationship once. And it ended pretty badly.”

I waited for her to elaborate. She didn’t. Seriously? She’d warned me about him—and freaked me out in the process—all because of some lovers spat? There had to be more to this story.

“Why did it end badly?” I pressed. “What did he do?”

“Why do you want to know?” Her voice took on a sharp edge, and she crossed her arms over her chest, stepping back a bit to put some space between us.

“Because *you’re* the one who warned me not to trust him, and I just found out he’s my mentorship professor, and since I’m new here and quickly turning into public enemy number one, I’d like to know how wary I should be.”

Her eyes flashed with a bit of surprise—maybe even a little concern. “He’s your mentorship professor?”

“Yeah. So what happened between you two?”

Ras looked like she wanted to be anywhere else. “We have… a history.”

“I gathered that when you told me you two dated.”

She threw me a dirty look, and I held up my hands. Then she nodded. “It was something like that.”

Oh my god. Why in the world had I trusted the word of someone who was refusing to tell me the truth about anything that had happened? For all I knew, she was just a spurned ex-lover who had it out for Emmett.

Maybe I’d listened to the wrong person. Maybe Emmett wasn’t the one who couldn’t be trusted. After all, how much did I know about Ras? She was practically still a stranger. I’d only met her today for goodness sake.

“Why can’t you just tell me what happened?” I asked. She was being way too evasive for my liking.

“I’d rather not go into all the sordid details of my personal life right now. I just need you to trust me, okay? He’s bad news.”

I groaned. “But you told me not to trust *him*. And now you’re telling me that I don’t need to know why, and that I should just take you at your word? What am I supposed to do with that?”

Her eyebrows rose. “For starters, I’d suggest you not date any of your professors. It’s generally not a great look for anyone.”

“What? No. Gross. That’s… *Ew*,” I spluttered, wishing I sounded a bit more believable. I took a deep breath. “I’m not dating him. He’s undead. Plus I already have a mate. Jay is my mate, and I love him, and we’re meant to be together forever. And as soon as I learn everything I came here to learn, we’ll be together again.”

“Uh huh.” The look Ras gave me seemed an awful lot like pity. “I didn’t mean to alarm you, I’d just be careful around Emmett. He can be very persuasive.” She looked down at her books. “I have to go. Just trust me, okay? The more distance you put between Emmett and yourself, the better off you’ll be.”

She brushed past me, and I checked the time. “God dammit!” I’d have to run to make it to my next class. But what about calling Jay? Hearing his voice? I missed him now more than ever. Screw it, class could wait. I needed to talk to Jay.

I ducked into the nearest empty classroom and immediately let out a squeak of horror. There were shelves lining every inch of the walls, and on those shelves were countless animal skeletons. Some were tiny mice, and others were the huge skeletons of apex predators.

Why were vampires so weird?

More and more, I wondered if I’d been hoodwinked by the bright, beautiful first impression the house had made when Cali, Jay, and I arrived here. Looking back, that all seemed like a gorgeous facade designed to hide a school that was just as creepy as I imagined.

I turned away from all the animal bones and faced the door as I dialed Jay. Yeah, I’d be late to class, but so what? I could always use the “I’m new here” excuse if I got into trouble.

“Lola?” Jay’s voice slid down the line, and I felt my body relax for the first time in far too long. “What’s going on?”

I sighed. I loved hearing his voice. “I miss you.”

“I miss you too.” He sounded confused, and maybe a little distracted. “But maybe we can talk a little later?”

I frowned. Did he really not want to talk to me? Was it because of the whole texting thing earlier? “Are you still mad at me?” I blurted out.

“What? No, why would I be mad, baby? There’s just a lot going on here right now.”

“Oh.” I was relieved that he wasn’t angry with me, but it hit me like a punch in the stomach that he didn’t want to talk right now. He was my mate. My lifeline. How could I face all of this without his support? “What’s going on there?”

“These dead people keep coming back to life and trying to murder us—revenants, I think they’re called. Arlo became one of them. And Artemis might have something to do with it all, but we’re still figuring that out. Oh, and now there’s this dude on the lawn who we have to deal with—”

What the what? Maybe this was a sign I needed to go home. “Maybe I should come back.”

“No, you need to deal with your situation—learn how to adjust to this new life, and then you can come home. Until you can get your bloodlust under control, there’s nothing you can do here right now. You’re safer staying put.”

I bit my lip, thinking of my *very* detailed daydream. “Um, not necessarily.”

“What do you mean? Is something wrong?”

*Try everything.*

But Jay already had plenty on his plate, from the sound of it. He didn’t need to be stuck babysitting me on top of everything else, and I didn’t want to worry him while I was still so far away. “I got kicked out of my first class.”

He sighed. “*Lola*—”

“It wasn’t my fault! My teacher is such a hardass. Can you believe she doesn’t allow phones in the classroom? What is this, the eighteenth century?”

“They didn’t have phones back then.”

“I know that,” I snapped. And then I took a deep breath, trying to calm the frustration raging inside me. This phone call wasn’t going at all the way I’d hoped. “But you still miss me, don’t you? I really miss you.”

“Are you sure you’re okay? You’re acting a little… clingy?”

“*Clingy?* Just because I miss you doesn’t mean I’m clingy! Excuse me for having feelings!”

“Sorry, you’re right.” He sighed again. “I love you, Lolapop. And I do miss you. So fucking much. But remember, you and I have a bond that distance can never break. It’ll be okay.”

Tears burned my eyes. “Do you promise?”

“I promise, baby. I’ll call you later, okay?”

“Okay.”

I ended the call, feeling only marginally better than before. But I didn’t have time to wallow. I was already super late for my next class.

I tucked my phone into my pocket and started running. If there was one bit of comfort I could take, it was that nothing had changed between me and Jay. He was still there, still steady. He still loved me. Emmett might have been haunting my dreams, but Jay was real. And he was right. Our mate bond was unbreakable, and there was nothing to worry about.

I hustled up what seemed like an unending staircase, with hallways jutting off on either side. Which one led to my classroom? I took the third hallway on the left and stopped in front of a closed door. Was this my classroom? Or… I looked down the hallway and saw another closed door. Or was it that one?

I turned around, looking down at my schedule, but then a pair of strong hands grabbed me from behind and pulled me into one of the empty classrooms.

**Episode 1297**

ARTEMIS

I hated the scent of burning flesh.

Today wasn’t the first time I’d experienced it—the Kollector had killed several of his “possessions” in truly awful ways—but I’d never gotten used to that fatty, rotten, charred smell.

And now it filled the air around all of us, no doubt settling into our hair and clothes as we hovered around the young man who’d collapsed.

The young man I knew from… somewhere. I just wasn’t sure where, exactly.

Next to me, Cali’s eyes nearly bugged out of her head, and she gently toed the guy’s body. There was no response. “Is he… dead?”

On the other side of her, Greyson sighed. “God, I hope not. One dead guy is enough for a while.”

I stared at the guy, trying to recall where I knew him from. My mind was hazy, and every thought felt like it was slogging through mud in a foggy pit. I barely even remembered what had just happened in the house. The last truly sharp and present memory I had was of heading down the stairs with Big Mac, Rishika, and my mother. We were going outside so Big Mac could cast the spell on me. And then we’d run into Cali and Greyson…

And then Violet, Marta, and Arlo had come up from the basement?

After that, my mind was blank. Like it had been wiped clean.

When I’d fumbled my way back to the present, it had been to the sight of Xavier’s witch wiping a bloodied knife on her shirt. Context clues had told me she’d just stabbed Arlo, and from the state of Greyson and Xavier, I’d assume they’d been fighting him.

Things hadn’t truly come together until the witch had told us about revenants and we’d all gone outside. To burn Arlo’s body so that something else didn’t take up residence inside it. And then the young man had staggered over.

He was unconscious still, though his face was drawn, almost like he was in pain.

He reminded me of someone… But who?

He didn’t look like anyone I remembered from the Fae world, and my encounters with humans were few and far between enough that I would have remembered him. Still, I was sure I knew him somehow.

I knelt down next to him to get a closer look, aware of the group’s eyes on me. The young man’s eyelids fluttered, and he let out a ragged gasp. Then his eyes shot open and scanned the group of supernaturals clustered around him. He looked absolutely terrified.

“W-What?” he stammered. “What am I doing here?”

Greyson frowned. “You don’t remember?”

He shook his head, as if doing so would loosen the truth from some gummed-up place in his mind. I knew the feeling. “I have no idea,” he finally said.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” Big Mac asked.

He shook his head again, more slowly this time. “I don’t… *have* any memories?” It sounded like a question, and he looked at the group for confirmation, even though they didn’t know anything more than he did.

God, the resemblance to… *someone* was uncanny. Who was this guy? And why did I feel like I knew him?

Suddenly, he jolted upright. “I was at the drive-in!” He blinked rapidly, his breath coming in short bursts. “I remember. It was a double feature—I can’t remember the titles.”

“And then?” Greyson asked.

The guy shrugged. “Not a lot. I… I remember walking through the woods? But that’s it.”

Mrs. Smith gave him a gentle smile. “Do you know your name, young man?”

His brow furrowed, and then his eyes widened again. “York. My name is York.”

His name was like a lightning bolt to my senses. Suddenly, I was immersed in a memory so vivid that at first, I couldn’t tell whether it was happening in real time.

My hands were wrapped tight around York’s neck. He was egging me on, telling me to kill him.

And then there was blood. Lots of blood.

And York was dead.

My heart stopped, and dread filled the space between breaths.

*I killed him*.

But *why*? Why would I do that?

The memory played on in those horrifying fragments, and I got the oddest sense that I was watching things play out from outside my body. Blood spilled onto the ground, staining the dirt. The hands that wrapped tight around York’s neck were mine, and yet *not*. The strength that locked my fingers in place, left deep divots in York’s flesh—it wasn’t my strength. And as I watched the life slip out of him, I knew it wasn’t my own will that had made me keep going.

But if it wasn’t me, then who? And could it even *be* someone else when I knew, deep in my bones, that my hands had been the ones to end this boy’s life—regardless of the power that fueled them?

And if I *had* killed him, then how was it possible for him to be here, in front of us, alive?

Another horrifying thought sent ice through my bones. *Did I kill him and bring him back?*

“Okay, York.” Mrs. Smith offered her hand. “Why don’t you come inside? You’re clearly hurt, and it’s getting awfully cold out here—”

“Uh, no,” Greyson snapped. “We are not letting some random kid into the pack house.”

“We can’t just leave him out here, Greyson,” Mrs. Smith argued. “We can at least bring him inside and let Torin heal him. Maybe once he’s in better shape, he’ll be able to remember what brought him here.”

Her son shook his head. “Or maybe once he’s inside the pack house he’ll decide to murder us all.”

Cali jumped into the fray, ever the defender of those down on their luck. “Greyson, be reasonable. Do you really think one human guy can take on a house full of werewolves, Fae, and witches?”

Kira held her hands up. “Hey, don’t loop me in on your problems. That was a one-time favor.” She gave Greyson a pointed look. “Which, as far as I’m concerned, you now owe me for.”

Xavier and the rest of the group immediately jumped in, and it became a three-way argument in the space of four seconds.

York turned to me, his eyes gleaming. “I’m ready to serve you, mistress.”

*Uh, what now?* I shook my head, thankful that everyone else was too busy bickering to overhear. “I am not your mistress.”

He reached for me. “Of course you are. Don’t you remember?”

I gently smacked his hand away, not wanting to actually hurt him. “Whatever you think I am,” I whispered, “think again. I am *not* your mistress.”

Cali broke away from the group and came over.

I stood and put a few feet of distance between York and myself.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

*Probably not.* I nodded. “Mm hm.”

She lowered her voice. “Mrs. Smith convinced Greyson to bring York inside, but now I’m not sure that’s such a good idea.” She looked back at York, who was still watching me with something embarrassingly close to worship, and then turned to me. “You know him, don’t you?”

Panic spilled into my stomach. “What makes you think that?”

Cali gently took my arm and pulled me farther away from York and the rest of the group. “Because I saw him with you in the cemetery.”

Another memory flashed through my mind—standing in a cemetery, my hands raised, watching in horror as the dead rose from the ground. Because I made them do it.

I lowered my voice. “Please don’t tell anyone.”

Kira’s voice interrupted us. “Why don’t we just kill him?” She came to a halt in front of York, and her dagger was out again.

York scrambled back, his eyes wide. “*W-W-What?*”

Greyson grabbed Kira’s arm and pulled her away from the terrified human. “Put. That. Away. This is my pack. And in my pack, we don’t just murder people whenever we feel like it. So back off.”

Kira rolled her eyes. “When this all goes sideways, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Xavier,” Greyson snapped, his eyes practically glowing with fury. “You wanna take your friend somewhere else?”

Xavier crossed his arms over his chest. “She might have a point.”

“Do I get a say?” York called, still cowering. “Because I’d really prefer not to be murdered today.”

“Jesus Christ.” Greyson rubbed his face and turned to Mrs. Smith. “Sabine, you and Jay bring this guy inside. Tend to him, but don’t let him out of your sight.”

York looked back at me as he was escorted into the house. I couldn’t shake the dread settling into my bones. Whatever he was here for, it couldn’t be good.

Cali gently touched my arm, and I jumped.

“Hey, it’s just me.” She forced a smile. “Artemis, what’s going on? Are you okay?”

I tried to form the words to tell her I was fine—a lie, but I didn’t see an alternative. But then Big Mac stalked over and saved me the trouble.

“Enough chit-chat. I have to do the spell now, before things get worse around here.”

Cali sighed. “Okay. Do you need anything for the spell?”

“I need you to get out of my way,” the witch growled. She shouldered past Cali and stopped in front of me, pulling out a small vial. She dabbed what looked like a green-tinged oil onto her fingers and began to draw shapes and symbols on my forehead.

“What are you doing?” I asked nervously. “What is that?” It smelled like… sage?

“I’m anointing you. Now be quiet.”

My heart banged against my ribs like a caged animal. I knew I had to do this, but fear locked me in place, and worst-case scenarios flitted through my mind.

What if all of this worked? What would we find out? Did I have dark magic in me? I took a deep breath. I had to stay rational. I had to do this not only for the pack, but for myself.

But what if this spell only confirmed the thing nagging in the back of my mind? The thought that I couldn’t seem to shake no matter how hard I tried? No matter how many times I told myself I had to be wrong?

*What if I* was *the Orb?*

“Let us begin.”

**Episode 1298**

LOLA

I felt multiple sets of hands on me—on my arms, holding them behind my back, and over my mouth so I couldn’t make a sound. I struggled against their grasp, trying to break away, but their grip was too firm. They dragged me back into a dark room, and once I passed over the threshold, someone shut the door, plunging us into complete darkness. I tried to kick out at anything, anyone, but I couldn’t make anything out.

What the hell was going on?

I desperately wished I hadn’t lost my wolf. If I’d had it now, I would have shifted and ripped my kidnappers apart. Without my wolf, the best I could do was try to bite the hand clamped over my mouth.

Which was exactly what I tried to do.

The hand was pulled back as saliva dripped down my chin. A girl’s voice rang out through the room. “Gross!” She sounded highly annoyed. “She spat on me!”

Someone shoved me into a chair and quickly tied my wrists to the back. I jerked, but it was no use. Whatever they’d used was tight. It dug deeper into my skin as I struggled against it.

I looked up. My eyes had slowly adjusted to the darkness of the room. I could just make out the outlines of three girls.

There was a click, and the beam of a flashlight was aimed directly into my face. I squinted, trying to make out the girls’ faces, but I couldn’t see anything. I felt the urge to kick the flashlight out of its wielder’s hand, but I restrained myself. I needed to be cautious. Taking on humans was one thing, but a trio of vampires was a completely different story.

“What do you want?” I demanded.

The girl holding the flashlight spoke first. “Hey,” she snapped. “We ask the questions, not the other way around. Got it?”

They didn’t give me a chance to respond.

“You think you’re so special, don’t you?” said one of the other girls.

“You’re a freak,” the third added.

As I listened to them insult me, I realized I recognized one of the voices. It was Jacqueline. Great. “I warned you to stay out of my business,” she said. She stepped into the beam of light and glared down at me.

Seeing Jacqueline’s face sent a burst of anger through me. “I have no intention of getting into anything that involves you,” I snapped. “Get over yourself.”

The other girls gasped.

Jacqueline leaned in close. I could feel her breath on my cheek. “Nobody talks to me like that!”

I huffed in annoyance. “Well, there’s a first time for everything.” The girls gasped again, and I gave an exasperated sigh. There was absolutely no point to this. It was just a stupid prank meant to scare the new girl, but I wasn’t going to be easily scared off. I’d been in *battles*. It was going to take a lot more than some dry lip gloss and French manicures to get rid of me.

Besides, weren’t they too old for this? Literally?

“All I’ve done is go to class,” I said finally.

Jacqueline shook her head. “Let me make it clear, *freak*.” She leaned in even closer. “Stay away from Professor Laurence.”

Oh.

*Ohhhhhh*.

*That* was what was really bothering her? Huh. Seriously? I smirked. “You mean Emmett?”

All three girls hissed.

“Don’t you dare speak his name,” one of them said.

I was completely over their intimidation tactics. “I’ve had enough of this bullshit.” I tried to stand, but the chair was in the way. I still hadn’t managed to loosen the rope they’d used to bind my hands. “I went to high school already!” I took a step forward, but the chair banged into the back of my legs. I groaned, and one of the girls shoved me back down.

“You’re not going anywhere,” she said.

I rolled my eyes. At this point, I wasn’t scared, I was annoyed. “Can you just hurry up with all of this so I can leave?”

Jacqueline, who was still standing in the light, crossed her arms. “No. You need to be put in your place.”

What the hell was that supposed to mean? I was thinking it over when the door opened. The girls whirled around in shock. The overhead light switched on, and we all squinted in the sudden light.

Irma was standing in the doorway with her hands on her hips. “Ladies,” she said. “What is going on here?”

One of the girls had quickly shuffled behind the chair and untied my wrists as Irma spoke. I gingerly rubbed my raw wrists as I looked to my three captors to see which one would speak first. I knew they didn’t want me to tell Irma what was going on—I didn’t think the school would take too kindly to kidnapping.

Jacqueline stepped behind the chair and squeezed my shoulders. In a sickeningly sweet voice she said, “We’re just welcoming the new girl, Lola, aren’t we?”

The other two girls nodded. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes.

Irma shot Jacqueline a skeptical look. She gestured to the ceiling. “In the dark?” Jacqueline was slow to respond, so Irma turned to me. “Is this true?”

As much as I wanted to rat out Jacqueline and her cronies, I needed to play things safe. Telling Irma the truth would only make things worse for me. I didn’t want it to look like I needed a teacher’s help to get me out of trouble. If that got around to the rest of the school, I would never live it down. And Jacqueline would make my life a living hell.

I just nodded and smiled. “We’re having such a good time getting to know each other,” I said. “They were just helping me with my light sensitivity.”

Irma sighed. She stared at me, and I squirmed beneath her gaze. If I hadn’t known any better, I’d have thought she was some kind of vampire lie detector. It almost felt like she was peering into my thoughts to discern whether or not I was telling the truth. Seemingly satisfied with my answer, she nodded and turned to the other girls. “You should all be in your classes! Snap to it.”

The other girls grumbled and headed for the door. Jacqueline stopped in the doorway just behind Irma and gave me the vampire stink-eye, complete with a flash of her fangs.

This would not be the last I saw of Jacqueline. I was sure of that.

I stood, relieved to not be tied to the chair. I wasn’t exactly eager to follow them. They’d probably be waiting around a corner out of Irma’s sight, ready to assault me again. But I also just wanted to get out of that room.

I smiled at Irma and went to walk past her, but she touched my arm. “Not you,” she said. “Not so fast.”

Ugh. I hoped she didn’t think I was the ringleader of this whole enterprise.

“U-Um,” I stuttered, pointing at the door. “I’m already late for class.”

“I’m not stupid. I can tell what’s going on here.” My heart sank. I was about to get into trouble for something Jacqueline had done to me. Irma’s voice softened. “Those three were bullying you, weren’t they?”

If I came clean and Jacqueline was punished for it, she would never forgive me. “No, wait, that’s not what happened—”

Irma held up a hand. “I know you’re dealing with a lot right now,” she said. “I hope the girls aren’t making it worse.”

I let my shoulders slump. “I can handle it,” I mumbled as I tried to move past Irma.

She deftly slid in front of me, blocking my exit. “How about I escort you to class? Just to make sure there’s no more funny business.”

I inwardly groaned. I could only hope that no one would see me being walked to class like a teacher’s pet.

We headed into the hallway, and Irma looked me up and down. “You look a little pale,” she said. “You have to make a better effort to eat well. Your body is going through some changes.” That was an understatement. “I’ll arrange to get you more O-positive, more B12.”

“Thank you.” I could tell that Irma genuinely cared. Things had been stressful lately. Maybe there were benefits to being a teacher’s pet.

Irma glanced over at me. “It must be so hard to be away from your mate.”

I stopped and stared at her. “How did you know?”

She smiled. “I’ve been around a long time.”

I felt a pang in my chest as I thought about Jay. “I do miss my mate, Jay. A lot of vampires don’t seem to think our bond is valid, though,” I said hesitantly. I thought about what Emmett had told me before. Irma nodded, so I continued. “Do you think the mate bond could be broken because I’m a vampire?”

Irma shook her head. “Oh, I don’t know, dear. I only meant because of the vampire heat.”

My mouth fell open. “The what?”

She rubbed her arm and looked around a bit sheepishly. She lowered her voice. “Sometimes, not always, new vampires can feel a powerful lust. Very hard to control.” She held my gaze. “It can be very distracting.”

I was hit by a flash of my sexy daydream about Emmett.

“Sometimes they won’t stop until they fulfill the urge,” Irma added.

Wait, what did that mean?!

**Episode 1299**

ARTEMIS

The herbal ointment Big Mac had applied to my face tingled uncomfortably. My skin almost felt like it was burning. The smell was overwhelming. It smelled like sage, but heavier, with a metallic tang. It wasn’t pleasant, and I had to resist the urge to wipe it off.

Big Mac slowly circled me, her eyes never leaving mine. Her presence made me more nervous than before. It was clear that something was bothering her, that all the unknowns of the situation were getting to her. I was her sole focus—the answer to her questions.

Cali stood off to the side, biting her nails. “What are you doing?” she asked.

Big Mac rolled her eyes in obvious annoyance. “I’m looking for the point of least resistance,” she said. “We’re looking to see if there’s dark magic within her, or if she’s been in contact or under the influence of it recently. Dark magic such as the Orb.” She pointed a menacing finger at Cali. “Now shut up.”

I followed her with my eyes. I didn’t dare move a muscle. I didn’t want to run the risk of having her turn her anger on me or to have this spell go wrong.

Suddenly, Big Mac stopped right in front of me. She leaned in close and pointed to my chest, directly over my heart. “Here.” Without taking her eyes off my heart, she started to mumble in a language I didn’t recognize.

The burning sensation on my skin increased, and I began to feel both hot and cold, almost feverish. I tried to lift my hand to feel my forehead, but I couldn’t move. I was completely paralyzed, my heart racing.

Big Mac started circling me again, slowly raising her hands toward the sky as she chanted in that foreign language.

I felt lightheaded and woozy. I didn’t know how I was still on my feet as my legs trembled beneath me. All I wanted to do was lay my head on a soft pillow.

My skin felt like it was under attack by a thousand stinging insects. If I looked in the mirror, I imagined my entire face would be bright red and swollen. I wanted nothing more than to rip my skin off and douse my body in ice-cold water.

I shut my eyes as the world began to spin around me. I was slowly lifted off my feet—or was I? My body was floating, yet I could still feel the ground beneath my feet. My stomach churned violently as nausea took over.

Sounding like it was coming from far away, I heard Cali’s voice. “She doesn’t look so good.”

A whistling sound, like a screaming wind, filled my head. I couldn’t help but grimace as it grew louder, shoving every thought out of my brain. I finally found the strength to move my limbs. I slapped my hands over my ears, but that did little to block out the sound.

“Make it stop!” I screamed.

There was a flash of white behind my eyelids, and the shrieking stopped as quickly as it had begun. Silence descended over everything, sending a shiver up and down my spine. I didn’t hear voices or the chirp of crickets or the whistle of wind or any of the other sounds of nature. Was my sister still here?

And then I did hear something. Soft breaths, one after another. There was a slight hitch to them. Was that me? The silence had disoriented me so much that I couldn’t discern the sound of my own breathing.

I’d clamped my eyes shut when the pain had started. Now, I sucked in a deep breath. I could handle whatever I was about to see. I slowly cracked my eyelids and immediately stumbled back, barely catching myself. I was stunned by what I saw.

I was no longer on the pack house lawn. Instead, I was standing in a vast white space. No trees, no sky, nothing—just blank white space, as far as I could see. I couldn’t hear any voices because everyone else had disappeared. They were nowhere to be seen.

But I wasn’t alone.

A man stood with his back facing me. His head was down, like he was lost in thought. Without warning, he turned to face me, and I was struck. Before he even spoke, I knew who he was. There was no question in my mind.

*Kadmos*.

His eyes lit up when he met my gaze. Tears of joy ran down his face as we stared at each other. He stepped closer and held out his hand to me.

“My dear daughter.” His voice cracked with built-up emotion. “I have wanted to see you face to face for so long.”

I reached out to him, and he took my hand. His touch sent waves of comfort through me. I felt at ease for the first time in a long while. This was what I’d been searching for.

His eyes were soft. “I’m so proud of you,” he said softly. “I’ve watched you grow up.”

All I could do was stare at him. I was absolutely overcome with so many different emotions: contentment, amazement, joy… I could barely contain them all.

I had waited for this day. I had so many questions for him, but I couldn’t ask any of them. I was so afraid to speak. What if this was just an illusion? I didn’t want to shatter it. I couldn’t take the risk.

“I’m so sorry it’s taken so long,” Kadmos said. He tightened his grip on my hand. “You’re probably wondering why I’ve chosen this moment to come to you.”

I managed to nod.

“I’m worried for you, Artemis. I want you to know that you are stronger than this.”

I nearly gasped. He wasn’t lying. He really *had* been watching me. I wondered how this worked, if he was all-seeing or whether he’d been physically following me around. Of course, I couldn’t bring myself to open my mouth and ask.

He gave me a small smile. “You come from a long line of warriors—fighting is in your blood. Use that. Never forget. Never succumb to anything.”

His smile grew brighter, and I knew he was saying goodbye. I was flooded with panic. I couldn’t let him leave—not so soon after he’d found me. I opened my mouth to speak, to tell him not to leave me, but then he faded away, and I was left holding nothing but air.

The room around me faded to black.

When I opened my eyes, I was staring up into the concerned faces of Cali and Orla. I tried to sit up, searching for Kadmos, but I quickly realized I was no longer in the bright white space. I’d returned to the front lawn of the pack house. I clenched my fists in frustration. Kadmos had left before I’d been able to ask him all the questions swirling inside my head.

Cali rubbed small circles in my back. “Are you okay?” She looked up at Orla. “Is she okay?”

Orla placed a hand on my forehead. The coolness of her skin was soothing. My face felt burnt and raw. “I think she will be,” she said. “You just need to rest, Artemis.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“You passed out from the spell,” Orla said.

I reached up to wipe the ointment off my face. I looked at it on my fingers. It made the pads of my fingertips tingle. Everything from before Kadmos appeared was still hazy, but the memories slowly came back to me. Big Mac had performed a spell.

“Did they find dark magic?” I looked around, and my gaze landed on Big Mac. “What happened?”

Her face was solemn. “You’ve come into contact with the Orb, and you were vulnerable to its influence.”

Cali chimed in. “Do you think the Orb had something to do with the zombies? Could it have infected Artemis then?” She looked back at me. Her eyes were filled with worry.

Big Mac nodded. “But the dark magic’s hold on her is gone now. Whatever it was, Artemis appears to have just been caught in it, but there’s only residue left behind—like a fingerprint.”

“So it *is* connected to the Orb?” Greyson asked, clarifying.

Big Mac nodded her head. “Yes, but Artemis doesn’t seem to be linked anymore.”

“Can she can stay here?” Cali asked hesitantly.

Big Mac shrugged. “I suppose.”

Cali exhaled and pulled me into a tight hug. “I’m so glad,” she murmured in my ear.

When she let me go, I looked up at the others. Rishika had a huge smile on her face.

Orla extended a hand to help me up off the ground. “Let’s go inside.”

Rishika grabbed my elbow and started to lead me into the house. I looked back over my shoulder and spotted Big Mac. She was giving me an intense, suspicious stare. It sent a chill down my spine. That didn’t make sense. She’d just said everything was fine.

Was this not over?

**Episode 1300**

My sister was okay.

*My sister was okay.*

I leaned into the relief I was feeling. I’d been so worried about Artemis being under the influence of dark magic that I’d been unable to think of much else. But I didn’t have to be worried anymore.

She hadn’t looked well at all during the spell. I’d been so afraid for her. My muscles had been tense the entire time. I didn’t know what I would have done if something terrible had happened to her. When she’d collapsed at the end, my heart had nearly stopped. Mom had had to hold me back.

But she was okay.

“I need to go lay down,” Artemis said.

“Come on,” Rishika said, putting a supportive arm around her.

“I’ll make you some tea,” Mom said.

I moved to follow Artemis, Rishika, and Mom inside when Big Mac touched my shoulder. Mom noticed and slowed her movements, but her gaze was still focused on Artemis. I knew she was torn between the two of us, unsure who needed her most in that moment.

I shot Big Mac a questioning look, and she gestured for Mom and me to step aside. I looked over my shoulder. Rishika was helping Artemis up the porch steps. They didn’t seem to notice we weren’t behind them.

“All of you, come with me,” Big Mac said, pointing at me, Mom, Greyson, and Xavier one by one.

We arranged ourselves in a small circle. “What’s this about?” I asked. “What are we doing?”

Big Mac didn’t answer; her eyes were locked on the house.

“Big Mac?” Greyson asked.

She shook her head, shushing him. We all exchanged a confused look between each other. “All right,” she said, leaning in close. “Now that Artemis is inside, I need to tell you something.”

“Are you going to tell us or keep being cryptic?” Xavier asked dryly.   
She glared at him. “Something’s not right with Artemis.”

I looked at her in alarm. “But you just said—”

“I know what I said,” she snapped. “She seems to be herself now, but the dark magic could come back.”

What? *How?*

I shook my head. “I don’t understand.”

“Dark magic found Artemis once,” Big Mac said. “That means she’s vulnerable—and the dark magic could use that to infect her again.”

No, no, no.

That was *not* the news I wanted to hear. I shifted my weight from foot to foot, peering nervously at Greyson and Xavier. “This doesn’t change anything,” I said. “Like you said, she doesn’t have any dark magic in her right now. Doesn’t that mean we have to protect her?”

Big Mac shrugged. “That’s up to the wolves.”

I spun to face my mates. “You’re not going to throw Artemis out, are you?”

“She’s your sister, Cali,” Xavier said. “I’d never do that.”

Greyson frowned, giving his brother a look. “We talked about this, Cali. I have no plans to toss your sister out.” He looked deep into my eyes. “Artemis has a place here. Unless I see evidence that she’s a threat, she stays.”

Xavier glanced between me and Greyson. He seemed to think hard for a moment before nodding in agreement.

My shoulders dropped in relief. For once, both my mates were agreeing on something!

Mom stared at Big Mac, her eyes wide with worry. “Is there anything we can do to protect Artemis in case the dark magic tries to return?”

Big Mac sighed. “There may be some charms that can help, but we should also keep an eye on her,” she said. “Notify me immediately if there’s any change in her behavior.” She turned to me. “Stay close to her.”

“Of course,” I said quickly. “I’ll do anything to keep Artemis safe.”

And I would. She was my *sister*. I might not have been a sibling for too long, but I knew I would do whatever I could to keep the darkness from possessing her again.

Big Mac stared at me through narrowed eyes. I knew she was sizing me up to see if I was capable of watching over Artemis. I didn’t look away. Seemingly satisfied, she nodded.

Mom touched Big Mac’s elbow and began to lead her toward the house. “So, these charms,” she began.

They slowly walked away, deep in discussion.

Greyson backed away. “I’m going to go check on York.”

As he walked away, Xavier pulled me aside.

He looked slightly better than he had before. His cheeks had regained some color, and his eyes were more alert. He didn’t look like he was in danger of collapsing at any moment. His strength must have been returning. That was a relief.

He took my hand in his. I stared down at our entangled fingers before lifting my gaze to his face. His eyes were soft. “You must have been worried when Artemis collapsed,” he said.

“I was,” I admitted.

“I could tell.” He took a deep breath. “I want you to know, I won’t let anything happen to Artemis. I’ll do anything and everything to protect her.”

Our recent kiss flashed before my eyes, and I blinked it away. I could see the sincerity in Xavier’s gaze. He really meant what he said. Nothing would happen to Artemis on his watch.

“Thank you,” I said.

It felt good to know that he would look out for her, but I needed to make it clear that nothing had changed between us.

“We’re still broken up,” I reminded him, maybe too bluntly.

Xavier cringed slightly. “It doesn’t matter,” he said. “I know how important Artemis is to you. Regardless of where things stand between you and me, I mean what I say.” He reached up and stroked my cheek. “I will always have your back—you’re my mate. It’s always going to be you and me.”

His eyes darted between my eyes and my lips. It looked like he desperately wanted to kiss me again. For a moment, I thought about letting him. I could close my eyes, let his lips meet mine. But, I couldn’t. What if Greyson saw us? I had to stick to my decision.

I couldn’t have either of them.

I forced myself to remove my hand from his grasp. Then I turned and walked toward the house. I could feel his gaze on the back of my head, but I resisted the urge to look back.

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A few minutes later, I found my dad in the kitchen. He had his back to the door while he leaned over an open cookbook on the counter. A pan simmered on the stove, and the room smelled like garlic and onions. My stomach immediately growled with hunger.

“Hey,” I said, coming up beside him.

He jumped, but he smiled when he realized it was me. “Hey, kiddo.”

“What are you cooking?” I leaned over his shoulder to read the recipe.

“It’s a garlic parmesan risotto,” he said. His eyes lit up. “I have a chicken in the oven. This will go perfectly with it.”

“You’ve never made risotto before,” I said.

“I know! I’m getting experimental in the pack house, huh?” He reached for the bowl of rice. “Would you like to help me?”

He seemed hesitant, like he was bracing himself for a no. I *had* been busy lately, with all the drama in the house.

“Of course, Dad,” I said. “Don’t be silly.”

He beamed. “All right. Now, there’s a lot of stirring.”

He wasn’t wrong. There was a lot of stirring and pouring. Rice, white wine, vegetable stock… I stirred and stirred while he tended to the chicken. He checked over my shoulder every now and again. My heart was so full I thought it would burst. I liked this quality time with my dad. I hadn’t had enough of it lately.

Rishika walked in just as I was about to add more stock. Dad and I looked up.

“Artemis is awake now,” Rishika said. “She’s asking for you, Cali.”

I felt torn in two. I looked at my dad, and he smiled. “Go, go.” He reached for the stock, and I handed him the spoon. “I can show this to you some other time.”

Torin seemed to appear from out of nowhere. He must have been eavesdropping. He waved his arm wildly. “I can help! I love risotto.”

Dad laughed and shifted his attention to Torin.

I gave Rishika the best smile I could. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” She nodded.

I took the stairs two at a time and speed walked to Artemis’s room. Her door was cracked, and as I slowly pushed it open, relief washed over me. Artemis wasn’t in bed. She was standing by the window. She looked strong, like herself.

I crossed the room and laid a hand on her arm. Artemis gave a startled gasp. I laughed. I needed to stop startling people. First my dad, now Artemis.

“I didn’t hear you come in,” she said with a smile. “Too deep in my thoughts, I guess.”

“How are you?” I laid my hand over hers, squeezing. “I was so freaked out when you collapsed. I nearly lost it.”

Artemis stared out the window at some point in the distance. “I’ve been better.” She paused and then laughed. “But I’ve also been a lot worse.”

I shook my head. “I’m glad you can joke, but seriously, I really want you to know that I love you.”

Artemis gave me a wary glance. “Are we having a sister moment?”

I nodded. “Is that okay?” I cursed internally. Maybe I was being too mushy for Artemis. She always seemed so strong, yet so distant at times. I didn’t want to push her away.

“It’ll take some getting used to,” she said. “I’m sorry if I worried you and Orla.” She turned to look out the window again.

“Artemis,” I said. “Is there something else on your mind?”

She didn’t speak. It almost seemed like she didn’t breathe, either. Then she inhaled.

“I remember York,” she said, looking into my eyes. “I remember what happened.”

**Episode 1301**

CHARLIE

I couldn’t believe I was back in Minnesota without Violet. Without my *mate*. She was all I could think about.

As my mom was talking, I had to force myself to listen to her. She was holding up a brochure that looked like it was from the 1950s and going on and on about hunter boot camp. She was so excited that she couldn’t stop talking. I was only managing to insert an “okay” or a “yeah” every now and then. This really meant a lot to her.

Her excitement was beginning to feel a little overwhelming.

My dad leaned in through the screen door and interrupted Mom’s spiel. “Hey, Charlie, I could use a hand sparking up the grill.”

I leapt up from my seat. “Sure, Dad.” I gave my mom an apologetic look and hurried out the door. I didn’t look back at her. I knew she’d look too sad, sitting there all by herself holding that brochure.

Out back on the deck, my dad stopped me. “You’ll have to forgive your mother—she’s very excited about you going to camp.”

“I know.”

“She’s been waiting for this moment, for you to come into the hunter fold, ever since you were born.” Dad patted my shoulder. “She’s very proud of you.”

“I know, Dad.” And I did. I knew how much this meant to her. “I’m both excited and a little nervous, I guess.”

Dad nodded. “I get it. I remember when I was your age.” His gaze went distant, and I could tell he was reliving old memories. “I remember feeling exactly the way you do. It’s a daunting new thing that changes your perspective about the world. But it turned out to be the best experience of my life. I hope you’ll feel the same way, son. Now, come on—let’s get this grill going.”

We walked down the steps to the grill, and I helped him get the charcoal lit. We were just putting on the first steak when Mom came out of the house with a pitcher of lemonade and two glasses. She set them on the table and leaned over the deck railing.

“Are you planning on calling Sandi?”

I kept my gaze focused on the grill and tried to keep my voice steady. “Why would I do that?”

“You *are* back in town,” Mom said, shrugging. “I hear she’s not seeing anyone.”

How would she even know that? Why did she have to go and ruin things? She was really getting under my skin. I could handle the talk about hunter camp, but any mention of Sandi was going to drive me crazy.

I finally looked up at her. “I’m not looking to date right now.” She stepped back at my forceful tone. I inhaled through my nose and continued. “I’ve got a few other things on my mind.”

Mom held up both hands. “All right, all right. I’m not trying to pressure you.”

*Yes, you are*,I thought to myself. She and Dad exchanged a glance. They had definitely talked about this in private.

Mom didn’t realize it, but all this dating talk just made me miss Violet even more. I was sure that was the opposite of what my mom intended.

I held up my phone. “I’m going to go call my friends from lacrosse.” I jogged up the stairs. “See what’s up.” I kissed my mother on the cheek to set her mind at ease and headed inside.

I walked up the stairs to my room. I was scrolling through my contacts to find Violet’s number when a photo caught my eye. It was in a nice frame—not one of those dollar store types—and sitting on a table in the hallway. It was a photo of me and Sandi with a few other friends. She was looking at the camera while I looked at her.

God, I’d forgotten all about this photo. It seemed like a lifetime ago. My parents were still stuck in the past, but I’d moved on. I flipped the photo over and called Violet.

She answered right away. “Charlie!” she said. “I miss you so much!”

I closed my bedroom door and slid down the wall to sit on the floor. “I miss you too.” My heart ached with how much I missed her. “How are things going at the pack house?”

“Oh my god, Charlie, things are so crazy here.” She filled me in on current events, including everything that had happened with Arlo and Lilac. “I wish you were here,” she said softly.

She didn’t know how much I wanted to be right by her side. The pack house had become home in such a short amount of time. Minnesota had become… less so. Especially without Violet.

“Are you ready for hunter camp?” Violet asked.

I sighed. “I’m not so sure what to expect, but I am kind of excited.” I cracked a smile. “It’s a chance to meet other people like me, so I guess that’ll be nice.” I laughed as a thought popped into my head. “I wish you could be there with me, but since it’s hunter camp, that would probably be a pretty bad idea.”

Violet was quiet for a moment. “Are *you* going to be okay?”

I leaned forward to rest my forehead on my knees. I was suddenly overwhelmed by how much I truly missed her. We’d been growing so much closer lately, too. I could still remember her smell, her touch, the softness of her lips… If I shut my eyes, I could almost pretend she was right there beside me.

Although part of me was looking forward to boot camp in this strange way, I couldn’t ignore her concern. I was a werewolf now, not just a hunter. I steeled myself. I had to get through this, and when it was over I could return to her, my mate.

“Don’t worry about me,” I said.

All I could hear was the sound of her breathing. “I love you, Charlie.”

“I love you too.”

A knock sounded at the door. “Charlie?” *Shit*, it was my mom.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered. “I have to go, but I promise I’ll call you as soon as I can.”

“Good luck,” Violet said.

“Love you.”

The doorknob turned, and Mom poked her head in as soon as I’d hit the button to end the call.

“Yeah, Mom?” I tried to keep my voice steady. My heart was beating quickly in my throat. I hoped she hadn’t heard the end of my conversation. I cursed myself for not paying more attention to my surroundings. I couldn’t risk either of my parents hearing our conversations.

Mom opened the door wider and entered the room. In her arms, she carried a narrow wooden box. She took a seat on my bed.

I stayed seated on the floor. I eyed the box. I remembered seeing a box like that at my grandfather’s house. I’d always wondered what was inside, but I’d never been able to check. The box had always been just out of my reach, and Grandpa had never offered to show me the contents.

Mom ran a hand over the top of the box. “This belonged to your grandfather, and his grandfather before him.” She looked at me with something like pride in her eyes. “I wanted to give it to you as a special gift now that you’re ready.”

I stood eagerly and stepped closer. I’d spent countless days dreaming of what was inside that box. Now I would finally get the chance to peek inside.

I sat down on the bed, and Mom handed it to me. All I could do was stare at it. I’d always imagined it held gold coins or a magic flute…

Mom nudged me. “Well?”

I took a deep breath and opened it up, and my face immediately fell. I looked at my mom. This had to be some kind of joke, and it wasn’t funny.

“It’s… a piece of wood.”

All of my childhood fantasies vanished in an instant. This was what I’d waited my whole life for? A piece of wood in a box? I almost wished she hadn’t given it to me. It wasn’t much fun when a mystery turned out to be a disappointment.

“Look closely,” Mom said, laughing.

I grumbled under my breath, but I picked up the wood. I ran my fingers over it, held it up close to my face. I hadn’t noticed it before, but the surface was intricately carved with looping swirls. One end had a removable metal cover. I gently took it off to reveal a sharp, pointed end. A realization hit me.

“It’s a stake,” I said.

Mom beamed. Her eyes were watery with tears. She swiped them away. “If only both of your grandparents could see you now.”

I tightened my grip and stood. I imagined myself using the stake in battle. It was… oddly comforting. It felt solid in my hand. It would serve me well someday. Not so disappointing, after all.

“Thanks, Mom. I can practice with it before I leave.” I jumped into a battle-ready position and sliced at the air. A fantasy played out in my head, of me slaying vampires like a heroic warrior. Would Violet find it sexy?

Mom shook her head. “No, there’s no time for that.”

My arm dropped. “Huh? What are you talking about?”

Mom stood, confused. “Charlie, have you not been listening to me?” she said. “You’re starting camp tomorrow.”

**Episode 1302**

ARTEMIS

I crossed the room to the door and carefully peeked out into the hallway. I wanted to make sure no one was listening in on our conversation. There were so many wolves in this house that it was way too easy for people to eavesdrop. Satisfied there was no one around, I gently shut the door behind me.

Cali was still standing at the window, staring at me. I’d caught her off guard with my sudden confession. I sat down on the edge of the bed and sighed.

“I remember being with York at the cemetery… I remembered what I was doing there.” I couldn’t bring myself to look at Cali again. Instead, I kept my eyes trained on the floor. “I remember… seeing the dead come to life around me. And Cali… I had made them do it. I was so terrified. I didn’t know what to do. It all happened so fast.”

Cali sat down beside me. I could feel her gaze on me. I looked up to see that she was staring at me with wide eyes. She lowered her hand from her open mouth.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” she asked.

Cali wasn’t just shocked—she was hurt that I had kept this from her. I could hear it in her voice.

I shook my head. “I was too scared.” I wrung my hands. “I didn’t know what it meant. I was afraid—but now that Big Mac says I’m okay, I thought you deserved to know the truth.”

Truthfully, I’d been afraid my own sister would disown me. In another time and place, I would have. Cali hadn’t signed up to have the Light and Dark Fae sister who was susceptible to dark magic’s influence. I would’ve understood, even if it’d been hard.

Cali sat silently for a moment. She looked deep in thought. I could see that she wanted to yell at me for keeping things from her. She had every right to be angry. I tensed up, preparing for a lecture, but instead, she just sighed.

“Thank you for telling me,” she said. “But you don’t have to be scared to tell me, Artemis. If I could make Big Mac snap her fingers to make all of this go away, I would pay whatever price it took. You know that right? I was so worried when I saw you in the woods like that. You seemed so out of it.”

“I remember.” I shut my eyes to keep the memories from hitting me. I spoke softly. “I had no idea what I had done, or what I was capable of.” I opened my eyes in time to see Cali frown. “I did what I could to keep you safe. I walked away.”

Cali wrapped her arm around my shoulders. “It’s okay.” She rested her head against mine. “Whatever that dark magic was, it was controlling you. It wasn’t your fault, but it’s *gone*. Big Mac said so.” She looked up at me. “I want you to know that if you ever feel like something is wrong, you can tell me. You’re my sister—I’ll look out for you.”

Honestly, it was nice to have a sister. For once I wasn’t alone in the world. But I wasn’t sure whether I should tell her about what had happened during the spell—about my conversation with Kadmos. When it came to telling Cali things, you had to tip-toe the line of: will Greyson, Xavier, and the rest of the pack find out in two minutes?

Still, I kept replaying seeing Kadmos in my mind. I couldn’t tell whether it had been real. His hand in mine had certainly *felt* real. I’d been so sure that it was him, but maybe it was just part of the spell? It was possible that a side effect of the spell was realistic hallucinations. Would Cali think it was stupid? How could I possibly believe that my father had visited me?

He was supposedly dead.

Except for the whispers from the Fae world…

The last time I’d talked about Kadmos, it had led to a fight with Orla. It would be a risk to bring him up again, even to Cali. It’d been pretty rough for all of us, and we’d only really been coming out of it.

For now, this was something I needed to keep to myself. I would just have to figure everything out on my own.

I wrapped my arms around Cali. “Thank you,” I said. “I’ll always remember that.”

There was a quick knock on the door, and then Rishika peered in. “Am I interrupting?” Her expression seemed apologetic, but from the tone of her voice, I could tell she didn’t really care at all.

I wanted to mess with her, tell her that Cali and I were in the middle of a life-changing conversation, but I noticed Cali looking back and forth between Rishika and me.

“I’ll go tell Mom that you’re doing better,” she said.

“Thanks,” I said. “Tell her I don’t need the tea, I’m fine.”

Cali nodded and squeezed my hand and slipped past Rishika, who shut the door and locked it behind her.

“Is it true?” she asked. “Are you fine?”

I nodded. “I think so.” I looked down at my hands, thinking back to the aftermath of the spell. “The spell was really disorienting, but I’m feeling much better now.”

Rishika exhaled a sigh of relief. “I’m glad. Everyone was worried.”

I scoffed. “I doubt everyone was worried.” I thought about Big Mac. While everyone else had been fussing over me, she hadn’t looked concerned at all. She’d actually seemed annoyed.

“I was.”

There was a moment of silence. I looked up at her, but she turned her gaze to the floor.

“Good to know,” I said, trailing off. Rishika really did care about me. I knew it, but somehow I kept trying not to believe it. “I was worried about you too.”

She shot me a puzzled look.

“When you walked in on me when Vander was here,” I explained. I felt my cheeks grow warm. “I saw the look you gave me. It wasn’t a pleasant one.”

Rishika flushed. “Oh, um, that,” she stammered. She wrung her hands before sitting beside me on the bed. “I’ll admit I was jealous.” She met my gaze. “I had absolutely no right to be, though. We agreed to keep things casual, after all. You can kiss whoever you want, it’s fine. I’ll be fine.”

“But if it wasn’t fine though…” I took her hand and laced our fingers together. Rishika stared at me, her lips slightly parted. “I’d want you to tell me.”

“Yeah?” she asked.

I nodded, feeling almost giddy. The thought that I had made this powerful werewolf *jealous* was unbelievable. For a moment, I forgot about everything else. Rishika and I were the only two people in the world.

I leaned in close. The only sounds in the room were our breaths, in perfect unison. I closed my eyes, and my lips met hers.

I could kiss her for the rest of my life. Pulling away from the kiss created a physical ache throughout me. I opened my eyes, seeing a hunger in her own that I wanted to return. I touched her chin and angled her head so I could lean in close to her ear.

“I missed this,” I whispered.

With a soft grunt, Rishika pulled me back in, kissing me deeply. I tangled my hands in her hair as her fingers stroked my back. I parted my lips, and she slipped her tongue between them, tasting me.

We collapsed back onto the bed, and I straddled her. Her hands slipped beneath my shirt, running up and down my spine. I shivered in delight. This was what I needed. This touch, this feeling.

*Her.*

I kissed the base of her neck, slowly moving up, planting kisses as I went. She moaned when I nibbled at her ear.

“This needs to come off,” she said, tugging at my shirt.

“Only if yours does too.”

She grinned as I pulled the shirt up over my head. We both tossed our shirts to the ground, and I knelt over her, taking in her perfect breasts. Gods, I would never get over these. I traced the pad of my finger over her nipple, and she let out a sigh.

I slowly ran my tongue around her nipple before taking the whole thing into my mouth and sucking. My hair was in her hands, and when she pulled on it I couldn’t hold back my moan. Everything I’d been going through the past few days melted away. That was what she did to me. I only wanted to focus on her, to feel her.

“Stop teasing me,” she gasped. I bit her nipple in response.

In a flash, she’d flipped me over, taking my place. We became a tangle of limbs as we got rid of the rest of our clothes. I sucked in a breath as she pinched one of my nipples before giving me the relief of her sweet mouth. She reached between my legs, her fingers teasing my clit, and I felt myself growing wetter.

“Now who’s teasing who?”

“You have to take it easy,” she said, easing one finger inside me. “You’ve had quite the day.”

I bit down on my lip, trying to keep myself in check. It wasn’t working. “Have I?”

“Mm,” she hummed. “Do you like that?”

“*Yes*.”

She eased another finger in and out while her thumb circled my clit. My breath hitched from the pleasure. “Oh, *gods*.”

I wanted to scream. I was soaking wet. Rishika’s fingers were slick as she pumped them in and out. I leaned forward, putting my hand on her cheek to bring her up to kiss me. I kissed her with everything I had. I kissed her knowing that she was the only one I wanted to kiss this way.

“Wait,” she said. “It gets better.”

She brushed her hands over my thighs, and I agonized as she moved her way down my body, moaning as she ran her tongue around my clit. Putting her fingers back inside me, she teased me and had me begging her not to stop.

I didn’t think I could take much more. I was so close to the edge.

I moaned Rishika’s name as I came, and she didn’t stop until the wave of the first orgasm turned into another. She laced her fingers with mine.

“Feel good?” she asked.

I lost myself in her gaze. I truly didn’t want to be with anyone else. She was the only person I needed.

“Come here,” I said softly.

She brought her lips back to mine.

Maybe things would be better from here on out.

**Episode 1303**

XAVIER

I went downstairs to the basement, preparing myself to help Greyson interrogate York. I had no clear idea of what was happening, but I knew I wanted to be right there if York revealed anything. While it was true that I didn’t need anything else on my plate, I had a feeling that York might know something that could bring things into perspective. At least I hoped so.

I entered the room to see York sitting straight up, seemingly alert. Greyson watched me closely as I walked in, a hint of distaste coloring his features. I knew he wasn’t thrilled to have me here.

Well fuck him.

I’d promised Cali that I’d look after Artemis, and if this York character could shed any light on things, I wanted to know straight from the source. I needed to stay on top of things, especially after my absence. I had to know what threats to the pack were lurking in the shadows. Greyson was the Alpha for now, but I had other plans.

“Who are you? How’d you end up here?” Greyson asked York. I could tell that York wanted to answer, but he was obviously nervous, seemed really confused, and was most likely afraid to say the wrong thing to the two agitated strangers in the room with him.

After a few moments York finally spoke. He repeated what he’d told us outside—talking about the drive-in and ending up in the woods. He paused and looked off into the distance, as if searching his memory.

“I might have been attacked,” he finally added.

“By who?” I asked. I wondered if he’d been attacked by the revenants—that was at least a better name than *zombie*. With how things were going lately, though, it could have been anybody.

“I don’t remember,” York said, rubbing his forehead and staring down into his lap. “Maybe we should call the police.”

“NO!” Greyson and I yelled in unison.

York looked like he was about to faint from fear. I didn’t blame the guy, but there was no way we needed the police sticking their nose into supernatural business.

“We’ll call in the morning—that would be better,” Greyson said. “In the meantime, get some rest.”

Greyson gave me a look and motioned for me to follow him out of the room.

“I was just beginning to gain his trust when you came barging in,” Greyson said.

“I didn’t barge in, I walked in—and good thing, too. I need to know what’s going on, and you and I both know that I can’t trust you to tell me the whole story,” I said.

Greyson sighed. He seemed tired, drained, and not in the mood for our typical verbal sparring. “I think York is either really good at lying, or he’s just a traumatized human.”

“Agreed,” I said. I hated it when I agreed with Greyson. “The question is, what do we do with him?”

“Wish we didn’t have to do anything. It would be great if he would just go back to wherever he came from. We have enough problems here without accumulating more,” Greyson said.

I hated to admit it, but I agreed with Greyson about this, too.

I had a lot of shit on my mind, not even taking the pack’s mounting problems into account. I thought about Kira, and then my thoughts went to Quinton, and I couldn’t stop myself from shuddering.

“Yeah, well, he said he was attacked,” I answered. If only he remembered who the attacker might be. Why couldn’t anything be easy?

“I know,” Greyson replied. “I’m worried that his attack might be connected to the undead that attacked us.”

“We should probably keep him around until we get clarity on what he meant. He might have answers we need,” I said.

“You trying to tell me what to do, little brother?” Greyson scoffed, his eyes flashing.

“No, I’m trying to tell you what we *should* do. Face it, I’m better at this than you,” I said.

“You can’t be vying for Alpha if you keep running off,” Greyson growled.

So much for avoiding another one of our epic fights. In fact, I was sure that there would never be a day when we *weren’t* at each other’s throats. That was our default state, after all.

“I was kidnapped by fucking vampires! And you did nothing about it, so thanks for that, big brother,” I snapped.

I did feel hurt that no one had come for me—even though I never would have expected Greyson, of all people, to do so. He’d probably been ecstatic with me out of the picture, since he’d had unobstructed access to Cali. She seemed to be all he really cared about these days. Honestly, though, I couldn’t judge him for that. Cali was all that really seemed to matter to me, too.

“This is how it’s going to be?” Greyson muttered. He was getting mad, squaring up like he was preparing to lunge at me.

I could feel my strength coming back. I felt edgy, ready for anything. It was nice to feel capable and in control again. I had Kira to thank for that.

“As I told you before,” I said, “I will be Alpha. And Cali is my mate—we *will* be together.”

“Cali broke up with both of us, remember? And I know things that you don’t,” Greyson said.

I felt a hot shock of annoyance rising in my chest as Greyson continued. I balled up my fists, ready to react.

“Cali’s already struggling with *due destini*—us fighting isn’t going to help her,” Greyson said. So he’d decided to play the level-headed brother.

I didn’t respond right away. We stood there for a few seconds, staring at each other and stewing in the tension before I finally spoke.

“Since it was clear that nobody from the pack house was coming to rescue me, I made a deal with Kira,” I said. “I have to go fulfill my end of that bargain. But know this—I *will* be back, and I *will* be Alpha.”

Greyson chuckled, but the laughter never reached his eyes. “Whatever. Go run off and do whatever you need to do—I’ll be here. With my mate.”

I left him before I did something I’d regret. I stalked off to my room, fuming as I packed my bag, vowing to myself that I would make Greyson eat his words. In due time. I even had a plan forming. I would kill Garren for Kira, become Alpha by ousting Greyson, get revenge on Iñigo and his bloodsuckers, and then make Cali mine, once and for all.

I zipped my bag closed and slid it onto my shoulder, remembering how upset Cali had been the last time I’d left. I needed to let her know I was going away and assure her that I wouldn’t be gone long.

I headed to Cali’s room. She was in her bathroom, and she peeked out when I came in. She was wearing one of those silver peel-off masks. Her hair was pulled back from her face, and she was wearing an oversized T-shirt.

“Get out!” she squealed. “I’m a mess!”

I smiled. “You look like a robot—a cute one,” I replied, happy for a rare moment of levity.

“Stop, don’t make me laugh,” she said. “I have to keep this mask on for five more minutes.”

I walked over to her and pulled her close. I wanted to kiss her, despite the foil mask. “I’m not staying long,” I said.

Cali’s eyes drifted to my bag, on the floor near the door.

“Where are you going?” she asked, her eyes narrowing just a bit.

“I have to help Kira. She helped me escape those bloodsucking assholes, but she didn’t do it out of the kindness of her heart—she’s a witch, after all. I told her I’d help avenge her husband’s murder,” I said.

“Xavier, you can’t go, you just—” Cali began.

I could make out the pain and panic in her eyes. Leaving her was the last thing I wanted to do.

“I have to, Cali. I gave Kira my word,” I said. I leaned down and planted a kiss on the top of her head. I loved the way she smelled. I took a deep breath of her scent. I hoped it was enough to hold me over while I was away from her.

I pulled back and looked into her eyes. “And about that kiss.” I put a finger to her lips, stopping her before she could respond. “It was not our last.”

“What do you mean? How long will you be gone this time? How will I know that you’re safe? That wasn’t our last?” she asked, as if she were playing my words back in her mind and was scandalized by them all over again. “You have a lot of nerve,” she said, a blush rising on her cheeks.

I didn’t have any answers for her—not now—and nothing I could say would calm her worries. I left her standing there, resisting the urge to take her in my arms again and tell her that everything would be okay. The thing was, I didn’t know that for sure. To be honest, there was plenty to worry about these days. I knew that I would do anything to protect her. That was the only thing that was certain.

I found Kira outside. She was sharpening her knife with a faraway look in her eyes.

I walked up to stand in front of her, anticipation circling in my stomach. “Where did you say this guy was?”

**Episode 1304**

MARTA

I was in my room, trying my hardest to relax. The last few days—hell, my whole life—had been one big string of stressful events, and I was physically and mentally exhausted. All I wanted was to take a nice hot shower, but Lilac was still chained to me like a moody cinderblock. Maybe it was silly of me to feel embarrassed in front of a ghost, but I couldn’t help it.

“I promise not to peek,” Lilac said. “Though you wouldn’t be able to tell if I had my fingers crossed, what with me being a ghost and all.” He laughed like he’d just told the funniest joke anyone had ever heard, living or dead.

“Don’t joke about this!” I said. It wasn’t funny in the least.

“Sorry. You shouldn’t be ashamed, you know,” Lilac said. “You’re really pretty.”

I gasped, annoyed and flustered. Great, now a ghost was *flirting* and being a perv with me? I thought back to when I’d first seen him in the road—and then later, in the car. I’d thought he was cute. Hell, right now any guy would seem cute. I hadn’t been with anyone since the 70s. I thought back to that last guy, surprised that I could still remember his face, his body, other things… I pushed that thought out of my head, snapping back to the dilemma at hand.

“Don’t ghosts ever sleep?” I asked.

“I’ll sleep when I’m dead,” Lilac replied. “Oh, wait, I *am* dead.” He snorted, starting to laugh at his own bad joke. Lilac had to be one of the happiest dead people I’d ever met. I couldn’t imagine what he must have been like in life. If he’d been even half as jovial as he was now, I would’ve kept a wide berth.

“Shut up! And shut your eyes!” I stalled a bit, taking my time putting my hair up in a messy top knot. Then I unhooked my bra, pulled it out from under my shirt, and tossed it onto the bed. I was just about to take off my shirt when I paused. “Are you peeking?”

Lilac sighed, indignant. “I’m not a creep. There, my eyes are shut!”

He put his hands over his eyes. I hesitated a moment more, then stuck my tongue out at him, testing him. Nothing. I peeled off my shirt, then my pants, then my panties, peering at him the entire time. Then I hurried into the shower.

“Can you describe how it feels to shower?” Lilac asked. I could hear him just outside the bathroom door. “I miss the physical feeling of things—all the sensations I took for granted when I was alive. I remember when me and Violet were little,” he continued. “We used to play together in the bathtub. We had water balloon fights, too. Oh, and remember those water guns with the massive water tanks? We used to spend entire afternoons soaking each other from head to toe with those things, playing cops and robbers. We had a sprinkler we played in, too—one of those old-timey ones that fanned back and forth. I never thought water would be something I’d miss so much.”

*Would he just shut up?* Lilac was a voice in my head that wouldn’t stop. I just wanted to take a quiet shower and mull over the chaotic turn my life had taken. Well, the *newest* chaotic turn my life had taken.

“Anyway,” Lilac said. “I’ll let you shower.”

For a while, it was silent. I let my hair down and ran my face under the shower jets. I let my mind go blissfully blank for a bit while I lathered my hair in peppermint shampoo that I’d swiped from Mrs. Smith. I let out a deep breath. Peace at last.

“Make sure you rinse all the shampoo out!” said Lilac. *Dammit!*

I spun around, hoping to catch him in the act, but he was too fast for me. “You’re peeking, aren’t you?”

“Maybe a little,” Lilac said.

Note to self: How did I beat up a ghost?

A short time later, I was ready for bed, finally settling down. I’d managed to dry off completely in the bathroom, keeping an eye out for any funny business. Then I’d returned to the bedroom, slipped my huge T-shirt over my bath towel, and pulled the towel off while Lilac made a show of covering his eyes again.

It was a useless play at modesty, since he’d (probably) seen me completely naked in the shower—though he’d insisted that the glass had fogged up so much that he hadn’t been able to make anything out. I only half believed him.

I yawned and flipped the duvet back, my mouth nearly watering at the thought of lying down and turning my brain off. I hoped that Lilac would shut the fuck up and let me sleep.

He was making himself comfortable in the armchair in the corner of my room when there was a knock on the door. I groaned. *Who could that be?* I couldn’t catch a break.

Lilac got up and stuck his head through the door, not bothering to open it. *Show-off.*

“It’s my sister,” he said. Then he tried to open the door, but he couldn’t. His hand just went straight through the doorknob over and over again until he turned to me. “What are you waiting for? Let her in!”

I groaned again. This was getting older than *me*.

“If you don’t open the door, I’ll sing ‘99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall’—in *French*,” Lilac said. “I’ll warn you, my voice isn’t great.”

I couldn’t imagine anything worse. I was already at my wits’ end—if he started singing that annoying song, which had clearly been created to drive people absolutely nuts, I would lose the small bit of patience I had left. I wondered, in the back of my mind, if it were possible to murder a ghost.

“Okay, okay, fine!” I jumped up from the bed. I was beyond annoyed as I swung the door open. “What?” I barked.

Violet cowered, clearly taken aback by my exasperation. “Is this a bad time?” she squeaked.

Just then, Lilac started singing the beginning of the song—in French, as promised. He was clearly having a great time making my life a living hell. For the first time ever, I wished for a typical ghost—a somber, tortured one that was big on the menacing, but short on the chit-chat.

I stepped aside. “Come on in,” I said, flashing a fake smile at Violet. It seemed to work, since she stopped looking scandalized.

“Is my brother here?” she asked, looking around.

“He is, and he’s annoying,” I said.

Violet waved. “Hi Lilac!”

“Tell her hi!” Lilac instructed.

“Both of you, stop! This isn’t the United Nations. I’m not going to sit here and translate everything you say. Violet, what do you want?” I asked, trying my best to keep the sharp edge out of my voice.

“I still want to try to get Lilac back… in the flesh,” Violet said.

God, still this?

“I’m still not sure that’s a good idea,” Lilac said. I relayed Lilac’s uncertain words to Violet.

“Where is he?” Violet asked. I pointed to the chair where Lilac had settled.

Violet turned to face him. “You don’t want to be back with me? To be able to hug each other?” she asked. It looked like she was a second away from crumpling to the floor and bawling her eyes out. I prayed that she wouldn’t—I wouldn’t be able to take it.

A pained look shot across Lilac’s face, and suddenly, I pitied him. “It’s not worth risking your life,” he said.

It was then that I realized how conflicted Lilac had to be. The annoyance drained away, replaced by a heavy feeling of uselessness. I wished I could help, but I had no idea the extent of my medium abilities.

“I don’t care!” Violet said. “I’d risk everything to have you back.”

I believed her, and I knew Lilac did, too.

Lilac turned to me, his face twisted in anguish. “Please, tell her not to pursue this,” he said, more serious than I’d seen him before.

I was about to do just that when I realized I didn’t have the heart to do it. They were both so sad, and I could only imagine how painful it had to be to lose someone, only to have them return just beyond your reach. Also, it was one thing to lose someone once, but to lose them twice would be pure torture. And yet here I was, caught in the middle.

While being Lilac’s link to the living world was tiring, to put it lightly, I understood how fortunate Violet was to have even a shot at getting him back. I also knew that I couldn’t keep this up forever.

“What did he say?” Violet’s voice took me out of my thoughts.

“I can try to look into this,” I said. “But I can’t promise anything.”

“Good,” Lilac said, his arms crossed. “Just tell her it’s not worth it. We don’t know what we’re messing with.”

Doing my best to ignore Lilac, I turned to his sister. “Sound good?”

Violet nodded as she stood up. “Thank you, Marta. Really.” I was surprised when she threw her arms around me in a tight hug. “You looking into it means a lot to me.”

As I closed the door on her, I turned to see a glaring Lilac. “What?”

“You know exactly what,” he said.

“I wasn’t going to break your sister’s heart, okay?” I said, climbing into bed. “She’s been too kind to me. I can’t do it, I’m sorry.”

He didn’t answer me—great, a ghost was giving me the silent treatment. I did my best to ignore him, settling into the bed, willing sleep to come. Only now I wasn’t tired.

Was there more to my power as a medium? I stole a peek at Lilac who was now sitting with his back turned to me on the other side of the room. I felt for him, and for Violet too. They were both putting me in a difficult position.

As I tried to drift off to sleep, a question kept repeating in my head. It was incessant, like Violet had been at my door. Was I capable of bringing someone back from the dead?

**Episode 1305**

AVA

I watched the sun rise over the tree line as I paused and caught my breath. I was in wolf form and had been running all night long. I had a pack of clothes on my back, and the pack house was far behind me.

I’d needed to leave that place. I just hadn’t been able to take it anymore. Seeing Cali and Xavier near each other made my insides hurt, and it was more than clear that no one in the pack wanted me there—even though if it hadn’t been for me, Xavier would still have been Iñigo’s prisoner. Sure, maybe I was the reason he’d been in Iñigo’s clutches in the first place, but I hadn’t planned for Xavier to become so entangled in Iñigo’s schemes.

How quickly things had spiraled out of control. I’d hoped that by showing allegiance to Xavier, he would see the mistake he’d made in un-mating from me. I’d hoped he would beg me to come back.

*How foolish could I be?*

As tempted as I was to take all of this out on Cali—and no matter how pleasurable it would be to rip her throat out—I knew that Xavier would never forgive me for it, and he would make it his life mission to kill me. Again.

Whatever I was going to do, I needed to figure it out fast. I couldn’t just roam the woods indefinitely.

I sprinted off toward the highway, deciding to change direction. I could maybe hitch a ride and buy some time until I figured out what to do. I weaved between the tree trunks, enjoying the feel of the wind in my fur. It felt good to let loose. Last night’s run had melted away some of the tension that I’d been holding in my body, and running in the sunlight made me feel invigorated and free.

I caught a whiff of something foul, and I slowed down and put my nose in the air. It smelled like death. That could only mean one thing: fucking *vampires*.

I slid to a stop, my senses on high alert. There was a noise behind me, and I spun around to see six vampires coming toward me with their disgusting fangs bared.

One of them was tall and broad and had a forehead laced with green veins. He looked more like a mutant than a vampire. He pointed at me. “The boss wants to see you,” he hissed.

I growled. I had no boss. Who was this jerk? The vampire hissed as the others began closing in. If I didn’t act, I was going to be in big trouble. Without another thought, my wolf leapt at the green vein guy. Just like that, all hell broke loose.

I locked my jaws around the green jerk’s neck and yanked him to the ground. I thrashed my head back and forth until I heard the satisfying crack of his neck breaking. Then I reared back, ripping his throat out before he could recover. His blood was bitter and cold in my mouth, but it was worth it. It felt good to take the asshole out.

Before I could move on to my next victim, two vampires flanked me and grabbed me by the scruff while they hissed and spat like banshees. One of them was a tall pale woman with gold front teeth and the longest pair of fangs I’d ever seen. The other was a mousy guy with sparse brown hair who looked like this was his first time braving daylight.

I lunged for the mousy one, managing to twist out of his grasp—though the woman held tight. I was inches from his face when his fist shot out, bashing me in the snout. I howled in pain and went limp in the woman’s hands.

She slammed me to the ground and leaned in close, preparing to literally drain the fight out of me. Her smell was overwhelming, and her fangs were dripping saliva onto my fur. Gross.

“I’m going to enjoy this,” she said.

I struggled beneath her weight as she tightened her grip around my neck, trying to hold it steady. She was strong, and soon I couldn’t move. As a last-ditch effort, I shifted to human form, sending her off balance enough that I managed to slide out from under her.

I quickly shifted back to wolf form and locked onto her arm, ripping it clean off. Rancid, blackened blood sprayed everywhere. I was nearly blind with it when I went for her again, this time catching her by the jugular and tearing her throat out. I imagined she was Cali, and that made the sight of her lifeless body falling to the ground all the sweeter. Two down.

I was making headway, but there were still four of them left, and they were moving around so quickly that I couldn’t pin them down in my sights long enough to lash out and attack.

In the end, I never got the chance.

Two of them sped toward me, and I felt something prick me in my left haunch. *Did they just inject me with something?* I rounded on them and growled with such savagery that I surprised myself. Then I felt my body getting weak. The mousy guy didn’t even bother to move as I loped toward him, my paws dragging in the dirt.

I collapsed at his feet. My body shifted back to human, and I couldn’t even lift my head up from the ground.

“We got her ass,” I heard one of them say. I drifted in and out of consciousness as I was picked up and slung over someone’s shoulder. And then I blacked out.

Strange visions floated through my mind—images of Xavier and me during happier times, and strange scenes of me, Xavier, and Colton running through a field of daisies. We were play fighting, nipping at each other’s heels and howling into the wind.

Werewolves loved shifting and bounding through flower fields—at least, I did. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been able to just enjoy being what I was without having to fight or attack or scheme.

I wished that the images were real, but even in my dream state, I knew that something else awaited me on the other side of the daisy field, lurking in the dark recesses of the woods that seemed to stretch toward me like hands.

From time to time, I came out of the dream to stare at the metal roof above me. I knew I was in a car. *Where are they taking me?* I slipped back into the dream world a few more times before the fog in my head finally cleared and I realized the car had stopped.

I looked around and sat halfway up, trying to calm the dizziness in my head. I gasped. We were at Iñigo’s estate; I would’ve known his fucking tacky mansion anywhere. Of course it was him. He probably hadn’t given the vampires anything to conceal their scent so I knew they’d be coming. Fuck.

I dropped back down to the seat and closed my eyes. Whatever they’d injected me with was starting to wear off. My head was getting clearer by the second, and I felt the strength returning to my arms and legs.

The mousy guy—who wasn’t as diminutive as I’d first thought—opened the car door and pulled me out. He slung me over his shoulder and carried me into the mansion. I pretended that I was still out of it, knowing that I would need the element of surprise on my side when I came to and ripped them all to shreds.

I saw Iñigo as soon as we entered a wide, open foyer with a sparkling chandelier hanging from the ceiling. He was wearing a black shirt and jeans and no shoes or socks—like he’d been relaxing before we arrived.

“She killed Horace and Eliza,” one of the vampires told Iñigo.

“I’m not surprised,” Iñigo replied. “She’s strong.”

The mousy one propped me up against the wall in the corner of the room. He pulled out a pair of handcuffs and was preparing to chain me up to a metal eye hook jutting out of the wall when Iñigo stopped him.

“She’s still drugged,” Iñigo said. “Too weak to do any harm.” Then he waved his hand, dismissing the group.

I waited there, slouched against the wall with my eyes only half-closed as I watched them all leave. I could feel Iñigo’s eyes taking me in. I knew I had to be patient. I couldn’t blow it now. I’d only have one chance to do this, and I had to make it count. I breathed in deep as Iñigo approached and knelt in front of me.

“You keep coming back,” he said. He reached out to stroke my hair, and at that moment, I partially shifted and lunged at him. I caught him by the neck with one hand and pinned him to the ground.

I couldn’t believe how easy that was. Glee rose in my stomach as I contemplated my next move. I’d been waiting for this moment.

Iñigo didn’t struggle—he just lay there with his throat exposed and his cold eyes fixed on mine.

“What now, Ava?” he asked.

**Episode 1306**

I opened my eyes to the soft light of early morning. I resisted the urge to tunnel back under the covers while I talked myself into getting up and starting my day. I threw back the covers and stretched, then padded into the bathroom. I yawned and stared into the mirror. I was groggy, and I looked it. I gave my face a vigorous rub, trying to shake off the cloudiness in my head.

I was still only half-awake when I stepped into the shower. The tepid water made me feel even more sluggish, and I turned the knob to warm it up a bit. Beneath the persistent lethargy, I was frustrated. I’d had a sexually charged dream starring one of my mates, but I couldn’t remember which one. The only thing I remembered about it was that there had been a tugboat involved.

*What the hell was that about?*

The water warmed and felt good against my skin. I closed my eyes, hoping it would take the edge off my agitation, or at least help me forget the dream altogether. Instead, the tickle of the water cascading over my body only intensified the frustration the dream had left in its wake.

I moaned and ran my hands from my hips to my stomach and all the way up to cup my breasts. I squeezed them together, letting the water pool in my cleavage while my mind wandered a bit. The exact details of the dream remained as hazy as the steamy bathroom—save for the random tugboat—but the sensations it had left behind lingered and demanded my attention.

It was no wonder I’d dreamed about Xavier and Greyson. In my dreams, I didn’t have to deny myself the thing that I wanted: uninterrupted, curse-free time with my mates. In my dreams, I didn’t have to choose between them, and there was no danger of madness or death if I didn’t make the right decision.

No, in my dreams I could do everything I fantasized about every time I laid eyes on them. I pictured Xavier and the captivating intensity in his blue eyes. I remembered how rough he could be, yet also gentle, and the way that every passionate moment we shared was unpredictable and exciting.

Xavier had strong hands, and he used them in ways that flaunted how experienced and confident he was. It would’ve been so amazing to have access to all that sexy self-assuredness whenever I wanted, without consequences.

It was getting harder and harder to stay away from him, to deny myself. I imagined running my hands through his hair and raking my fingernails across the taut, tanned skin of his chest. My arousal deepened, and I slid my hands down to touch the slick, swollen flesh between my legs.

I thought about Xavier’s cock as I slipped a finger inside myself, forgetting for a moment all of the fantastic, deadly barriers that stood between us and true intimacy.

I toyed with my left nipple, imagining that my fingers were Xavier’s tongue, while my other hand took on a life of its own. The water was the perfect lubricant for my fingers as I dipped them in and out, wishing that Xavier’s cock was in their place.

I rocked my palm against my clit and imagined Xavier on top of me, grinding me into the bed, his breath coming hot and choppy against my neck. I moaned again and sagged against the wall as I spread my legs wider so that my fingers could plunge deeper.

I was nearly over the edge when I thought of Greyson instead. I imagined taking handfuls of his blond hair in my fists as his face moved between my legs, his tongue darting in and out of me in a delicious rhythm before he rose to cover my body with his.

I came as I imagined flipping him over onto his back and riding him, my hips bucking against him in my mind, my fingers bucking against myself in reality with the same cadence. I covered my mouth as a satisfied whimper slipped from my lips. My knees went weak, and I slid to the floor of the shower, letting the water run over me.

Now I was awake.

I got out soon after and dried off, feeling wonderfully blank for a moment. I’d just pulled out my hair dryer when my phone rang. I took a quick glance at it and saw that it was Lola. I answered immediately, walking out of the steamy bathroom into the cool air of my bedroom.

“How’s vampire school?” I asked.

“Ugh, don’t call it that, but it’s a disaster!” Lola groaned. “There’s a bunch of mean girls—hello again, high school. But worse than that, I’m having… *thoughts*,” Lola said.

“Thoughts?” I asked, once I realized that she wasn’t going to elaborate. “Thoughts about what?”

“*Sex*,” Lola breathed. “All I can think about is sex!”

I thought about my shower, and a wave of heat spiked through my body. “Is this because you’re away from Jay?” I asked, my voice sounding thick, even to my own ears.

“I *wish* that was only it! It’s like a curse!” Lola said.

“Being cursed is not something to joke about when some of us really *are* cursed!” I snapped.

“Cali, I’m not joking. I’m experiencing a vampire heat!” Lola whined.

“A what what?” I’d never heard of that before. “Vampire heat” sounded like the name of a bad cover band.

“It’s this thing I just learned about,” Lola said. “I’ve been googling all night long, but there’s very little info. But I do know this: it can drive a vampire to do crazy things. Sexual things.” She whispered the last part of the sentence like she was afraid of being overheard.

I laughed. “I’m worried about what you might do to Jay the next time he visits!”

“It’s not funny!” Lola said. “What if I do something *before* Jay visits?”

“Wait, what are you saying?” I asked, serious now. “You’d *never* cheat on Jay, Lola.” I thought back to when I was first dealing with *due destini* and how challenging it had been to juggle such intense and dangerous feelings for two men. Now, I was a pro at it. “I think having those kinds of thoughts is pretty normal. It’s not like you’d ever act on them.” There was a long pause. “Right, Lola?”

“But what if I did?” Lola said.

“Oh no… You’re not even considering that, are you? Do you remember the grief you gave me when I admitted to kissing Greyson?” I asked.

“Exactly, I’ve become you, Cali!”

Now I was annoyed. “You make that sound like it’s a bad thing,” I said.

“You know what I mean!” Lola screeched.

“Just don’t do anything you’re going to regret,” I said. “You haven’t, have you?”

“Of course not… But there’s this professor…”

“Lola! A *professor*? Seriously?” She hadn’t even been at the place two days and she was already trying to break all the rules. Did vampire schools even *have* rules about that sort of thing?

“Nothing’s happened!” Lola said quickly. “But what if it does?”

“Just make sure nothing does. If you get the urge, just text me,” I told her. “Remember: You *love* Jay. He’s your mate.”

We hung up soon after, and I returned to the bathroom to blow dry my hair before I got dressed. I was feeling a little rattled after Lola’s call. The vampire school was supposed to be helping her, not stressing her out.

I went downstairs to the kitchen and was startled to find Greyson there, drinking a cup of tea. He put the cup down as I approached and flashed me a smile.

“Morning, love,” he said.

I froze, and for a moment I wondered if he knew about my sexy dream—and the even sexier shower. I felt heat rising to my cheeks and knew for sure that I was blushing like crazy.

“Did Xavier tell you he was leaving last night with the witch?” he asked. Phew, he didn’t know about this morning.

“He did,” I said. “And it doesn’t change anything.”

Greyson laughed. “I know better than to think it would.” He stood up. “I’m going to go check on York. Sage could probably use a break. She’s been watching him for the past few hours.”

He walked past me, but I stopped him before he could leave the kitchen.

“I’m going to go with you,” I said. “York has some connection to Artemis, and I want to find out exactly what that connection is.”

“Sure, I don’t see why not,” Greyson said.

I followed him down to the basement. I tripped on a loose piece of carpet on our way down, and Greyson grabbed my hand. At his touch, a quick replay of that morning’s shower session flashed through my head.

“Be careful,” Greyson said.

We made it the rest of the way without incident, though I was a little on edge now. Greyson opened the door to the room where York was being kept.

It was empty.

**Episode 1307**

GREYSON

I shifted into high alert. York was gone. Shit, when had that human had a chance to even leave?

“Stay close—do not leave my sight,” I said to Cali.

She nodded, her eyes wide as we both took in the stark reality of things. We hadn’t the slightest idea who this guy was, or what he was capable of. I should’ve come sooner.

“Where the hell is Sage?” I demanded. “How did no one notice this? Did she fall asleep on the job or something?”

My mind was racing, trying to figure out how I could have trusted her with such a big job when I didn’t even know her all that well, yet.

“Calm down,” Cali said. “It’ll be okay!”

“No, it won’t!” I barked. I didn’t want to hear it. *I told everyone to do one thing, one important thing, and this is what I get?* But there was no time to wallow in our failure—I had to fix this. I lifted my nose and sniffed the air. I caught a hint of York’s scent and followed it with Cali on my heels.

“How many rooms are down here?” Cali asked as we went room to room.

“I have no clue,” I said. I opened a door to a dark, damp, cold part of the basement that I’d never visited. I breathed a sigh of relief when I spotted York, curled up in a dark corner. I noticed again how cold it was down here, so much so that Cali was shivering. I pulled her close, trying to ignore the swooping sensation in my stomach at the feel of her pressed against me. I wished that I could have her right here next to me all the time. But there would be a time for that, and it wasn’t now.

“Sage!” I yelled, not bothering to keep the anger out of my voice.

Sage appeared a few moments later. “I was just looking for you,” she said. “York is—”

“Right there,” I said, pointing at York.

“Oh my god, Greyson, I’m so sorry. I really am. I’ve been so on edge with the whole undead running lose thing that I haven’t been sleeping all that well lately. Zainab says I have to stop drinking white chocolate mochas so late. I fell asleep by accident. That’s no excuse for leaving the human unsupervised, but that’s what happened,” she said. She was wringing her hands and wincing up a storm.

A bit of my anger drained away. “It’s okay,” I said. “I get it, but let’s try to be more careful next time,” I said. I sounded a bit like Xavier, I realized, and I shuddered at the thought.

“Maybe York sleepwalks?” Cali offered.

I shrugged. “Who knows?”

He could sleep *kill*, for as much as we knew about him. We had to be more careful and treat this like the serious issue that it was. We had no room for mess-ups.

“Sage, can I make you a cup of coffee? Maybe that will help,” Cali said. “Or enable you, I’m not really sure.”

I shook my head. “I’ve got this. Sage, could you grab Jay for me?” I asked. Sage sped away, all too ready to redeem herself. I turned back to York. He was still asleep, and as pale as a sheet. It was… unsettling.

I picked York up and returned him to his bed in the other room. York hadn’t even batted an eye through it all. I hoped that he was just a heavy sleeper and that there wasn’t something more sinister at play here. Jay came in just as I laid York down on the bed.

“Hey, everything cool?” Jay asked.

“It is now. I came down here to check on him and he was gone. I found him in a creepy corner of the basement. Sage had fallen asleep while watching him. No clue how he ended up in that room, or why he didn’t just try to make a break for it,” I explained.

“Wow, glad we caught him,” Jay said.

“Yeah. Would you mind watching him?” I asked Jay. I knew I could trust him to take this whole thing seriously.

“No problem,” Jay said with nod. “By the way, I just saw Maren bringing a bunch of suitcases down from her room. Did you know about that?”

“What?” My stomach dropped. Suitcases? What was she doing, trying to sneak away? I wasted no time bolting back upstairs. I found Maren at the bottom of the stairs with Fenrir, surrounded by the suitcases in question. She was certainly dressed for travel in a plain grey sweatshirt and jeans. Her thick hair was in a bun, and she eyed me as I approached.

“What’s going on?” I demanded.

Maren pointed to Torin, Tom, and Cali in the kitchen. “Fenrir, sweetie, I think Torin said he had a snack for you,” she said. She turned back to me once he was out of earshot. “You told me it would be safer here than in Portland.”

“And it is!” I insisted, even though I wasn’t sure if that was true anymore. Things were definitely a little crazy right now, but I’d at least done a good job of keeping her and Fenrir out of any direct danger.

Maren scoffed. “The undead? The vampires? We’ve been under assault from the moment we got here.”

Why was she doing this now? “Is this because of the DNA test? Because I went behind your back? I told you why—”

Maren held up her hand. “The DNA thing didn’t help, no doubt about that. But overall, I’ve just had enough of putting Fenrir in danger. Also, it’s clear that you and I still have some things to work out. Maybe some distance will be good for us.”

This was unbelievable. Why was it that every woman I met needed distance from me?

Maren gestured to the kitchen. “I don’t want to discuss this here, and I’ve already made up my mind.”

For one of the first times in my life, I felt completely helpless. I watched Maren carry Fenrir to an Uber that was idling at the curb and helped the driver put their bags into the trunk, my stomach in knots. I turned back to look at them. They were standing just a little behind me, Fenrir playing with a small green army man and Maren looking past me as if she didn’t want to meet my eyes.

At some level, I knew that Maren was right. The last thing I wanted to do was put my son—assuming he *was* my son—in any kind of danger. But where would Maren go? Back to Portland?

For us, nowhere was truly safe. Surely she realized that. People like us seemed to court danger, and it wasn’t unique to our pack house—no matter how much she wanted to think that leaving was the safer choice.

“You know, Aiden is still in Portland. And Hans. What about him? He *kidnapped* Fenrir,” I pressed.

“I’m aware of all of that. We’ll be fine. I survived without you before, and I’ll survive without you again,” she said.

Without wanting to, I thought back to the scar she’d given me. I didn’t doubt that she could handle herself, but that wasn’t the point. I looked down at Fenrir and was surprised by the pang of sadness in my chest.

“What about Fenrir? You wanted him to learn about werewolves,” I said. I was grasping at straws now.

“And I still do. But not now, and not this way. It’s just not safe for us. I’m sorry,” Maren said. She did really seem sorry, not that it made me feel any better. “Give Grey-Grey a hug,” Maren said to Fenrir.

Fenrir bounded up to me and wrapped his arms around my legs. I leaned down and put my arms around him, hoping that I’d see him again soon. We stayed that way for a while before Fenrir twisted free and ran back over to his mother.

I watched them both climb into the back seat of the car. Maren looked at me one last time before she shut the door and the car pulled away.

I released a huge sigh. It felt like everything was spiraling out of whack. It was like I had no control anymore when it came to protecting the people I loved, no matter how hard I tried.

Cali appeared at my side.

“I couldn’t help but overhear,” she said. “I’m really sorry, Greyson. But it sounded like Maren left the door open for Fenrir to come back.”

She reached out and took my hand. It felt good to have her with me. She was always a calming presence. *Except for when she brings trouble to our doorstep*, I thought fondly.

I forced a smile. “You’re right,” I said. And maybe Maren, was, too. We did have a lot of things to figure out.

My phone rang, and I pulled it out of my pocket. I stared at the screen, reading and re-reading the notification and feeling like I couldn’t take any more bad news—or any news at all. It was an email from the DNA Wellness Center.

*Your Results Are In!*

**Episode 1308**

AVA

I stared down at Iñigo, relishing the fact that I had overpowered him. For the first time in our entire history together, I was actually in control. I was the one with the upper hand—I was the dominant one, the dangerous one.

The sick thrill of him looking up at me as if he had surrendered was delicious.

But then he smirked at me. “What now, Ava?”

The bastard seemed amused. Unafraid*. Underestimating me.*

Gritting my teeth, I leaned forward and snapped, “Now I kill you.”

Iñigo, the most powerful vampire I’d ever known, was splayed underneath me, my thighs on either side of his torso, my hands on his neck. I started to apply pressure, just to see his eyes widen. I planned on enjoying this, my anger the only thing I could listen to right now.

I froze, though, when Iñigo started to laugh.

Why the *hell* was he *laughing?*

His reaction was so startling, the sound so rough and sexy that when our eyes met again, I felt a jolt of electricity shooting down my spine. That strange magnetic pull he had never failed to catch me off-guard, making my body go on high alert.

I hesitated for just a few seconds, overwhelmed.

But that was all that Iñigo needed.

He took advantage of my hesitation and moved quickly. He flipped us over and pinned me to the floor, his body on top of mine, pressing down. He held my wrists with both hands, tight and bruising.

We were both panting, and he stared deep into my eyes, watching my expression intently. It felt like he could see straight through me, and I hated it. I hated the whimper that was stuck in my throat at the sensation of his hardness against my stomach. I hated how good he smelled to me, when all other vampires smelled like death. I hated how transparent my feelings about him were.

When he laughed, essentially mocking me for my weakness, I wanted to bite his head off.

I growled up at him, struggling against him, but that just made him tighten his grip on me. He slammed me back once more, pinning me down with his hips flush against mine. It took everything I had not to arch up against him, not to lean in to the amazing friction.

“You like sparring with me, don’t you?” he asked with a smirk. “I can tell you’re into it.” He moved closer, his breath hot in my ear as he whispered, “I can smell how wet you are.”

There was mischief and challenge in his words, and I found that infuriatingly, disturbingly attractive. He wasn’t supposed to have the upper hand here. My body was not supposed to betray me so easily, to be so affected by him. I refused to let this keep going—I wasn’t going to indulge in his fantasy, whether I wanted to or not. With those thoughts burning inside my head, I roared and shifted fully into my wolf, twisting out from underneath him and circling back around.

I charged at him, claws out, teeth bared.

But the bastard just danced away to the side, his movements so quick and graceful that I couldn’t trap him down. I reminded myself that even Xavier had struggled while fighting vampires who were as old, as fast, as Iñigo, and at least that made me feel a little better about myself. Even though I was a good fighter, even though I aimed at the right spots, at the weakest parts of a vampire’s body, Iñigo was moving at a speed that very few would be able to match.

And the whole thing just enraged me even more.

His every move was defensive, like he was having fun. He seemed not to even want to hurt me anymore, was wasting no energy on me, because I was so useless, wasn’t I? I wanted to kick myself for not having ended this when I could have, when he’d been pinned underneath me. The thought made me growl again, and it was so loud and sudden that it actually startled him for a beat too long.

Surprise on my side, I managed to regain the upper hand.

I slammed him against the wall and shifted back to human, though without shifting the hand that had him trapped. I used my paw to hold him by the throat again, one of the very few places where vampires were vulnerable.

Even though I squeezed at his windpipe and he choked, he still managed to smile at the same time. It shouldn’t have been so goddamn sexy.

“You don’t actually want to kill me though, do you?” he asked.

I sneered at him. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m just saying, you’ve had quite a few opportunities to get rid of me.” His breathing came out sharp. “What’s holding you back?”

I resented the insinuation in his tone. “I could say the same about you.”

That was a great question, actually. One that I hadn’t allowed myself to ask earlier.

Was Iñigo keeping me around just because he was attracted to me and I was his little plaything? Had my seduction technique worked? Did he care about me enough to not dispose of me? Or did he want me alive because of the Fae? Because I was his ticket to them?

I was only hesitating to kill him because he remained the only way for me to get to Xavier. And if I offered Iñigo the Fae that we had agreed upon, he would restore my mate bond to Xavier. That was all there was to it.

“We’ve made a deal,” I told Iñigo. “The blood bond. You’re my way of getting Xavier back.”

Iñigo raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure you want him back?”

I let out a snarl. “Don’t you ever say that again!”

Iñigo chuckled. I stared down at him, at the amused smirk on his lips, and despite myself, I found him captivating. Killing those vampires earlier had been nothing. But somehow, here with Iñigo… Something about him spoke to me—in a bad way. In a dirty way. In a carnal, messed up way.

When I looked at him again, his smile had faded. There was no mockery in his gaze anymore. His eyes were dark with desire. He moved slightly upward, and my breath hitched as his lips pressed against mine.

The kiss stayed soft for a brief moment only, then his lips parted and his tongue was in my mouth, domineering. The way he tasted was sinful—not like blood or death, but like something delicious that I seemed to have developed a taste for.

I was naked after shifting; he was wearing a T-shirt and jeans, and I liked the sensation of the rough fabrics against my skin. I liked feeling him hard under me, over his pants, where I rubbed up against him with abandon, sparks of electricity blooming in the pit of my stomach. He groped and grabbed me all over, and the pressure of him underneath me, the friction he created between my legs as his hips arched up to me, made me moan.

I knew that I shouldn’t have been indulging in this with a sick bastard like him—not with so much on the line. Not when I was supposed to be thinking constantly about Xavier, about how important it was for us to be together.

Except I couldn’t help myself.

And the vampire seemed to be feeling the same, if the sounds he made and the way he kissed me were anything to go by. I let him sit up and lick across my collarbones like an animal before his mouth moved to my ear. I shivered, expecting a bite like the last time. But instead, he spoke in a whisper.

“Can’t keep fighting this, can we, Ava? You know it feels too good.”

His words made me tremble, but I refused to be docile. I refused to keep this game between us like it used to be. I looked right into his eyes. “You kissed me first. Seems to me that you’re the one who can’t resist.”

The fire in my gaze made him laugh. It was a melodic, chilling sound that caught me off-guard. It was enough for him to flip us over and get on top of me as I writhed on the ground. It all felt too good. I shouldn’t have encouraged it as I slipped my hands under his shirt. I shouldn’t have said yes when he asked me if I wanted him to touch me.

I shouldn’t have wanted any of it.

He held my wrists over my head while his other hand trailed down my breasts, over my stomach and then between my legs. His touch was featherlight there, teasing, making me hiss. At the same time, he leaned down forward, toward my neck. I knew I could shift any second, but everything he was doing felt too amazing to deny.

And then, with his fangs brushing against the skin of my throat, Iñigo said, “Join me.”

**Episode 1309**

GREYSON

I stared at the notification on my phone. The contents of this email could very well change my entire life. The world disappeared around me as I stared at the notice—all I had to do was click on it to see the results. There was part of me that was scared of what would happen next, but at the same time, not knowing was not an option. Not knowing would not sit well with my conscience.

I took a deep breath, preparing to tap on it and find out the truth once and for all. It was insane that I had fought so many deadly battles, but somehow this one email felt scarier than anything I’d ever faced. Even facing my own father.

Having a kid would turn my life upside down, and I was petrified about what it would mean for me and Cali. The thought of her made me remember the dream I’d had, about having children… A healthy, feisty baby girl. It was a wonderful fantasy, the idea of which I couldn’t resist.

“Greyson?” Cali’s voice startled me back to reality. She was right next to me, her eyes wide as she stared. “Are you okay? You look like you’re about to pass out.”

I looked away from her. I didn’t want to tell her what was going on until I had answers. She needed answers as well, and continuing to drag this out would only make her worry more.

“It’s nothing,” I said, clearing my throat. “I just need a second.”

I turned my back on her, ready to click on the email, my thumb hovering over it.

But then, there was a bloodcurdling scream from upstairs.

It barely fucking surprised me at this point.

Screaming when I was about to find out something that would change my entire life? Of course. What else could I even expect? This house was full of drama, day in and out, and I always had to be there to deal with every deadly and non-deadly situation.

In some ways, I was looking forward to having an actual kid to deal with instead of a pack of werewolf problems. Cursing under my breath, I pocketed my phone and followed Cali upstairs.

“What do you think happened?” Cali asked me.

Before I could reply, we both spotted Zainab, leaning over Jay. He was unconscious, looking like he was sleeping—apart from the blood trickling from his hairline. My stomach clenched. Jay was an strong wolf. What could have possibly made him fall like this?

Where was York?

Zainab looked up from Jay to me, her eyes wide. I realized that she’d been the one to scream. “I was just walking by the room and I saw Jay, and look!” She pointed to a window that had decidedly *not* been open when we’d left Jay and York in the room.

The guy was nowhere to be seen.

I checked on Jay and confirmed that he was still breathing, which was a huge fucking relief. The idea of anyone from the pack getting hurt was horrible, much less someone like Jay, who I’d grown to appreciate. Also, I didn’t even want to know what my brothers would do if anything ever happened to this guy. Not to mention drama queen Lola.

My relief was tainted by a bit of annoyance, though. Why had Jay decided to bring York upstairs? Had he? I glanced at Zainab. “Go get Torin.”

Zainab nodded and dashed out of the room as Cali sank town next to Jay.

“Wake up, Jay,” Cali said, sniffling. “I can’t ever let anything happen to you! Think about Lola—what would she do without you? She’ll kill me!” Cali kept mumbling, gently patting his face. She seemed so worried, and I was too.

How had this even happened in the first place?

“Do you think York hurt him?” Cali asked. “How would he even have done that?”

“I don’t know.” I rose from the ground and moved to the window to look outside. I didn’t see anything. The lawn looked perfectly peaceful. Two squirrels were chasing each other, but that was about it when it came to excitement. No sign of York.

Where the hell had he gone?

Seriously, he was just a scrawny guy and a human at that, and he’d seemed scared. But how had he escaped Jay? He must have surprised him… But how was that possible? Had York really been scared enough to have made a run for it? This didn’t make any sense. And I definitely didn’t have the energy for it.

When would it be my time for some sort of vacation? I was *so* ready for it. Then again, I doubted Cali would just drop everything and follow me to some exotic destination with nothing but a bikini in a carry-on bag.

No, I knew I couldn’t drop everything either, not with the pack. But it was still nice to think of an easier, good time ahead of where we were now.

“What are you thinking?” she asked me.

I glanced at her beautiful mouth. Then at her beautiful eyes. Then I gave her a tight smile. “How we can never catch a break.”

Cali sighed heavily, and that single gesture definitely mirrored my feelings. Right on cue, Zainab rushed back into the room, Torin hot on her heels. I made a mental note to thank the Fae for always being there for us. I wondered what he got out of being here, apart from acting like our live-in nurse. Was Tom’s food so good that he considered it payment enough? I felt like we were kind of exploiting him and would probably need to repay him somehow, at some point.

The Fae made a beeline for Jay, and Cali moved aside to let Torin check him over. He leaned over Jay, waving his hands and doing the glow-y purple magic thing he always did.

The cut on Jay’s head instantly sealed up, but Torin frowned. “Why isn’t he waking up?” He waved his hands again, with obvious concentration. But still, nothing. He looked up at me, looking worried. “There’s nothing physically wrong with him anymore. He should be awake.”

Well. Wasn’t this great news.

“Thank you, Torin.” I turned to the girls. “Cali, Zainab, stay here with Jay and make sure he’s okay.” My tone was sharp, my patience running thin.

I made a move to leave the room, but then Cali asked, “Where are you going?”

“I can’t have that guy York wandering around the pack house, especially not if he’s attacking people. I’m going to deal with this right now,” I said, and walked out of the room.

Thankfully, Cali was worried enough about Jay that she hung back. I made it my mission to examine every inch of the pack house, and then the lawn. But everything seemed normal; there was no sign of York anywhere.

As I stood on the lawn, I looked out over the lake and saw ominous clouds gathering. Dark clouds. That seemed a little weird. The weather had been good so far today. I scowled as the clouds grew, faster than any I’d ever seen before. And then I realized that they were heading directly for the pack house.

I couldn’t believe this—the last thing I needed right now was a storm with a mind of its own. Where the hell was my Caribbean vacation, damn it! Before I could do anything to stop the storm—and just *how* were you supposed to stop something like that?—there was an enormous flash of lightning and a booming clap of thunder.

My heart pounding, I caught a glimpse of movement at the edge of the lawn. It was a figure.

A person.

But now that it had started to rain heavily, I lost sight of it.

That didn’t matter, though—I was determined to get to the bottom of this. Freak storms were not on the list of things that scared me.

I took off after the figure, heading for the woods. The storm was fully upon us now, and I struggled to see through the sheets of rain. I felt like I was in some sort of video game as I jumped over obstacles—fallen trees that the wind had destroyed, large pieces of hail that landed on the ground like rocks… The chaos around me seemed to come into a halt when, in a flash of lightning—literally—York appeared.

He stood a few feet away from me, directly in my line of vision.

I could barely believe what the fuck was happening. Had this supposed human seriously just traveled by lightning? What in the name of actual fucking Zeus was going on right now? I hadn’t been this confused in a while.

“What are you—” I started to speak, but a growl from York cut me off.

Suddenly, he didn’t look human.

Suddenly, the guy’s eyes started glowing orange, a vicious look on his face.

It made a lot more sense that he’d managed to knock Jay out, now. But what was I supposed to do? Shift? Just bite his head off and get this over with? Or would those glowing orange eyes poison me, or something?

I took a step back. “I just want to talk. If you could stop doing that—”

I didn’t finish my sentence.

York lunged straight at me.

**Episode 1310**

VIOLET

As Marta and I entered the living room, I couldn’t stop thinking about the possibility of bringing Lilac back. I was high off of the prospect from my conversation with her yesterday. My hopes were sky high—I couldn’t help it, couldn’t stop myself from considering the situation and seeing that as a viable option.

Of course, I would never have thought that bringing him back was possible, but Ava was living proof that it could happen. *Literally* living. The magic required existed. We just had to figure it out.

“This house never relaxes, huh?” Marta was saying as we ran into the living room. Before I could agree or disagree, I noticed something odd outside, in the sky. A storm was brewing, though I could have sworn that the sky had been blue not five minutes ago.

“This is so weird…” I said under my breath. Before I could dwell on it too much, though, I spotted Big Mac a few feet away, also staring through a window. With Marta right behind me, I rushed toward her, hope vibrating in my chest.

“Big Mac—”

She shushed me with the wave of her hand. She kept looking out at the lawn, clearly disturbed by the strange storm. But I couldn’t focus on that right now. If there was a way that she could help me bring my brother back, I needed to know sooner rather than later.

I pushed Marta forward, nodding between her and Big Mac. The medium rolled her eyes a little, but then conceded. She’d probably realized that I wasn’t going to leave this alone.

“Big Mac—”

“No.”

Despite the witch’s deadpan tone, Marta continued. “We’ve been thinking—I mean, we want to know whether it would be possible to bring Lilac back. For real.”

I nodded eagerly. “Like Ava!”

Big Mac stopped staring into the yard and turned to both of us with a massive sigh. “Oh, boy. I do NOT need this right now.”

I frowned. “But—”

Big Mac raised her hand in a “halt” gesture. “Please, kids, don’t do this to me. I have enough on my plate at the moment.”

“I know you do, but—”

Big Mac didn’t wait for me to finish. Instead, she swept out onto the lawn, heading straight toward that strange storm. Frustrated, I was about to follow her when my cell phone suddenly vibrated in my back pocket.

“Aren’t you going to get that?” Martha asked, raising an eyebrow. “It might be Charlie.”

I had the slight suspicion that Marta did not want to do this with me—*this* being chasing after a very powerful witch who was running toward a weird storm. Nevertheless, Marta had a point about the phone call. When I pulled my cell out of my pocket and saw Charlie’s name on the screen, I grinned.

“It is him!”

Martha smiled at me indulgently. She had become quite the little trickster. But even I couldn’t deny that Charlie was the only thing that could distract me from my Lilac mission. I picked up the phone, moving slightly aside to talk to my mate in private.

“Violet?” Charlie said.

I instantly melted, all my worries settled by the sound of his voice. “I’m so happy to hear from you,” I sighed.

“I’m always happy to hear your voice, too,” Charlie said.

I missed him so badly. Sometimes, I ached with how much I needed to see him, to kiss him.

“How are you?” I asked throatily. “Have you started any of your training yet?”

“Not yet, but it starts today.” Charlie sounded sheepish. “I’m so not ready.”

I chuckled. He was adorable. “Don’t worry, this is good. The sooner you get started, the sooner you’ll be able to get through the training and come back to me.”

Charlie’s tone changed. It became soft, charged. “I miss you so much already. I can’t stop thinking about you.”

I sank down into a chair, my heart pounding at his words. “I miss you too.” I bit my lower lip, glancing around to make sure that I was alone. And then, I was as bold enough to say, “I actually had a dream about you last night.”

I could hear the smile in Charlie’s voice. “Oh yeah? What kind of dream?”

He sounded playful, and I loved it. It made me feel so carefree, despite all the darkness in my life. Slyly, I said, “It was a very fun dream. We were on a beach, somewhere tropical…”

Charlie’s tone became breathy. “Were you wearing a bathing suit?”

I was blushing, but I powered through. “No.”

“What where you wearing, then?”

I swallowed. “Nothing. Neither of us were wearing anything.”

Charlie’s voice came out like a rumble. “*Shit*, Violet.”

My whole face was on fire. I would have given anything to have him wrap his hands around me, put them all over me right now. It felt too risqué for me, but I didn’t want to stop talking to him about my dream. It felt so amazing to share naughty things like this with him, my mate.

“You gave me a massage with the sunscreen,” I said, blushing fiercely. If I could see myself, I’d probably look like a beet. “I really liked it.”

“Did I make you feel good?” Charlie breathed, and suddenly, I needed to be in my room for this conversation. My heart was racing, and my legs felt a little wobbly, even though I was sitting.

What I wouldn’t have given for him to be here with me, whispering that question in my ear.

“Everything you did was amazing—”

Before I could finish my sentence, there was a commotion on the other end of the line, startling me.

“Wait, what’s that?” I demanded.

Charlie didn’t respond, which was worrisome on its own. On the other line it was just a mish mash of clattering and muffled swears.

Panic rose up inside me. My voice got loud. “Charlie? What’s going on? Is everything okay?”

When Charlie still didn’t respond, I jumped up, pacing up and down as I strained my ears. I was desperate to figure out what was going on over there. And then, I heard a hissing sound—a hissing sound that reminded me of a vampire.

*Oh no!*

Before I could freak out even further, Charlie was right back on the line. “Sorry about that,” he said, sounding a little breathless.

I gasped. “Where were you?”

“Right here, actually.”

The casualness to his tone was unbelievable. “Seriously? What just happened?”

He cleared his throat. “It was nothing, don’t worry. Just a rogue teapot and tablecloth that I, uh, unceremoniously knocked over. No big deal,” he said. “I guess it decided to attack me when you started describing the things I did to you in your dream.”

My breath hitched. The idea that he’d gotten so turned on that he’d literally tripped over something made me blush. “So you just killed the supernatural teapot, and that was no big deal?”

Charlie snorted. “They’re not as tough as they seem, I guess. I crushed it in seconds.”

“I guess that’s what happens when you’re a big bad vampire hunter,” I teased. “You get rid of your enemies super quickly.”

“About that dream, though,” Charlie said, clearing his throat again. “I think I need a little more detail—”

“Charlie?” The unmistakable sound of Iris’s voice in the background made my blood go cold. “Charlie? I heard something fall. Are you okay?”

“Shit! I’m sorry, I’ve got to go,” Charlie whispered, and hung up immediately.

I pressed my lips together, glaring at the phone. I hated that we had to sneak around, but at the same time I understood the importance of it.

Just as I stood up from the chair to resume my mission of bothering Big Mac, Marta and the witch in question passed by me, heading out to the front porch. Big Mac was rolling her eyes, and Marta was right behind her, rambling.

Excited by this new development—Marta was following Big Mac, and Big Mac hadn’t killed her yet—I followed them out. Just then, I heard Marta say, “But you have to admit that it’s possible, right? Even I have heard of necromancy…”

Big Mac whirled around, and both Marta and I stopped dead in our tracks. The witch’s face was fierce. Her patience was very evidently running thin. She looked between us and scoffed before sneering. “You girls don’t know what you’re playing with. Necromancy is the most dangerous form of magic, and it’s never free. If you think *my* deals are bad, you have no idea what kind of payment those spells would require.”

I stepped forward, looking Big Mac in the eye. I wasn’t scared of her. I wasn’t scared of anyone when it came to saving my brother.

“This isn’t a game to me,” I declared. “I’m not messing around. I’d give anything to have Lilac back in the human world.”

Big Mac leveled me with a stare. Her eyes were piercing. “Anything, Violet?” There was a challenge in her voice. “Even your own life?”

**Episode 1311**

I sat there with Zainab, Torin, and the still-unconscious Jay. We had moved him onto the bed. He lay there, breathing evenly, his eyes closed. I hadn’t called Lola yet to tell her about this. I hoped that everything would be resolved soon. I hoped that Jay would be okay.

*And what the hell am I supposed to tell her?* I wondered. *A human with some weird relationship with my sister did something to your mate*?

Lola would be furious. And panicky. And not helpful at all, in general. I loved my friend, but it was true.

Torin stared at Jay, still shaking his head in confusion. “I don’t understand why he’s not waking up. It doesn’t make any sense. Is he in a coma?”

*None* of this made any sense. I thought back to the first time I’d seen York—in the cemetery with Artemis. My sister had a part in all this, and whatever exactly it was, it wasn’t good.

I stared at Jay, a lump in my throat. *If anything happens to him…*

Suddenly, Jay’s lips parted and he took a huge gasp of air. He bolted upright, his eye wild. I shrieked in shock and fear.

All three of us—Torin, Zainab, and myself—literally fell back, astonished and freaked out.

“What the *HELL?*” I burst out.

Jay was panting, his expression panicked. He looked so different than usual, so unlike his calm, sweet self that my heart was hammering. In a voice that I didn’t recognize, he said, “It’s here.”

*I’m sorry, WHAT?!*  I screamed inside my head. The change in Jay’s tone, the strange light in his eyes… It all reminded me of Arlo’s strange voice, of the strange look in Artemis’s eyes. *Oh my god*, was Jay—our beautiful, one-eyed Jay—turning into one of those horrible zom—revenants?

*What’s happening here?*

This was bad. Lola would never forgive me if I let her mate turn into the undead on my watch. She was very particular about her mate, and she generally preferred him alive. But the whole vampire thing probably complicated things…

I scrambled closer to Jay. “What did you just say?”

Jay turned to look at me. To my immense relief, the strange look in his eye was gone.

*He’s looking more like himself. He’s okay*,I told myself, relieved. *Lola’s not going to kill me. Yet at least*.

Jay swallowed thickly and blinked in confusion. In his normal voice, he said, “What just happened?”

“How are you feeling?” Torin asked Jay, looking both intrigued and as freaked out as I was.

Jay grabbed his throat. “I’m so thirsty.”

Zainab jumped up. “I’ll get you some water!” She ran downstairs while I stared at Jay.

“What do you remember?” I asked him urgently.

Jay’s lips turned into a thin line. “I don’t really remember anything.”

“Can you try?” Torin asked him hopefully.

Jay looked between Torin and me and took a deep breath. “I think… I was coming up here with York. York was hungry…”

“What happened after that?” I prompted.

Jay paused. “I leaned over to ask him what he wanted to eat, and then…”

I taped my foot on the ground impatiently. “And then what?”

Jay blinked between Torin and me. He shrugged. “Nothing.”

I let out a sharp sigh. “Clearly he attacked you.”

“Yeah,” Torin said. “That’s what I gathered, too.”

I was not impressed by our interrogation and detective skills. Torin and I were literally stating the obvious. But apparently the obvious would have to do. I helped Jay sit up on the bed and fluffed the pillow behind his back.

“Do you need anything else other than water?” I asked. “Are you feeling okay? Dizzy, maybe?”

Jay looked at me, blinking. “Cali, I’m okay. Stop fussing.”

*Easy for him to say*, I thought to myself, still panicked.

“What about your head, though?” Torin asked Jay.

“My head is actually killing me,” Jay admitted.

That meant that he *wasn’t* okay. Obviously! I thought back to that strange voice he’d used and cleared my throat. “Do you remember when you first woke up? What you said?”

Jay squinted at me. “You mean when I asked what happened?”

I realized that he didn’t remember the other part. The creepy part. “No. You just stared at us and said, ‘It’s here.’ What did you mean by that?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Jay said, shaking his head. Then he winced, holding his head as if the pain was suddenly too much.

Torin and I exchanged a wary look. I patted the healer on the shoulder. “Please stay here with Jay and make sure he’s all right. I need to go tell Greyson what happened.”

Zainab arrived with Jay’s water as I rushed out the room. At the same time, I heard Torin tell Jay, “Maybe I should put a cold compress on your head, see what happens. I watched a very interesting documentary with Tom the other day about how compresses usually help humans with headaches.”

Bless Torin, honestly.

Certain that Jay was in good hands, I climbed down the stairs. But as I moved past the windows, I noticed that there was a huge storm outside. A weird storm. A storm that looked eerily familiar.

*Please, don’t tell me it’s like that other one…*

Just then, just as I reached the living room, Greyson staggered into the house. He was completely soaked in rain water, dragging a subdued York behind him. Big Mac, Marta, and Violet entered the house behind them. York remained like a limp doll in Greyson’s arms.

*This is ridiculous!* I thought to myself. I would’ve smacked York if I hadn’t been certain that he probably had no idea what he was doing.

“What’s going on with this guy?” I asked Greyson, gesturing at York. Then I stared at my mate, my heart racing. “And are you okay? You’re soaking wet! What kind of freak storm was that?”

Greyson didn’t miss a beat. “I’m fine, but York is not. He is no ordinary human. He attacked me out there.”

I gasped. “He’s a zombie—damn it, I mean revenant?”

Because we *obviously* needed more of those around… Shit.

“He might be…” Greyson trailed off. “But I’m not sure. Something seems wrong with the guy, not necessarily malicious. Like he’s trying to resist something taking hold of him.”

“Not necessarily malicious” was encouraging as a characterization. NOT.

Big Mac, Violet, and Marta were all silent. My stomach clenched in concern. I was worried about the storm. I was worried about York. I was worried about Jay.

But above all, I was worried about what might have happened between Artemis and York in the cemetery.

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A few minutes later, York was once again tied up in the basement, because that was where he belonged. We couldn’t exactly just let him roam around the house, but we couldn’t exactly let him leave either.

Meanwhile, Greyson and I stayed with him to stand guard. Alone. I wasn’t sure if this was a good idea, but at least I had the Alpha with me. So if anything went wrong, I could blame Greyson. Seemed like a great plan.

Meanwhile, York was looking completely docile. Human. As if he didn’t know what had just happened. I was relieved, in a way. At least the imminent threat had been contained. I turned to Greyson and saw that he was still drenched from the freak storm, and also impeccably hot. It was unfair, as always.

He also seemed distracted, though.

He took his phone out of his pocket, staring at it. And then he put it away again.

This was pretty weird. Not supernaturally weird, just plain old weird.

I poked his shoulder. “What’s going on with you? You know, other than having someone attack you. That’s pretty routine around here, anyway.”

Greyson avoided my gaze. That in itself was very suspicious, considering he usually stared into my eyes like a lovelorn, sexy, brooding male model.

*Focus on the problem, Cali!* I scolded myself.

“It’s nothing,” he said, clearing his throat. He checked his phone one more time and blew out a breath. I gave him a flat look.

“Greyson. You can’t fool me. Whatever is on your phone is clearly important,” I said. “What is it?”

Greyson gave me a look I couldn’t interpret, but I could tell that he was conflicted. I moved closer, trying to comfort him without accidentally kissing him. Because that could happen. You know, by accident.

“You can tell me anything,” I said. “You know that.”

Suddenly, a thought struck me.

*Maren. Asking about the DNA test…*

How could I be so dense?

“It’s the DNA test results, isn’t it?” I asked Greyson, my eyes wide.

Greyson faced me this time. He looked haunted. “Yeah.”

My voice came out strangled. “You haven’t *looked* at it yet?”

Greyson shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Nope.”

I sighed. He seemed so anxious. “You need to look. You won’t feel better until you do.” I grabbed his hand and gave it a squeeze.

He met my eyes and slowly nodded.

Then he pulled out his phone once more. He clicked through the messages and exhaled sharply.

Meanwhile, I was freaking out.

*How the hell am I gonna feel if we find out that Fenrir is really Greyson’s son?* I wondered.

Breathlessly, I asked, “So? What is it?”

Swallowing roughly, Greyson held out the phone so I could see the screen.

“Fenrir isn’t my son,” he said.

**Episode 1312**

LOLA

I went straight back to my room after breakfast.

I closed the door behind me and leaned back against it. Like every dramatic teenager ever, I let out a heavy sigh. I couldn’t believe how exhausted I was from this place already. I was definitely going to skip a class to take a rest. I’d expected the first few days of classes to be intense, but this was overwhelming.

This was overwhelming in ALL possible ways, especially when I considered what Irma had said about… vampire *heat*.

I’d never even heard of anything like that!

Like I’d told Cali, I’d tried Googling it, but surprise *surprise*, I hadn’t found any information that looked legit, or even realistic. At least, as realistic as any information on vampires could be. I wanted to dismiss the whole heat situation outright, but I couldn’t deny that I’d been having all these, um—

*Urges*.

Urges and feelings—sexual feelings to do with my vagina, primarily—about things that I wanted to do to Emmett. With Emmett. All over Emmett. I thought back to what Irma said, about those feelings not going away until they were acted upon. Which was ridiculous. Outrageous. *Unethical!*

It was simply not an option. Obviously.

I would never cheat on Jay. I would rather die. I would rather kill myself and Emmett and everyone in this damn school.

Vampire heat, my ass!

It really just sounded like an excuse for some vampires to do whatever they wanted after they were turned. Though it kind of *felt* like a real thing that I had to resist, but anyway… The problem here was that I had no idea what to do about all these confusing emotions that I was feeling about a man who wasn’t my amazing mate.

Confusing *sexual* emotions. This was about the sex that I wanted to have with my teacher. I wanted to ride him, and I wanted him to ride me, and I wanted him to go down on me and pull at my hair and do all sorts of horrible filthy things that—

I shoved the thoughts away and groaned loudly, letting out a frustrated breath.

*Jay Taylor Young, Jay Taylor Young, Jay Taylor Young*, I repeated. *Love of your life, your mate.*

I’d already been through puberty once, I didn’t want to feel like a crazed teenager controlled by my hormones again! Or, if there was a hormone thing happening, I needed Jay here, so he could take care of it. But since he couldn’t be here, I needed…

I needed some other outlet.

But what?

My gaze caught on the laptop on my bed. I swallowed. The idea formed pretty easily. I looked around like the criminal I kind of was and pulled the curtains shut. Then I locked the door.

Feeling a little silly and annoyed, but above all frustrated, I moved to the laptop. I hesitated. I probably shouldn’t have been doing this in a place where everyone had a supernatural nose, but oh well. This was my last resort.

Swallowing roughly, I opened an incognito tab.

Normally, I would’ve gone for something pretty straightforward, with a bit of power play, where the guy looked like my mate. This time, though…

I felt a little embarrassed as I typed in “vampire porn.”

Instantly, the results flooded in. So many of them that I was shocked. Who would’ve thought that this was really a thing? Was *Twilight* to blame? I gasped, almost slamming the laptop shut, but curiosity and lust got the best of me.

This vampire heat situation was a real fucking problem here. Literally.

Feeling ashamed, but also turned on, I started to explore the various videos that had popped up. Obviously everything looked like humans doing cosplay, and at first I scoffed.

“This is so stupid,” I muttered.

But I continued to flick through the videos.

The titles were interesting, to say the least.

*Nosferatu: Fuck or Die*

*Dark Lover*

*Vampire Fucks MILF*

*Vampire Orgy*

*Interview with a Vampire (and his cock)*

*The Glory Hole that Bites*

Feeling silly, I was about to click out when I spotted the thumbnail for a video low on the list. I froze. And then I clicked on it, unable to stop myself, because the male actor looked, um…

The male actor looked just like Emmett.

He was tall and lean and dark-haired, with green eyes and pale skin. The actor didn’t have Emmett’s perfectly proportioned features, but they were pretty close. I was so intrigued and horny and generally problematic that I couldn’t stop myself from watching it.

When I pressed play, the man in the video approached a waiting woman on the bed.

The fangs he had on were fake, but they matched his face perfectly.

I put on headphones, just as the (fake) vampire started caressing the woman all over, kissing and biting at her neck before getting more intense and dominant. Her moans seemed pretty realistic, and by the time he flipped her onto her stomach and tore off her nightgown and panties, I found myself with a very serious problem.

I was feeling extremely guilty—instead of watching someone who looked like my mate, I was getting all hot and bothered because of vampire porn. Then again, in theory, I wasn’t really doing anything wrong, was I? In fact, I was trying to make sure I *didn’t* do anything wrong. For Jay’s sake and my own! If I got these feelings out now, maybe it would solve the whole vampire heat thing and I would be free.

At least that was what I told myself to justify sliding my hand into my underwear and between my legs. I was wet already, so ridiculously worked up that I hated it. I hated how good my own touch felt, how rubbing circles while watching this horrible cheesy video made my toes curl. The vampire on screen slapped the woman’s ass while roughly fucking into her from behind.

“*Look at you, my little plaything*,” he said.“*Do you like it when the master of darkness uses your body for his pleasure?*”

The master of *what?* And was he speaking about himself in the third person?

“*Yes, master*,” the woman moaned. “*Please, harder!*”

Oh my god, why was I watching this? And more importantly, why did I relate to that so intensely?

“*I’m here to fuck you and drain the blood out of you*,” the (fake) vampire said. “*I’m here to give you what you need, and you’re going to lie there like a good girl and take it. Do you understand?*”

This was super cheesy. Very badly made. Horrid.

Why did I find it so hot?

WHY!?

I had a huge problem. I wanted to die from embarrassment, but also come. Mostly the latter. I was in a horrible, horrible predicament, and I just couldn’t help myself! I bit my lip to stifle a moan, and just as the fake vampire grabbed the woman’s hair and tugged, biting into her neck while roughly taking her, I started touching myself more roughly as well.

When I closed my eyes, it wasn’t the actors I saw.

I was the one bent over the bed, my hand down between my legs, rubbing at the apex of my thighs while Emmett plunged his cock in and out of me, grabbing onto my hips while he used my body for his pleasure. In my ear, with his hot breath burning me, he whispered, “*You feel so good, Lola. Such a sweet thing for me…*”

The sounds of sex were obscene, the need of it all making me feel lightheaded, like fire was spreading all over me. Emmett was biting my neck while sliding in and out of me, in and out like my fingers did, hard and fast. Every part of my body was pounding. My heart, my head. The heat was so intense that I felt like I could catch fire.

I really was in heat, here, huh?

I bit my forearm to smother the sounds I made. This felt so, so wrong, but at the same time, so right that I wanted to scream and cry. I felt empty and aching, needing so much more, needing the real thing, but the fantasy did do the trick.

Moments later, I orgasmed with a silent cry.

The video was still going—the guy really had great stamina, and I felt like congratulating him on his performance. He had brought a lot talent into this vampire role. Before I could wash my hands and leave a comment of encouragement, though, there was a knock on the door.

*Oh. Shit!*

I froze.

A voice—a familiarly sexy one—spoke through the door. “Lola?”

Emmett. Emmett was here.

*OH MY GOD! Is this really happening AGAIN?*

I wanted to die. Just die. Just, why me? *WHY?*

Maybe he’d take the hint and just walk away?

But no.

Emmett’s voice came through again. “Lola? I’m sorry to bother you, but I got the strangest sense that you needed me. Can I come in?”

**Episode 1313**

GREYSON

A swirl of confusing emotions washed over me. The initial wave was pure relief—I was really not in a place to be a father right now, and I had never wanted to build a family with Maren.

But as quickly as the relief arrived, there was a wave of something that felt confusingly like grief. Like a longing for what could have been.

No, I’d never wanted to start a family with Maren, but the idea of having a son… I had actually liked the idea of a child, of passing on my Alpha bloodline. Of being able to make right something that Silas had gotten so wrong. Of having a part of myself, alive and real in this world.

I looked at Cali. She had taken the information in and was looking relieved herself. I couldn’t blame her. She opened her mouth to say something, then closed it. I could tell that she wasn’t sure how to react. I didn’t want her to think that I wished for a son with Maren.

“Probably for the best,” I said brusquely. “And now that Maren is gone, that might be the last we see of them.”

I knew Cali could see right through me. She moved closer, touching my arm. “I know you had gotten pretty close with Fenrir. He’s a great little kid, so it’s not… It’s not a bad thing to feel weird,” she said. “If you feel weird, I mean. I know you wanted to care for him, protect him. So it’s okay if you’re disappointed. You get that, right?”

The concern in her eyes made my chest hurt. Of course Cali would be empathetic enough to understand that I was conflicted about all this. But I wanted to make sure that she understood that I didn’t want to be with Maren. As much as I liked Fenrir, Maren had nothing to do with it. What I wanted the most was what I saw with Cali in my dreams…

Having a family with her, with the woman of my—

I didn’t finish the thought.

My ears started ringing, my brain throbbing as I sank to the ground.

When I opened my eyes, I was looking up at stars.

The pain in my head was gone.

The stars were bright, but I wasn’t outside. They gently circled above me on the ceiling, and I realized that I was looking at a baby mobile. *Huh?*

I sat up and saw that I was in a bright, sunny nursery. The walls were a wonderful minty green with some purple in it, and yellow flowers drawn on them. There were three little bookcases with tons of books, and five different hampers full of toys—how many toys did one kid need?

How many books did one kid need?

Where was the kid in question?

The answer came immediately, when a toddler tugged at my arm.

“Doff!” she said.

When I looked down at her, I was certain that this articulate genius could be none other than my child… But was she *really* my child? Could she be? She had a little floofy white dress on, and was looking like an angel or a live birthday cake with her massive brown eyes. She looked up at me, all happy. With a drooly smile, she pointed at me and said, “Dada!”

Hadn’t I already said that my kid was a fucking genius? *Look at her*. A genius!

Who drooled a lot, but that was a detail.

The toddler had to be around a year old or so, maybe a little younger, and she now tried to pull herself up on the edge of the table, her brow furrowed. Because I was going to die from the cuteness, I reached out to stabilize her. But the girl looked at me with determination, like, “*Oh my god, Dad, I’ve got this! Don’t be annoying.*”

Laughing under my breath, I hovered my hands near her just in case she decided to fall, but I let her do her thing. She had been standing well on her own for a few months now, but she still ended up toppling over sometimes and cackling in delight. She hadn’t managed to take steps yet, and I was definitely stressing out about that moment.

I didn’t know how I knew that, but I was certain about it.

Baby girl pulled herself up and swayed gently, and then she let go of the table. She took a wobbly step toward me, reaching out her little hands with a grin, and I could have sworn my heart stopped altogether.

“Cali! Come quick, she’s walking!” I called.

Not a second later, Cali appeared in the door. Her belly was round—she was pregnant again so soon, because we were apparently the kind of couple that just couldn’t keep our hands off each other—and she looked radiant. Her eyes lit up as she stared at our baby girl and exclaimed, “Sabine! You’re doing such a great job!”

The toddler giggled in a very “aww shucks” kind of way, waving a chubby little hand at her mother.

I grinned. “Look at her! She’s smart, like her grandmother.”

“I mean, what she’s doing is pretty standard, you know,” Cali told me with an arched eyebrow, and I shushed her. I stood up and put my arms around her from behind, kissing her cheek. She leaned back against me, stroking my forearm.

“Our child is a genius,” I said. “You can’t convince me otherwise.”

Cali laughed, because just then, our genius toddler drooled all over her teddy bear that suspiciously looked like a wolf. I watched Cali look at our daughter fondly, and it felt like my heart would burst from how perfect this moment was.

But then, from the corner of my eye, I saw movement at the top of the far wall.

When I looked, I was overwhelmed by horror.

What looked like blood had started to ooze from the ceiling, from the baby mobile and the stars. It was dripping down the walls, looking like a scene straight out of a slasher movie. I gasped, feeling sick to my stomach. I turned to look at Cali, to point out the blood and get her and Sabine out of here.

But it wasn’t Cali that I saw.

Her face had morphed into that witch’s.

Chloe*.*

She looked deadly serious. She met my eye, and with cold, calculated accuracy, said, “Remember, Greyson. Time is running out.”

I was horrified, my chest tight. My head was spinning, and my vision started to get blurry.

And then I blinked.

And when I opened my eyes again, I was back in the basement. I was lying down on the floor, with Cali’s face hovering over mine.

“Greyson? Greyson, can you hear me?” Cali shook my shoulders, her face full of concern. “Oh, thank god,” she choked out, when she saw that I’d come to.

She helped me sit up, but my head still felt heavy. I held it, rubbing my forehead.

Cali asked, “Did you have… Did you have another one of your dreams?”

I was still confused, but I remembered what I’d seen. The image would always be burned into my mind. I nodded swiftly, but it made my head hurt even worse.

“Wait, you need to be more comfortable,” Cali said. She helped me stand up and led me to a chair. She gave me a bottle of water and stroked my shoulder soothingly as I drank. A few moments later, I could breathe evenly again. I could think without my head feeling like it was about to explode.

“Are you feeling better?” Cali asked.

“Yeah.” I glanced up at her. The longing I felt for her was back tenfold.

“Greyson?” Cali said my name softly. “What did you see in your dream?”

What the hell was I supposed to tell her? She had broken up with me. She had broken up with Xavier. I was not supposed to declare my undying love for her, even though that was all I fucking wanted to do. I was not supposed to tell her about how wonderful I’d felt when I’d been with her in the vision. I was not supposed to put any more pressure on her.

But then, Cali squeezed my shoulder. She brought herself in front of me and leveled me with a stare. “Greyson, you need to tell me. We’re in this together, no matter what.”

It was hard to deny her when she phrased it like that. It was hard to deny her in general.

“I saw…”

Cali stared at me, waiting.

“I saw our daughter,” I finally admitted. And then the words rushed out of me like a waterfall. “I saw her, and she was smart, and adorable, and you had dressed her in a ridiculous dress that looked like a cake, and she took her first steps.”

Cali suddenly went white as a sheet. Her eyes widened as she whispered, “It happened again, then.”

I swallowed. “What are you talking about?”

Cali breathed, “You saw our daughter? Sabine?”

“Yes,” I said with certainty.

Cali pressed her lips together, her eyes glistening. “I saw her too.”

**Episode 1314**

XAVIER

Kira and I had been in the car for what felt like hours, and I’d been questioning her about Garren the whole time. We were currently headed toward Seattle, where Kira had informed me she’d last encountered Garren. It was during the time that he’d killed Geoff, the love of Kira’s life.

I was pretty curious about this witch who had fallen so hard for a vampire. I had a lot of questions about how that relationship had even started in the first place. I knew I needed to tread lightly, not treat this like a juicy little story—even though I was dying to hear about the whole thing. Basically, I needed to stop thinking like Colton—who was a pretty fucking bad influence on me in general—and focus on the task at hand.

At least Kira was willing to talk to me. I had no idea when I’d become such an expert at getting information out of someone without using violence, but it seemed to be working for me so far.

“I’ve thought back a thousand times to how I found Geoff’s body,” she was saying. “Garren was already long gone, otherwise I would have ended him then and there.”

So Kira hadn’t actually *seen* Garren kill Geoff. That was worrisome. We needed to be certain about shit like that. The last thing I needed was to get rid of the wrong son of a bitch.

“You weren’t a witness,” I said, clearing my throat. “In which case, how do you know for sure that Garren was the one who killed Geoff?”

Kira shot me a look. It was slightly menacing, but I wasn’t surprised. “Garren and I had beef. He’d been threatening me for ages. I didn’t take him seriously enough, because I knew that he couldn’t take me.”

I remembered the way she’d flung the vampires away as if they were cockroaches. There was no doubt she had powers, and she knew how to use them.

“I should have realized that he would go after someone I loved instead,” Kira added, swallowing thickly. The sadness in her face was such a huge contrast to her earlier fierceness, it was a little disconcerting. What the hell would I do if she started crying? I didn’t have any tissues in the car. *Shit*. Okay, I needed to calm down. I’d gotten a lot better with emotions since meeting Cali, but still, I did *not* want a crying woman in my car.

Especially when that woman could also blow up the car if she got mad.

“How did you end up working with Iñigo?” I asked her cautiously. “Why didn’t you go after Garren yourself?”

Kira’s expression grew bitter. “Geoff was in Iñigo’s coven. And Iñigo promised me that if I worked with him, he would help protect me from the bounty that had been taken out on me for… past wrongdoings.”

I did not ask what kinds of wrongdoings. Who was I to judge? I’d done some pretty questionable things myself.

“He promised to help me get revenge,” Kira went on. “I thought he’d be able to locate Garren for me, but the longer I stayed there, the clearer it became that Iñigo had no intention of helping me.”

This still didn’t make any sense to me. It just didn’t add up. The woman sitting in the passenger’s seat next to me was formidable. She was at least as powerful as Big Mac.

“Since you realized Iñigo was being a shady dick, why didn’t you leave and seek revenge on your own?” I asked.

Kira shot me sideways look. “Grief works in mysterious ways. I was feeling very vulnerable, and Iñigo has a way of settling you down, making you feel secure, even though he’s the devil.”

That sounded a lot like Stockholm syndrome. Maybe that’s how he had his fangs in Ava, who was many things, but I’d never thought I’d see her working with a vampire. I thought back to my conversation with Kira in the woods. Ava had some kind of deal with him. That was really as much as either of us knew, but it was enough to convince Kira that Ava couldn’t be trusted. Did Ava have something dark going on the way Kira had, too?

“I can see the judgment in your face,” Kira told me flatly.

“No judgment,” I said, shrugging. “Shit happens. Even to witches.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Despite what you might think about witches, we do have feelings. And I am no killer. I was raised to use my magic to help people, not hurt them.”

I recalled what a skilled healer she was. It required a lot of powerful magic for a witch to be so effective and quick when it came to treating wounds and supernatural pain. The realization must have been obvious on my face, because when Kira saw my expression, she snorted.

“Not all witches are the same, you know,” she told me. “In the same way that not all werewolves are bloodthirsty monsters.”

I nodded. “Fair enough.”

“By the time you popped into my life,” Kira continued, “I was already plotting a way to set off on my own. I knew that Iñigo Gagliardi never honors his promises, not if there’s a better option.” She scoffed. “Obviously having a healer of my caliber in his crew was the better option for him—as opposed to helping me get revenge and setting me free.”

“You’re sure you have no idea what kind of deal Ava made with Iñigo?” I asked.

Kira shrugged. “Like I told you, all I heard was that there was a deal. I have no idea what it entails, though.”

The idea was troublesome, but I didn’t want to think too much about it. I figured that Ava’s deal with Iñigo could be about me, about getting back on my good side. I had no idea why she kept insisting on that love bullshit—though at the same time, it kind of made sense. She’d been brought back from the dead, and now her brother was gone and I was her only link to her old life.

I didn’t want to feel sorry for her, though. She’d done so many horrendous things, enough that killing her should have been my first urge, not feeling bad for her. It was fucking weird that I felt both at the same time.

Luckily, Kira and I were far out from Ava and Iñigo’s reach now.

And I was glad that Ava had left the pack house on her own—for everyone’s sake. Her own, Cali’s, and of course mine. Ava running away meant one less headache for me to deal with. One less mistake to fix.

“Once we get to Seattle,” I said, changing the subject, “is there anywhere in particular that you think Garren might be?”

Kira wrinkled her nose. “It’s not like Garren and I ran in the same circles.”

I loved how Kira said that as if she drank tea and ate crumpets all day while Garren was some sort of brute.

“I’m not sure where he would be hiding out,” she continued. “He’s probably not even in Seattle anymore, but hopefully we’ll be able to pick up his trail there.”

I nodded in agreement. This was pretty standard procedure for me, from my mercenary days. Seattle used to be part of my turf. I already had a few places where we could stop in and question people. There was a well-known Rogue hang-out that I had in mind. If Garren had been in the area recently, he would have been there—whether it was to drink or fight or fuck, he wouldn’t have passed the spot up.

“We’ll ask around. Someone has to know something,” I told Kira.

She agreed, staring out the window. It was strange for me to be back at it again, doing this kind of work. Cali would never want me to return to the mercenary life. It was something that I used to enjoy, putting bad guys away and getting paid for it. But it was too dangerous. Once this job was over, I would be back at the pack house, with Cali, where I belonged.

This was just something I needed to finish before I could get back to what was really important.

My mate.

The pack.

*My* pack.

Being the Alpha.

Sooner rather than later, Greyson needed to be dethroned. I didn’t want to kill him anymore, but that didn’t mean I could let him remain in charge. With those thoughts still twisting in my mind, I took the nearest exit.

“Our first stop should be the Tooth and Claw,” I said. “If he’s been around here lately, they’ll know.”

Kira’s eyes were sharp on me. “And once we find him?”

I shrugged. “I’ll kill him.”

Kira bristled. “Absolutely not.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Seriously? Are you going to pull the ‘I don’t like death, I’m a healer’ card on me right now? What are we doing here, then?”

She scoffed. “I want him dead, don’t worry. But I’m going to be the one to do it.”

**Episode 1315**

Greyson stared at me in disbelief.

I felt the exact same way.

The night before, I’d had multiple dreams, and one of them had come back to me suddenly, as soon as Greyson had begun speaking about his own. One of the images in my head had been about being pregnant, living in a beautiful home that I’d never seen before in my life. And then Greyson had called for me to say that our daughter Sabine had taken her first steps.

*Our baby girl did look like a cake… But what was I supposed to do? NOT get her that dress? It matched her vibe perfectly!* I thought to myself before smacking my forehead.

This was absurd! I hadn’t even remembered any of this until the moment Greyson mentioned it. I’d only remembered the dream about a tugboat. What did it mean that Greyson and I were having these visions together, but at different times?

What did *anything* mean at this point?

Greyson was still staring at me like a lost puppy, and I didn’t know what to say.

“Cali…” Greyson trailed off, squeezing my arm. “Did you—”

Before either of us could say another word, Marta came down the stairs. She looked intrigued, and much more carefree than I was feeling.

“How’s our newest undead resident doing?” she asked. It came out awkward, but also like a genuine question.

Both Greyson and I turned to look at York. We had all but forgotten about him with this dream revelation. The young man was still sitting there, awake but looking very docile. Out of it.

“I don’t know,” I told Marta truthfully. “He’s been like this for a while.”

Greyson didn’t speak at all, looking at his hands. I could tell that he was still shaken from his vision, and I couldn’t blame him.

“That makes sense,” Marta said thoughtfully. “Big Mac and I have been talking, and I’m going to try and reach out to the revenant inside York.”

That sounded like a great idea! Not dangerous at all!

*Oh my god, will the threat of imminent death EVER end?* I thought.

Meanwhile, Marta continued casually, “That way, there’s a chance that I’ll be able to draw out York’s true spirit and talk to him. Speaking to the real York would help us get to the bottom of things.”

Greyson, looking exhausted, shrugged. “Can’t hurt.”

That was debatable, but whatever.

He and I stood back as Marta moved closer to York. The most irritating thing about all of this was that real life just rudely went on without giving Greyson and me a minute to figure out those visions. And in the meantime, Xavier was off somewhere, playing knight in shining armor with the witch who’d saved him, because *I* hadn’t saved him. Because I was a useless mate who hadn’t been able to protect the man she adored.

*This is ALL SO GREAT!* I scoffed internally.

Feeling like I wanted to sleep for a million years to avoid everything, I watched as Marta closed her eyes, inhaling through her nose as she stood opposite York. I eyed Greyson, and he shrugged again.

“Neither of us has experience with mediums,” he whispered. “But even though Marta is pretty new, she seems confident.”

I smiled, because if I didn’t smile, I would start crying. “That doesn’t sound dangerous at all.”

Greyson pressed his lips together. He whispered sarcastically, “Excuse me? It’s a great idea. I make all the decisions around here because I’m the Alpha and I know everything.”

I stared into his eyes, and I felt such a huge wave of fondness for this self-deprecating idiot. This was a mess, and he knew it, and I loved him for it. I loved him for at least trying, so hard, to do the right thing for everyone.

Finally, Marta’s eyes popped open, and she glared at her side. I was confused for a moment before I realized that she must have been listening to Lilac. It was still so weird that he was always here, but no one could see him. So creepy.

But Marta didn’t seem creeped out, just annoyed as she waved her hand in the air. “Yeah, no kidding, Lilac!” she hissed. “I know that nothing’s happening!”

I was sensing a bit of tension between Marta and Lilac. Perhaps of the sexual variety? I didn’t remember him being annoying when he was alive. Just cute. Regardless, even though I was enough of a gossip to wonder about this interesting dynamic between a ghost and a medium, we had bigger issues to deal with right now.

“Is it really not working?” I asked Marta.

She took a deep breath and shook her head. “I can’t sense the spirit inside York at all. It’s like he’s totally gone. But even the undead have souls that I should be able to reach.”

I swallowed audibly. “It’s okay. At least you tried.”

Marta looked at the ground, clearly disappointed. “Whatever is going on with the Orb and the spirit world and these revenants, I don’t understand it. I’m sorry I can’t be more helpful.”

“Thank you for offering to help,” Greyson told her.

Just as he finished his sentence, Sage came downstairs, looking a bit contrite. “I’m here to look after York,” she said with a firm nod. “I promise that this time I’ll stay vigilant—no way is he getting away from me again!”

Greyson gave her a look, arching an eyebrow. He looked like a sassy dad.

Sage sketched out a cross on her chest. “I promise!”

Speaking of Greyson being a sassy dad, when Marta and the two of us went back upstairs, he immediately pulled me to the side, and I knew he was about to mention the visions again.

“I don’t understand,” he muttered, after making sure that we were alone. “Were you in my dream again?”

I felt myself flush. The last time we’d shared a dream, we’d been at our rehearsal dinner. Having sex. Hot, sweaty, amazing sex. I steeled myself, trying not to let his proximity affect me, and said, “No.”

Greyson seemed confused. “No? But you just said—”

“I mean, no, we didn’t see the dream at the same time. I actually saw it first, I guess… But what exactly did you see?” I asked.

He told me everything—him and Sabine in the room, the toys and the books and the floofy dress, Sabine taking her first steps, me being pregnant…

“It all felt so real,” Greyson whispered. His voice cracked, and I wanted to reach out and stroke his face. I was so struck by the detail of his narration. It was exactly the way that I remembered the dream.

“Were there yellow flowers painted on the walls?” I asked.

Greyson nodded. “And a baby mobile with stars.”

My heart was racing. It was clear we’d both seen the same thing.

“It was so peaceful, right?” I asked Greyson quietly.

“Peaceful, perfect—everything I could ever want,” he said. He moved a little closer to me, staring deep into my eyes.

“It was so different from everything that’s going on in our real lives,” I said, realizing. “No danger, no death, no worries. It all felt so right, somehow.”

Greyson swallowed. “But what did you think about… How the dream ended? Did you see anything that upset you?”

My stomach dipped. I knew where he was getting at—he was basically asking me how the thought of having a baby, a family, with him would make me feel. I knew how it made me feel, but at the same time, I couldn’t imagine moving on with my life without Xavier.

I sidestepped the question and shook my head. “I can’t stop wondering what all this means,” I said. “It’s obvious it has to do something with those three witches. But why?”

Greyson took a deep breath, looking away. He seemed troubled. “So you didn’t see anything that upset you in the vision?”

It was odd how he repeated that, but I wouldn’t get hung up on that. Since he didn’t say anything else, I just barreled through with my questions. “This doesn’t make any sense, though. Why won’t those witches just leave you alone? Why won’t they just leave *me* alone? Why do they keep torturing us with these visions of happiness and serenity and—”

Suddenly, a thought struck me.

*Could it be that…*

I didn’t dare finish the sentence in my head. But at the same time, after all this, I knew I owed it to both myself and Greyson to be honest. I touched his shoulder gently and whispered, “Do you think that these visions…”

“What?” Greyson asked, resting his hand over mine. My skin was thrumming under his touch. The way he looked at me made the words stick in my throat. But I needed to power through. I needed to figure out the truth.

“Greyson,” I murmured. “Do you think we’re somehow seeing the future?”

**Episode 1316**

ARTEMIS

I woke up in the morning with Rishika by my side. We’d spent the entire night together, hadn’t actually fallen asleep until the sun was already up. I stared at Rishika, and my heart started thumping. She was gorgeous, always fierce, but she looked so vulnerable in her sleep. She looked so vulnerable when she kissed me, when we touched each other, when we gave each other pleasure. She could be vulnerable and intense all at once, and it was incredible to me.

It was hard to look away from her.

It was hard not to want to wake her again, just to pull her into my arms and brush my lips over her glowing skin.

Smiling to myself, I flipped back onto the pillows. For the first time in ages, I actually felt completely at ease. No dark thoughts, no confusion—I had woken up, and I felt like myself. Maybe all I’d really needed was to be reminded of who I was and who I cared about. How it felt to live in my own skin and feel good with someone who was important to me.

Rishika was important to me.

I allowed myself to think that there was a chance this dark nightmare was behind me.

Maybe now, I could trust myself again.

I turned and gazed at Rishika once more, feeling that same sudden surge of emotion inside me. The way I reacted to her was surprising. Unprecedented. I wanted to kiss her, kiss her mouth and all over her beautiful body. I wanted to feel her warmth, feel how much she wanted me, pull her close and whisper something in her ear that would make her smile. I loved seeing her smile. We didn’t really know what was going on between us, but I did know that I wanted to be with her rather than without her.

*You’re legit*, as Cali would say.

Even though I’d always thought of myself as more of a loner, I couldn’t deny that seeing all of the werewolves and their mates together made me a bit jealous. They always had each other’s backs, always knew there was someone who cared about them unconditionally.

I had never experienced anything like that.

I thought back to last night, to the connection Rishika and I had shared, to how absolutely incredible the sex had been. But it hadn’t been just sex. It never had been. It had felt like more, so much more, and the overwhelming tenderness I felt inside as I stared at Rishika was the proof of that.

I moved in to kiss her, to wake her up for more—

*Don’t wake her*, the voice hissed inside my head. *She’ll be easier to take out this way.*

I recoiled in horror, my stomach tightening so forcefully that I thought I would throw up. *No no no no no no. This isn’t happening*, I thought to myself in a silent scream.

I scrambled off the bed, but the voice in my head kept talking.

*Don’t you see that she makes you weak?* it mocked. *Don’t you see that love and desire are for fools?*

I shook my head, digging my nails into my skull. “I don’t want this,” I hissed. “Leave me alone!”

The voice laughed. *Leave you alone? You really don’t understand, do you? I could never leave you. I AM you.*

“NO!” I said forcefully. My voice was loud enough to wake Rishika. She stirred, smiling lazily. But then she frowned when she saw me standing in the corner.

“Hey, what are you doing over there? Who are you talking to?” she asked.

My eyes dropped from her lips to her bare breasts and lower. I thought about touching her, feeling her tremble under my tongue… I thought about letting myself be with her again, and the notion was terrifying.

There was no way that I would be with her in any way if I couldn’t control myself.

If the voice remained inside my head.

I could never hurt her. I would rather die than hurt anyone I cared about.

“Nobody, I’m talking to no one,” I said hastily. “Just going to take a shower…”

I started to back away, but Rishika sat up, reaching a hand out to me. She smirked, and it was breathtaking.

“But we already showered earlier.” She bit her lower lip. “Come back to bed. We’re not done yet.”

The voice in my head was ominous. *Oh, you’re done, all right.*

I fought off a scream of terror and turned my back on her. I ran to the bathroom, shutting the door and locking it. My chest was heaving, and I was shaking all over. My knees buckled, and I sank down onto the edge of the bathtub, trying to gather my thoughts.

This couldn’t be happening again.

The emotional whiplash was too much for me to deal with—only a few hours ago, I had felt so good, so free, so whole, and now the madness had returned. It was happening all over again. I stood up on wobbly legs and looked at myself in the mirror, studying my own face. I looked the same as always. A little flushed, but that was it.

The voice was quiet again.

Had I imagined the whole thing? Was I losing my mind, after all?

“Artemis?” I heard Rishika’s voice through the door, followed by a knock. She sounded concerned. She sounded like she cared about me, like she would do anything for me to be safe. The thought was terrifying, considering that it seemed like the person she should be worried about was herself.

I was dangerous for her.

We had spent an incredible night together, and now everything felt tainted. The idea that Rishika was unsafe around me had my stomach lurching with disgust and self-hatred.

I needed to pull it together, but I didn’t trust myself to be alone around Rishika right now.

I needed to do what was best for her.

I forced a smile onto my face, took a deep breath, and opened the door. “I’m fine, just starving! Should we go get some breakfast?” I glanced behind her, at the blaring sun outside. “Or lunch now, probably.”

Before Rishika could reply, I brushed past her, grabbed a dress from the floor, threw it on over my head, and marched downstairs. I could feel her confused gaze on me, still alarmed, but she didn’t say anything. She just followed me to the kitchen, still naked and glorious. What was it with werewolves and nudity? I usually didn’t care, but now that I could see a love bite on the inside of Rishika’s thigh, I was certain that I’d start trembling if she came anywhere near me.

*I* was the one who’d left that mark on her flesh. And it looked so good on her that I was starting to feel as territorial as a werewolf.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” she asked me. A very tricky and scary question. She looked like she wanted to touch me. But what if she did, and I hurt her? What if the voice made me do something I’d regret for the rest of my life?

“I’m fine,” I said quickly. “Everything’s fine,” I repeated, and then I opened the ice box fridge thing and stared blankly inside, my thoughts still racing.

I needed to find Cali.

I needed to tell someone about what was happening, but I was afraid of what the others would say. I was afraid that Big Mac would want to burn me alive, and Greyson would just let her. Not even Orla would understand; she would just be too worried to think clearly.

It had to be Cali. Greyson listened to her, anyway, and she knew enough about this whole thing not to look at me as if I were evil.

*I’m not* evil*… Am I?*

The echo of a laugh drummed in the back of my head, and a shiver ran through me. Just as I shut the fridge, determined to go find my sister, there was a loud knock on the door. I turned and saw that Rishika was still looking at me kind of funny.

“I should get that!” I said brightly, heading toward the door.

Rishika raised an eyebrow. “You seem chipper this morning. But also super weird. I don’t know if I should take that as a compliment.”

The insinuation was obvious, and my cheeks heated. I ignored the sensation, the urge to walk up to Rishika and just kiss her again, to pull her upstairs and into that same bed. I could hear her grumbling something under her breath as I made a beeline for the door and yanked it open.

I didn’t know who I’d expected to see, but it definitely had not been Steinar.

The man made of stone gasped when he saw me.

“Steinar?” I said, puzzled. “What are you doing here?”

Steinar looked as frazzled as a granite man could look. “The library,” he said mournfully. “It’s been destroyed!”

**Episode 1317**

LOLA

I froze, heat flooding my cheeks as I realized I’d just gotten off pretending I was with Emmett, and now he was at my door… *AGAIN!*

I really could not catch a break, could I?

I stared at the laptop in front of me, my heart pounding with anxiety. The video was still playing, vampire porn and all. Congratulations to the guy who was still going, but this was ridiculous! I slammed the laptop shut, hard enough that it slid off the bed and clattered loudly onto the floor.

“Lola?” Emmett called, because he seriously could not take a hint. Why wouldn’t he just *leave?* “Is everything okay in there?”

*Nothing is okay in here, thank you very much!*

But Emmett sounded worried, like worried for real, and now he was jiggling the doorknob. The man just would not leave! *Ugh.* I started running around like a chicken with its head cut off, because what other choice did I have? Since he wouldn’t buzz off, I had to face him.

I went straight to the bathroom first, because I was pretty sure that there was damning evidence all over my hands. I washed them as quickly and thoroughly as possible, screaming, *omigod omigod omigod!* inside my head.

As Emmett continued to speak very worriedly, saying things like, “I can hear you in there, what are you doing?” I quickly zipped up my pants and frantically yanked the covers up on the bed. I smoothed them out and spritzed on a bunch of body sprays—eucalyptus and lavender—to throw him off.

“What is happening in there?” Emmett asked, the doorknob still jiggling.

What was his *problem?* Seriously!

Feeling mortified—and like I wanted to murder him but also fuck him—I gave my room a once-over. Everything looked copacetic, so I guessed it was now or never.

Hoping that the anxiety and horniness did not show on my face, I yanked the door open and gulped when I saw him. Flipping my hair over my shoulder, I tried to lounge casually against the door frame. “Did you call?”

Emmett looked profusely confused. He looked me up and down, his brow furrowed. “What took you so long? Are you okay?” His gorgeous eyes roved across my face with concern. “Are you sick? You look a little flushed.”

His words made me flush even more. I hated how worked up I had gotten, but at least he didn’t seem to suspect anything. He didn’t even glance at my hands. Perhaps the soap in this establishment killed pheromones or something.

I laughed a little too loudly and said, “Oh this?” I pointed out at my red cheeks. “I was just doing some burpees.”

I cringed the second the word left my mouth. *Burpees?* *I haven’t done those since high school track!*

Emmett gave me a dubious look. “Yoga and burpees, huh?”

I nodded vividly. He squinted at me, all suspicious. He hadn’t seemed weirded out just a few seconds ago, but all my genius excuses seemed to have made him think that something was up.

*God dammit!*

He then put me out of my misery and said, “I see.” He cleared his throat. “I’m sorry to bother you, but the strangest thing just happened—I was working in my office, and all of a sudden I got the strongest sense that you needed me for something.”

My head started throbbing, along with other parts of my body. This was a nightmare! Had my vampire heat somehow drifted all the way to his office? *Please, god, I CANNOT deal with this!*

Still shaking, I stared at Emmett as he stood in my doorway, and my heart skipped a beat. I realized, horrified, that my vampire heat most assuredly had NOT disappeared, even though I had taken care of myself. If anything, it was stronger than ever.

It felt like a *disease*.

“Are you sure you don’t need to go see the campus healer or something?” Emmett said, frowning. “Why aren’t you in class, anyway?”

Before I could reply, he took a step closer and raised his hand to touch my forehead. “You almost look like you have a fever—not that it’s possible for normal vampires of course, but who knows with you?”

I flinched back before his palm could make contact with my skin, the idea of him touching me right now making me go out of my mind.

“Don’t worry, I’m—”

“If you’re okay physiologically, the wound must be in your psyche,” he said seriously. Was he for real? “I think something has upset you, but I’m here for you if you want to talk. You can trust me.”

I knew that I had to tell him I was fine, that he should get back to work. But without even realizing it, I just stood aside, and Emmett strolled into my room like some sort of dark prince.

Exactly like the one in the video that I’d just gotten off to.

*I am going to hell. I DESERVE HELL, and NOTHING more!*

As I contemplated the million ways that I was a horrible person who did not deserve her wonderful mate, Emmett’s energy filled up the entire room, like always. I had to force myself to go sit down on my bed, away from him. It was like an impulse, an urge that made me feel like I was about to jump out of my skin.

This was barely under my control.

It was terrifying, actually, joking aside.

Emmett sat down at my desk, thank god, and I purposefully moved even further away from him on my side of the bed.

“How are you adjusting as a new student here?” Emmett asked.

I let out a laugh that was near hysterical. “Uh. Not too well.”

Emmett offered me a grimace of sympathy. “I heard about what happened during your first class… Is that why you’re skipping now?”

I didn’t dare answer.

He kept looking at me sympathetically. “You really can talk to me, Lola. I know how hard it can be to fit in somewhere new.” He broke eye contact, glancing outside as if he were reminiscing about something. What could he possibly be thinking about? How could someone like him ever have any issue fitting in?

I thought back to what Ras had said, that the two of them had a history, and I realized that I didn’t know anything about Emmett’s past.

“How long have you been at this school?” I asked.

Emmett turned back to me and waved a hand. “Oh, many years. But I’m not here to talk about me.” He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. His gaze was intense. “I want to make sure you have everything you need.”

He stared right at me, and I flushed again.

You *have everything I need*, I wanted to tell him. *And I need it really fucking badly.*

I shook my head, shame settling inside me. I forced myself to think about Jay, about how amazing sex with him always had been. But Jay wasn’t here, and this vampire heat was becoming a real, all-consuming problem for me. It had become so disturbing that I felt unlike myself. Like a different person. Like I couldn’t control my own heart and body.

In many ways, it *did* feel like a disease.

“I’m fine,” I said shakily.

Emmett looked dubious. “You know—” He paused, his eyes flickering to the floor. If he’d looked incredulous before, now he seemed entirely confused. “Why is your laptop on the floor?”

To my horror, before I could come up with some sort of excuse, Emmett moved to pick it up. I reached out to grab it from him, my heart drumming so hard that I could hear it.

“Oh,” I said, as brightly as I could, “don’t worry about that, I was just… studying, to make up for skipping!”

The excuse was ridiculous. Completely asinine. But for once, Emmett didn’t look like he thought I was lying, so I considered it a success. What I did *not* consider a success was the fact that he sat down next to me on my bed. On the same bed that smelled like eucalyptus and lavender and other body sprays intended to overpower the scent from me orgasming just ten minutes ago. I wondered if he could still tell, despite the strong essential oils I had drenched the room in.

But if he did, why was he insisting on staying here with me, all alone? What would that mean? What the fuck would it mean if my professor, who was in a position of power over me, wouldn’t leave me the hell alone while knowing that I was in heat?

My stomach clenched when Emmett smiled at me. “That’s a great idea. Maybe I can help you study. Make sure that tomorrow goes more smoothly.”

I watched, almost in slow motion, as Emmett pulled the laptop from my hands and opened it up.

And the porno began to play.

**Episode 1318**

GREYSON

I stared at Cali, dumbstruck. It wasn’t that the question hadn’t occurred to me, too. I’d wondered plenty of times if what I’d been seeing in these dreams was the future, but I was struck that Cali had asked. But… *why* had she asked?

Now she was looking at me expectantly, waiting for a response. I thought back to how I’d felt in the dream—to how *right* it had felt to be in that nursery. That was what I wanted. *That* was the future I wanted for us so badly that it felt like a physical ache in my belly… But there was something else. Another feeling, right next to it in my gut that told me that things were more complicated than that.

Those witches were the ones responsible for these dreams. How could I trust anything they showed me? Each new vision only reminded me that I was running out of time. I could still hear the echo of their mocking voices.

And then there was the ending of the dream—the blood. And the vision before it. Cali still hadn’t answered my question about whether there had been anything that had upset her, and I was hesitant to bring it up again. If that had been a vision of our future, blood running down the walls couldn’t be a good sign. But—knowing Cali—if she’d seen the blood in her vision, she would have mentioned it right way.

But that didn’t make any sense. If we’d shared the dream, then why was *I* the only one who’d seen the blood? I ran a hand through my hair with a sigh. I hated these dreams, but now it felt like even *they* were falling apart, which was even more frustrating.

I looked down at Cali, ready to say at least part of this to her, but found I just couldn’t bring myself to do it. Her face was turned up to me, and she looked excited. Happy, even. Could that be because of the vision? Could she be feeling excited about the prospect of a bright and sunny future together? Her expression filled me with a flood of hope.

I swallowed my worries and misgivings and shrugged, casually. “I have no idea if the dreams represent the future, or why the witch sisters are doing this to us.”

Were they showing me my deepest desires? That seemed possible, considering everything they’d showed me centered around what I wanted more than anything: a real family. The kind I’d just lost my chance at having with Fenrir, thanks to the DNA results. I blew out a frustrated breath. This had gone on long enough. It was probably time for me to confront the witches.

Cali had a look in her eye that usually preceded a lot more questions, but before she could get started on any of them, there was a commotion near the front door.

What could it be this time? More zombies? Another infestation of vampires?

I could hear Artemis, and her voice sounded raised and edgy. There was another voice I didn’t immediately recognize alongside hers—a man’s voice. I steeled myself. What the hell was it going to be now?

“We’d better go figure out who that is,” I muttered, and moved toward the door, Cali following warily.

But when we drew near, she stopped in her tracks. “Steinar?” she gasped, her eyes widening.

“Wait, what?” I asked, confused. I stared at the entryway, baffled. A rather peeved-looking gargoyle-man was animatedly talking to Artemis. What the hell was that giant granite dude doing back here? And why had our pack house turned into a way station for every freak in the Northwest? I strode forward, intending to ask that very question, but Steinar was talking, and I paused to listen.

“—and it’s gone. *Destroyed!* The whole Obaltarion!” His granite eyes were wide and panicked as he looked around at the rest of the pack, who were gathered around. “I just don’t understand how this could have happened. The library was protected by magic. This never should have happened. It *couldn’t* have happened, technically speaking. It shouldn’t have been possible—”

“Hang on,” I said, holding up a hand. He looked rather surprised by our interruption. “Slow down, buddy. Listen, I’m sorry to hear about your library and all, but how is this our problem?”

I was wracking my brain, trying to remember what I knew about the place he was talking about. It was a magical library—that much I remembered. Cali, Artemis, Lola, and Jay had traveled there to get information for Lola a few weeks back. The place was protected by some super powerful witch. That was about all I knew, and I couldn’t see how any of it had anything to do with me or my pack.

“Greyson, we at least owe it to Steinar to hear him out,” Cali said quietly, looking at me reproachfully.

I looked back at Steinar, who looked like he was about to cry moss tears or something. “Okay, why don’t you back up? Tell us what happened.”

Steinar’s stone chest rose as he took a shaking breath. “I was at my post—just as I should have been—when I noticed something strange.”

“What was it?” Cali asked, looking worried.

“*Cracks*,” Steinar whispered. “In the mausoleum. At first, I thought it was some kind of mold or something—sometimes that can happen; I have to keep a really close eye on things like that. You wouldn’t believe the havoc those cemetery ferns can wreak if they’re left unchecked. They get into cracks and then it’s all over for that stone. The integrity is just *gone*—”

“Steinar!” Cali yelled. “*Focus!*”

“Yes, right. Sorry,” he said, bowing his head. “Anyway, the cracks started to spread. It was slow at first, but then it was just so fast. And before I could do anything about it, the mausoleum crumbled entirely!”

Cali gasped, putting her hand over her mouth.

Steinar nodded gravely. “And when I dug my way inside, the library itself was completely destroyed.”

Cali was white as paper. “What do you mean, destroyed?”

“Books torn apart, walls cracked and peeling, and Hypatia…” He trailed off.

“What about Hypatia?” Cali asked, though she looked sick, like she already knew the answer.

“She was gone.”

Steinar had the look of someone whose whole world had just collapsed. His awkward, rocky body had a few chips in it, which I guess was his way of expressing his distress, but I was unmoved. I had no idea who Hypatia was. And I was about to tell him that as bad as it sounded, I had my own shit going on here, when I glanced over at Cali.

Her face was still paper-white, and she was staring back at the stone giant with wide, freaked-out eyes.

I forced myself to think before I spoke.

“So,” I asked Steinar. “Why have you come to us? Did you think we could help, somehow?”

Steinar looked a little surprised at first, but then his sharp features fell. “I-I suppose I didn’t know where else to go. The library has been my home for centuries. I must save it. I’m determined!”

“Save it?” I stared at him in surprise. “Maybe I’m not following pal, but it sure sounds like the place is already destroyed. You intend to rebuild it, or something?”

Steinar looked at me, then straightened up to his full—not insubstantial—height, towering over everyone. When he spoke, his deep voice rumbled like a fall of rocks. “For as long as I can remember, it has been my sacred duty to protect the knowledge in that library. That library contains one-of-a-kind texts. If the magical community were to lose the knowledge contained within that library, the loss could not be calculated. The effect would ripple through lands and generations.”

“But what can you do, Steinar?” Cali asked gently. “If that damage has already been done?”

He frowned, his stone eyebrows drawing together. “If the library was destroyed by magic, as I believe it was, then I’m hoping it can be fixed by the same means.”

Cali shot a look at me, and I could tell she didn’t understand what he was talking about any more than I did. She looked back at Steinar. “What might that entail—”

But I was done listening. “We actually have kind of a lot going on here at the moment,” I said curtly. “I’m sorry about everything that happened, man, but we don’t really have time to be hunting down magical library looters and bringing them to justice—”

“What kind of information did the Obaltarion have?”

Cali, Steinar, Artemis, and I spun around as Big Mac strode toward us, her face grim. Oh no, if we got that witch involved in this, I could already tell it was going to mean we were *all* going to be involved.

But Big Mac wasn’t looking at me. “What kind of information did that library of yours have?” she asked Steinar again, firmly.

Steinar looked slightly offended. “It contained information on *every* magical phenomenon known to our world. Including those that had been forgotten.”

“Why are you asking?” Cali asked Big Mac.

Big Mac glanced at her, then looked back up at Steinar. “Did it have any information about revenants?”

**Episode 1319**

Steinar looked a little perplexed as he took in Big Mac’s question. He almost looked a little insulted at the insinuation that he *wouldn’t* know exactly what she was talking about.

“Revenants?” he asked. “Of course we had information on revenants. We had information on every magical creature in existence, both light and dark.”

A surge of energy went through the pack as everyone exchanged weighted glances. We were all clearly thinking the same thing—maybe the library could give us answers about what was going on with the revenants. *And* the rest of the havoc the Orb had caused.

“Do *you* know anything about them?” I asked Steinar cautiously. “About the revenants? I mean, I know you’ve read so many of the library’s books over the years—”

But Steinar was already shaking his great stone head. “No, no. Information like that—about truly dangerous magical creatures—is deemed unnaturally perilous, and is restricted. You have to have special permission from Hypatia to even go into the section with those books. If you try to go in without it, you’re out cold for six months.”

“You never even got a look at them?” I asked incredulously. “In all your years there?”

Steinar shrugged. “It was too dangerous, even for me.”

Big Mac looked over at Greyson, her eyes flashing. “If there’s information in that library—any information at all—about how to stop what’s happening here, then we need to find it. Now.”

Artemis stepped forward, her jaw set. “I’ll go.”

I looked at her, shocked. Her sudden willingness to be out and about made me nervous, as well as surprised. But I stepped up next to her. “I’ll go with you.”

Greyson frowned at both of us, his grey eyes clouding over. “Absolutely not,” he growled.

“Greyson—”

“No way, Cali,” he said, cutting me off. “I’m surprised you even *want* to go, with everything that’s going on. I’m not comfortable sending anyone out right now, not with what’s been happening. We have to stay put. We’re safer together.”

Big Mac shook her head. “No way. We’re totally in the dark here. What we need is information, and if this library of his”—she tipped her chin toward Steinar—“has any answers, then it’s worth the trip.”

“The library’s been destroyed,” Greyson pointed out. “He told us that.”

“Except I think that if I can gather enough Fae, they’ll be able to help set things right,” Steinar said quickly, his granite face brightening for the first time.

“Right, well, that’s me. So guess you better count me in as well,” Artemis said firmly.

For a moment, I wondered why Artemis was so eager to set out into the great unknown. She’d been through so much in such a short period of time, and she still seemed really shaken up. Earlier, it had seemed like all she wanted was space from all the drama, but now she was ready to go charging back in.

But it didn’t matter, not really. She was my sister, and there was no way I was letting her go off alone.

“Then I’m going too,” I said again.

“And us,” Astrid said, stepping forward.

“Two more Fae, reporting for duty,” Torin said, winking cheekily.

My mom had been listening to everything from the kitchen doorway, but she pushed her way forward. “Well, if my daughters—and all the other Fae in the house—are going, then I’m going, too.”

I could see that Greyson looked irritated, but Steinar clapped his hands with excitement. The resulting crash made everyone jump in surprise, but Steinar’s face split into a happy smile. The tension of the room cracked, and a happy buzz of talk broke out.

“*Finally*. Maybe we’ll get some answers,” Sage said, reaching out to give my arm a squeeze.

“Yeah, good luck,” Zainab said, nodding.

I glanced up at Greyson, who clearly wanted to fight back on our decisions. It was clear that the tide had turned. Everyone wanted all this revenant stuff to be over—or at least to get some answers about it—and they were glad that we were going to go find a solution. Greyson wasn’t going to be able to keep us from going.

“I don’t think *you* should be going anywhere,” Big Mac said, drawing my attention back. She was looking at Artemis, and her expression was hard. “At least nowhere I can’t keep an eye on you.”

A pained expression passed across Artemis’s face. “That’s not fair,” she said quietly. Then she straightened her shoulders and looked Big Mac right in the eyes. “I want to help just as much as anyone else. *More*,even.”

Big Mac shook her head. “I believe that you believe that. I just don’t think that’s all you want,” she said dubiously. “And I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

Artemis narrowed her eyes. “Well, it sounds to me like you’re volunteering to come with us, then.”

Big Mac looked outraged, but then she clearly thought about the suggestion for a moment. Finally, she shrugged. “Maybe I should,” she said slowly. “I’d be better equipped to interpret what exactly we’re looking for, and my magic could help you, undoubtedly.” She thought for a moment longer. “Yes, maybe I will.”

I tried to smother an irritated sigh. I didn’t love the idea of a road trip with both Big Mac and Artemis. Of all the people in the house, they were the very last people I’d choose to spend an extended amount of time with—at least when they were together. The two of them had been at odds more than once. Though Big Mac was probably right about her expertise in knowing what to look for, and she was much more adept with her magic than me, or even Artemis. So even though the thought of sharing the back seat with her made me feel prematurely carsick, I had to admit that having a witch along would be helpful.

Next to me, Greyson sighed and threw up his hands. “If you’re all hellbent on this, there’s not much I can do to stop you. Well,” he growled, “there *is*, but I doubt my forcing you to stay in the pack house would do much good,” he muttered, looking annoyed. He hated being outvoted, but I knew he knew we had to do something about the undead, and this seemed like our best—and *only—*option.

Steinar beamed down at us—Artemis, Torin, Astrid, my mom, and myself, all standing in a line. “My fellowship of the library!” he said joyfully. He clapped his hands again, making everyone jump again, and then said, “Right, let’s go!”

“Hang on, Steinar!” I said, putting a hand on his stone arm. “Slow down, buddy. “Don’t we have to pack first?”

Steinar looked baffled, like I’d started speaking in a foreign language. Then his face cleared “Ah! Yes! You people all need food and clothing and those little brushes you use at bedtime to polish your teeth.”

“Toothbrushes,” Torin supplied helpfully.

“Yes!” Steinar said. “That’s it! Those are so odd.”

“Tell me about it,” Torin said, raising his eyebrows.

Steinar rolled his eyes. “You fleshy creatures are so finnicky, I do forget sometimes.”

“We’ll be quick about it,” I assured him. “Let’s go,” I said to the Fae, as we all headed upstairs.

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I was up in my room, trying to decide if I would need five or six pairs of wool socks when there was a soft knock on my door.

“Come in,” I called, tossing in the extra pair of socks, just to be safe.

Greyson opened the door and slipped into my room. He gave me a small smile and closed the door behind him.

“Hey,” I said, slipping my feet into a pair of boots.

“Hi,” he said, his expression turning dark. “Listen, Cali. I have to tell you, I don’t love the idea of you leaving right now.” He hesitated. “For a few reasons.”

My heart thumped. “I don’t love the thought of leaving you either, actually.” It was strange, maybe, but I was feeling especially close to him at the moment, still thinking of the vision we’d shared.

Greyson took a step toward me.

I looked down at my backpack as my face heated up. “But maybe it’s for the best,” I added. “Maybe some space would be good for us right now. For both of us.”

Greyson took another step closer. “I’m sure that’s true,” he said, his voice so low I could feel the rumble of it in my chest. “But space from you is the last thing I want right now.”

He took another step closer to me.

I knew I should step back—maybe if I did, I’d be able to breathe properly—but I just couldn’t bring myself to do it. I looked up into his eyes, finding them bright and fixed on mine, the light in them sharp.

“You were asking about the visions,” he started.

“Yes?” I asked when he didn’t go on. “What about them?”

“If there was a way to make them our future,” he said, and the look in his eyes seemed to pierce right through me, “would you want that?”

**Episode 1320**

VIOLET

I paused nervously in front of Big Mac’s room, my hand raised to knock. I hadn’t been able to stop thinking about what we’d talked about the last time we’d spoken—especially the dire warning she’d given me about the dangers of bringing Lilac back to life.

But I straightened my shoulders. I knew I had to get my questions answered, so I knocked firmly.

Mrs. Smith opened the door. “Oh, Violet. Hello. What can I do for you?”

My heart pounded and my tongue faltered as I tried to form the words. “I-I had a question for Big Mac.”

Mrs. Smith shot a glance over her shoulder, then looked back at me and smiled. “Come in.”

Big Mac looked up at me as I walked in, her expression sour. A small suitcase was open on the bed, and she was throwing clothes into it, obviously packing in a hurry. “What?” she asked shortly.

I took a steadying breath. “I know you’re heading out, but I wanted to know more about this library you’re going to.”

Big Mac narrowed her eyes. “Why?”

My heart thumped in my chest. “Because if it really does have information about everything in the supernatural world, like that stone guy said, then wouldn’t it have information about necromancy, too?”

“Oh, for crying out loud. Does every wolf in this pack have a death wish?” Big Mac said, rolling her eyes and turning to the dresser. She yanked open a drawer and grabbed an armful of socks. “I’ve already told you, girl, you don’t want to go dabbling in necromancy. It’s far too dangerous. Too unstable.”

“But isn’t that just because we don’t really understand it?” I asked quickly, stepping toward her. “I mean, maybe there’s information at this library that could help you learn more, help you understand it better, so it wouldn’t be so dangerous and unstable. And then maybe you could figure out how to bring Lilac back. *Safely*.”

Big Mac laid a raincoat on top of the suitcase, then gave everything a shove downward and shut the top with a snap of her fingers. “There is no safety when it comes to necromancy, girl. Besides, I’m a witch, not a medium or a necromancer. They’re two very different schools of magic,” she said sharply. “Now drop it.”

“MacKenzie,” Mrs. Smith said quietly, but even I could hear the warning tone in her voice. It almost made me giggle seeing Big Mac look a little chastised by Mrs. Smith’s voice.

“You haven’t seen what I’ve seen, Sabine. There are things you don’t play around with, and this is one of them.” She looked back to me. “Trust me. Drop it.”

Tears pricked the corners of my eyes as I shook my head. “I won’t drop it. I can’t. Not if there’s even the slightest chance it could happen. And there is. I’ve seen it happen. And so have you. Ava came back. I know it’s a remote chance, but that’s better than nothing. And I’ll take it, if it means even a sliver of hope that I could see my brother again.” Hot tears started to course down my cheeks. “You have to understand, Lilac was everything to me after our parents died. He took care of me. He looked out for me. He’s my twin, my other half. Losing him was like losing my right arm. I feel like I’m about to lose my balance without him, all the time. And if there’s any chance that we could be together again—any chance at all—then I’ll take it,” I finished, swallowing down a sob.

Big Mac looked at me, and her eyes softened. Just a little, but I could see the change in them. She gave a small sigh. “Alright, enough with the water works. If we can even get into this place, I’ll see if it has any information. But I’m not making any promises,” she added harshly.

My heart swelled. “That’s all I’m asking for. Thank you! Thank you!” Impulsively, I threw my arms around Big Mac.

She was clearly surprised, and she stood frozen for a moment. Then, stiffly, she gave my back a couple of awkward pats.

I pulled away, beaming at her. “If this can even give me a chance to get Lilac back, I’ll… I’ll owe you big time,” I said, feeling more hopeful than I had in a long time.

“Careful talking about favors around a witch, but… you’re welcome,” she said gruffly, not looking at me. “Get going, girl. I need to finish up.”

Mrs. Smith smiled at me as I left, and I headed downstairs, feeling lighter than I had in ages. I looked around for Marta—and Lilac—wanting to tell them the good news.

I heard Marta’s voice coming from the kitchen and headed in that direction, but I stopped short in the doorway when I saw Marta in the middle of what looked like an argument with empty air, though I realized it was probably Lilac.

She was standing at the kitchen island and had a loaf of Tom’s homemade bread, a jar of mustard, and a plate of cold cuts laid out of front of her, and she was gesturing wildly.

“—and what I am asking is that you give it a rest already. As I have already told you,” she said, rolling her eyes, “it doesn’t matter which side of the bread I butter. This isn’t the first time I’ve made a sandwich, you know.” She paused for a moment, listening, and then threw up her hands, looking infuriated. “I’ve already told you! I’m not making a BLT!”

I walked toward her cautiously. “Uh, hey, you two—”

Marta turned to me, a furious glint in her eyes, and pointed the butter knife at me. “We need to talk.”

“Do we?” I asked, easing myself onto a stool at the island. “What’s up?”

“What’s up? What’s up is that your know-it-all brother won’t give me a moment’s peace! All day long it’s *talk-talk-TALK*! He’s driving me *insane*!” She paused for a moment, her face flushed, and tilted her head, clearly listening to something. Then she let out a frustrated huff. “Oh my god, I am *not* saying you need some kind of muzzle! Did I say that?” She turned to me. “Violet, did I say that?”

I used to hate getting in the middle of my brother’s arguments when he was alive and I could actually hear them. I didn’t even know what to say now that he was, well, a voice in my friend’s head.

“What I’m saying is that I don’t want to hear every little thought that crosses your mind. It is possible to have an unexpressed thought!” She turned to me, glaring. “This morning he told me—in *detail*—the entire plot of *Casper*. As if I needed to hear about *other* annoying ghosts!”

“Hey!” I said quickly. “My brother isn’t annoying.”

Marta narrowed her eyes. “Trust me. If he was stuck to your side all day long, you’d think he was annoying too.”

I opened my mouth to argue but closed it again, thinking better of it. I wanted to defend Lilac, but I also knew that I needed to tread carefully. If Marta got too fed up with the situation, would she break their weird ghost bond? Was that how those things worked? I had no idea, but I couldn’t let that happen. Marta was my only connection to my brother, and I was determined to make it work—for all of us.

The situation should’ve been mutually beneficial for all of us, not just me and Lilac. I bit my lip, thinking hard. How could I smooth this over and convince Marta to maintain the bond between her and Lilac?

I wracked my brain. What did people do to get two people who were fighting to make up? And to make them work together better?

And that was when it came to me.

“*Couples therapy!*”

Marta looked up from her half-made sandwich—where she *was* buttering the wrong side of the bread. “What did you say?”

“Couples therapy!” I said again. I had no idea why it had taken me so long to think of it. “That’s what you and Lilac need!”

She shook her head and glared at the air to her left. “We are *so* not a couple.”

I waved a dismissive hand. “That doesn’t matter. And, if we’re being technical, technically you’re a couple of souls. And what you have is kind of like a marriage, right? There’s a bond kind of thing, right? And all couples bicker, so this is totally normal!”

Marta looked back down at her sandwich. “Whatever.”

I couldn’t help but smile. She had been picking up on modern slang very quickly. “What we need to do is sit you two down so that you can get to know each other.” I grinned, starting to feel really excited. “And once you do, I promise, you’re going to love Lilac just as much as I do!”

Marta snorted as she cut her ham and turkey sandwich in half. “I doubt that.”

“Please, Marta, please?” I cried, clasping my hands together and trying to look as sad and pathetic as possible. “I’m asking you. You know how much Lilac means to me, and that means that this”—I pointed to the air between Marta and her left shoulder—“needs to work.”

Marta glanced over, then sighed heavily. “*Fine*.”

I clapped my hands in excitement. “Perfect! Your first session starts now!”

**Episode 1321**

XAVIER

“What is this place?” Kira asked dubiously as she climbed out of my car. She looked warily up at the small, squat building, then along the street of grey, windowless, industrial buildings.

“The Tooth and Claw,” I told her. “It’s a bar.”

“Is it? Looks nice,” she said, raising an eyebrow.

If this was what she thought “nice” looked like, I had serious doubts about this witch’s mental state.

“It’s not meant to draw foot traffic,” I explained, walking toward the front door.

There was no sign over the door or anywhere else on the building. If you were walking by, you probably wouldn’t have known it was a bar at all, which was kind of the point. It wasn’t the kind of place that the proprietors wanted to encourage tourists to just pop into—it was the kind of place someone had to tell you about.

I stopped before I reached the front door and turned to Kira. “Listen, while we’re in there, we need to keep a low profile. The Tooth and Claw attracts a pretty rough clientele, and the last thing you want is to draw unnecessary attention. You got me?”

Kira nodded.

I glanced at the façade of the building, remembering the last time I’d been in there. I’d been with Colton and Gabriel, and we had most assuredly *not* kept a low profile. My gaze went to the bar’s one small window, and I grinned to myself, remembering how Colton had been sent crashing through that very window, after starting a fight that had shut down the Tooth and Claw for the first and only time in the bar’s storied history.

But I wasn’t with Colton and Gabriel now, and I had no intention of staging a reenactment of that night.

“You don’t need to worry about me,” Kira said, her voice tight. “I’ve spent plenty of time with rough crowds. I know how to handle myself.”

I looked down at her. Her jaw was set, and her pretty face was determined. But I had no idea how powerful she really was. The only magic I’d seen her do was healing craft, and that wasn’t going to cut it in a place like this. She was a rookie, a newbie, and out for vengeance, a combination that I knew from experience spelled reckless disaster. But what other choice did I have? I gave my word. Maybe I’d catch a lucky break for once and the girl would surprise me.

“All right,” I said, pulling the door open. “Then let’s rock and roll.”

The Tooth and Claw was dark and loud and smelled strongly of sweaty bodies and sour beer. The music from the shitty jukebox in the corner blared and blended with raucous yells from the bikers lined up at the bar, and stepping into the place felt like stepping back in time. It was everything about it—the sound, the stink, the fucking radiating heat of the place—that reminded me of the life I used to lead when Colton and I had hunted people for the bounties on their heads. It had been a weird job, but it had paid well and had been exciting as hell, and I’d have been lying if I said I didn’t miss it sometimes. But I’d given it up for a reason, and that reason was in the shape of Caliana, and I couldn’t wait to get back to the pack house and be with her again. For good.

But all this was driven out of my head when I heard an excited voice shout my name.

“Xavier!”

I looked up, surprised, but my face broke into a smile when I saw the tattooed woman behind the bar. “*Jamie?*” I could feel Kira’s eyes on me, but I ignored them as I strode to the bar. “I can’t believe you’re still bartending here. How the hell are you?”

Jamie laughed and poured beer into a tall glass. She slammed it onto the bar in front of me, the foam splashing onto the scarred wood of the bar top. “Same old shit, man. How are you? It’s been ages since I’ve seen you. I was starting to worry that something had happened to you. How’s that idiot brother of yours?”

Kira sidled up the bar and squeezed in next to me. She gave the biker next to me a look and he edged away, giving her a little room.

I could see that Jamie was curious about the newbie at my side.

“This is Kira. Kira, this is Jamie, an old friend,” I said, tipping my chin at each of the women in turn.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Jamie said to Kira with a friendly smile. The diamond studs pierced through her dimples glinted in the low light of the bar. She looked back at me. “So, what brings you to our fair establishment? If memory serves correctly, you only ever came into the Tooth and Claw when you were in the shit.”

Before I could answer, Kira leaned forward. “We’re looking for Garren Ackers.”

I looked over at Kira, irritated. That was *not* what I’d meant when I’d told her to keep a low profile. You didn’t just walk into a place like this and start shouting out names. You took your time, got the lay of the land, and *then* you put out feelers. You were circumspect, for fuck’s sake. But when I looked back over to Jamie, my irritation turned to surprise.

Jamie looked scared.

Which was strange. I’d known her for a long time, and Jamie was a total badass. She had a degree in history, a full back tattoo of Bugs Bunny, a black belt in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, and she wasn’t scared of anything.

She cleared her throat. “Why are you looking for Garren Ackers?”

I shrugged. “No special reason. Any idea where he might be?”

She pushed up the sleeves of her black T-shirt, exposing her fully inked arms, and shook her head. “Nope. And if I were you, I’d stop looking. And I’d stay as far away from him as possible.”

“Jamie, has that line ever worked on me once?” I laughed. Maybe if I played it cool, I could get us back on track. “I mean, I figured he’s a bad dude but…” I glanced around the bar. “That’s kinda of your bread and butter, isn’t it?”

Jamie didn’t smile. “No, this is different. Garren’s kind of… gone off the rails, the last few years.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Jamie glanced around nervously. “He’s been working for the Blood Moons.”

Okay, so much for having any luck at all on this mission.

“The what?” Kira asked, looking confused. “Who are the Blood Moons?”

I just shook my head. Now wasn’t the moment to tell her, but the Blood Moons were a shadowy, deadly, organized crime ring. And even in the criminal underworld—where that kind of thing was usually encouraged—they were notorious for being ruthless and unnecessarily cruel.

Jamie nodded. “The rumor is that he’s been working for them as an assassin, taking these high-profile jobs.” She leaned her hands on the bar and gave me a long look. “He’s moved up in the world, and he’s not a guy you fuck with.”

“Again, Jamie, when have the warnings ever worked?”

Jamie looked grim. “Last time he was in here he was high as a fucking kite—some blood drug thing—and throwing around money like it was nothing.”

“When was that?” I asked.

“Couple months back,” Jamie said vaguely. She rolled her eyes. “It all starts to run together. But ever since he ripped Keith’s throat out over a spilled beer, he’s been banned from coming in.”

I nodded slowly, taking this information in. “Okay. Any idea where he’s living now?”

“Like I said, I don’t know,” Jamie said briskly, grabbing a dirty cloth from beneath the counter and scrubbing a non-existent spot off the bar top. “And I don’t want to. And if you were smart, neither would you. Stay away from him. He’s trigger-happy and dangerous—even for you, Xavier.”

Next to me, I could feel Kira tense.

I picked up my beer and drained it, then dropped a twenty on the bar for Jamie. “It was good to see you again.”

“You too,” Jamie said. Her eyes were worried as she looked at me. “Take care, man. I mean it.”

I nodded. “Let’s go,” I murmured to Kira.

“Where are we going next?” Kira asked as we moved through the crowd. “She didn’t know where he lived.”

But before I could answer her question, there was a rough voice behind me.

“Heard you were asking about Garren.”

I turned around.

A huge man with wild black hair was standing up at a table near the door, glaring at me.

“Yeah?” I asked defiantly. “So? Guy can’t ask a couple of questions to see an old buddy?” Hopefully the bluff worked.

Somewhere behind us, a glass fell to the ground and shattered. The talk in the rest of the bar died down, and I could feel the eyes of the rest of the patrons on us. Okay… no way we were bluffing our way out of this fight.

Four more men, all built along the same lines as the first, stood from the same table. They looked like the defensive line from a pro football team, and they stood in a row, blocking our exit, glowering down at us.

The first man took a threatening step toward me. “If you’re asking about Garren, you’re asking about us. And if you’re looking to mess with Garren, then you want to mess with all of us. You got me?”

The men all shifted, teeth, fur, and claws all springing forth with savage growls. I barely had enough time to get Kira behind me when the wolves lunged for us.

**Episode 1322**

LOLA

This was a nightmare. It had to be. That was the only explanation. There was no way this could really, *actually* be happening to me. Just then, the vampire on-screen let out a less-than-quiet moan, and I thought I’d sink into oblivion with my embarrassment. My heart was racing, sweat was beading on my forehead, and my mouth was desert-dry. I balled up my fists, just waiting to wake up. I *had* to wake up.

But then, to my absolute and lasting horror, Emmett looked over at me, his elegant eyebrows slightly raised, and I knew it was *actually* *happening*.

My heart thudded to an abrupt and catastrophic stop. Maybe I would just die. It might be the most merciful thing to ever happen. I wanted to disappear. I wanted the floor to open up so I could sink into it, never to be seen again. I looked past Emmett, eyeing the window, wondering wildly how painful the fall would be if I just flung myself through the thick, leaded glass. I broke out into a full sweat as I hazarded a sideways glance at Emmett and saw his face moving from an expression of surprise to understanding, and then to something that looked annoyingly like amusement.

Why did he look *amused?* There was absolutely *nothing* funny about any of this! Whatever the *opposite* of funny was, *this* was it.

My whole body felt as though it had been encased in ice, so it required a huge effort, but I managed to reach out and snatch my laptop out of his hands. I then slammed it shut with so much force, I was mildly surprised I didn’t hear the screen shatter.

“Th-that must have been some kind of a virus. I’ve been having problems with it ever since I opened an email from some prince asking me to wire him money. You know how those things are,” I finished lamely, tossing the offending computer to the ground and kicking it beneath my desk. I never wanted to see the thing ever again.

Still looking amused, Emmett held up his hands. “Please don’t feel as though you have to explain yourself to me, Lola. Trust me, I understand. Vampires can have astonishingly high libidos.”

My face—already burning—flushed even hotter as he said that last word. I was surprised it hadn’t actually burst into flames.

But Emmett just shrugged. “Perhaps it seems strange to some, but it’s just a fact of our existence. You’ll adjust, or perhaps you already are?”

Death would be here at any moment.

“Can we just… forget you ever saw that?” I muttered distractedly, looking anywhere but at him. It didn’t matter how casual he was or how understanding he tried to sound, I was never going to get over this. And that epic window escape was still not out of the question.

Perhaps he saw me still eyeing the window, because the amusement left his eyes.

“Lola,” he said, and his voice was kind. “You really don’t have to be embarrassed about any of this. Vampire heat is always intense and hard to deal with when you’re first reborn. It’s can be inconvenient, but it really is quite normal.”

I looked over at him, and—for the first time—suddenly became aware of how close we were sitting. I’d sat as far away from him as I could, but it was as if the room had somehow shrunk, and now it felt like I was practically sitting in his lap.

Drawing in a deep breath, I squeezed my eyes shut. I had to get ahold of myself. I felt like I was going out of my mind. He kept saying the word “normal,” but I didn’t buy it. None of this felt anywhere *close* to normal. I wasn’t even in the same *neighborhood* as normal. Was it normal to feel this kind of out-of-character attraction for just one person? I wanted to know, but there was no way I was going to be asking him that.

When I opened my eyes, I saw that Emmett was leaning toward me, making the space between us even smaller, and I leapt back as though I’d just received an electric shock. He had a quizzical look on his face, almost as if he had anticipated my questions.

“It’s nothing, really. I was just curious about how things were going to change for me,” I said, gesturing to my laptop. I paced to the other side of the small room. “It’s not a big deal. Like, at all.” I turned and looked at Emmett, trying to smile normally, wishing like hell that he would just leave me alone to my shame.

Emmett stood. “Lola, I’m telling you, there’s nothing to be ashamed about. In fact”—he stepped toward me—“there are a few tried and true ways to help ease the urges you’re feeling.”

I clamped my jaw shut to stop myself from screaming.

“They’ve always helped with young vampires,” he went on. “Come with me,” he said, holding out his hand.

Without even thinking, I took his extended hand. As soon as I made contact with his smooth, cool skin, I felt a frisson of desire move through my body like an electrical current.

He smiled and led me out of my room. He pulled me through the hallway and down a staircase. When he led me into the kitchen, he gave my hand a light squeeze and let go. “Now sit tight for a moment,” he said.

I leaned against the butcher-block island and watched as he turned toward the two large industrial-sized refrigerators. He opened one, moving around, pulling open drawers and cupboards. Then he emptied an ice tray into a bowl and carried it over to me.

I eyed the bowl disdainfully. “Ice? Thanks, but I didn’t twist my ankle playing soccer, coach.”

Emmett laughed. “Don’t dismiss it without even trying it, Lola. You apply it to your pressure points, and it helps cool the whole system down.”

I stared at him. “My pressure points? Come again?”

*What was this,* Vampirology 101*?*

But Emmett just laughed again. Then he pulled the bowl of ice toward himself. “I’ll show you.” He picked up an ice cube and held it up, hesitating for a moment, a question in his eyes. “May I?”  
 I looked into his eyes and found myself swaying on my feet. The effect this man had on me was outrageous. This couldn’t go on. I had to put a stop to this. Ice sounded stupid as hell, but at this point, I’d do anything to make this feeling go away. Jay! My mate sprang almost immediately to mind. I just had to focus on my amazing, gorgeous, hot-as-hell, and perfect mate; that would get me through this.

Emmett walked behind me and laid the ice cube on my neck, just behind my ear. “See?” he murmured after a moment. “Isn’t that better?”

The ice cube was starting to melt against the heat of my skin, and it slid slowly down my neck. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. No, that was *not* better. That was much, *much* worse. Having him just behind me, murmuring into my ear… It was basically the most erotic situation I could imagine. Way better than that cheesy vampire porn I’d been watching. And the sensation of the melting ice against my skin was only making me hornier. I could feel heat pooling between my legs, and I sucked in a shaking breath as my knees started to turn weak.

Emmett moved the ice to the other ear, trailing the wetness across the back of my neck, and I let out an involuntary moan.

Then—humiliated—I clapped a hand over my mouth.

Emmett didn’t react or say anything, and for a moment I prayed like crazy that he’d had momentary hearing loss.

*What the hell was happening to me?*

I’d always had a higher than normal sex drive—any casual conversation with friends had always made that abundantly clear—but this was *insane*. I felt completely out of control, like I could barely keep myself from ripping my clothes off and laying myself out on the kitchen island in the hopes he would just take the hint.

The ice against my neck had melted to nothing, and Emmett put his hands gently on my shoulders, turning me to face him. His face was shadowy in the dark kitchen, and I couldn’t see his expression clearly. I wondered, vaguely, if he could see mine.

“Feeling better, Lola?” he asked softly, his voice a soft purr.

I looked up, completely aware of every inch of space separating us. There was so little of it. All I’d have to do was lean forward—reach up on my tiptoes just a little bit—and then we’d be kissing. His lips were right there, all sexy and sulky and…

My head started to spin. Stars exploded in the corners of my vision. I tried to blink them away, but nothing helped. I was swaying on my feet. I reached out, but there was nothing to grasp, and then, suddenly, everything went black.

**Episode 1323**

I leaned back against the headrest with a sigh and looked out the window. My eyes went to the rearview mirror, and I saw the other car following behind us. I wondered how Torin, Astrid, and Big Mac were faring together. Or, more accurately, I wondered if Big Mac had murdered Torin already, or just gagged him to keep him from talking.

Either way, it made me glad that Artemis, my mom, and I had ended up in the *other* car. I loved Torin and Astrid, but a little break from them made for a peaceful ride. Or, at least, it *should* have been peaceful, but my brain just wouldn’t slow down. I couldn’t stop thinking about what Greyson had said to me before I’d left—about the vision we’d both seen, and whether or not it showed our future. And whether I would *want* it to be our future.

I frowned as I looked out at the passing trees. What exactly had he meant by that? Did that mean he wanted to have a family with me? A baby?  
 My face heated. Having a baby would mean *making* a baby, and making a baby would mean…

My body suddenly felt too hot, and warmth like pooling lava gathered just below my belly. A picture flashed into my mind—Greyson and me in a new house that was just ours, *christening* every new room together…

But then I shook my head. No, that wasn’t it. That wasn’t what he’d been asking about. He’d had a weird look on his face when he’d asked. I hadn’t exactly been able to read it, but it felt like there was something he wasn’t telling me.

I chewed the inside of my cheek, thinking hard, sifting through everything he’d said. I wondered if he’d just meant that if I chose him, maybe we could have a chance to build that future together, but was that really it? I just wasn’t sure. There was just something about the way he’d asked that made it seem like it was more than that.

My thoughts floated back to the vision and the strange feeling it had left me with. I thought of the three figures I’d seen at the edge of the forest. Greyson had called them the witch sisters. The very mention of them seemed to set him on edge in a way I’d never seen from him before. Well, whoever or *whatever* they were, they had to have something to do with all this weirdness. But *why*? And were they after me or Greyson… or both of us? None of those options were especially heartening.

I heaved a gusty sigh. I didn’t understand any of this. And I’d had no idea what to say in response to Greyson’s question, either. Xavier was gone, but that didn’t mean our connection was gone. And Greyson knew as well as I did that I couldn’t possibly choose any kind of future with him without rejecting Xavier. And that would kill him. Like, it would *literally* kill Xavier.

This damn curse…

My head ached, and I pinched the bridge of my nose. All this time, and I was still no closer to knowing what to do about the *due destini* situation.

“Hey.” Artemis sat forward, resting her arms on the front seats. “How much longer is it going to be until we get to the airport?”

“A while,” my mom said, glancing down at the clock. “Why? What’s up? Are you hungry? I have some snacks in my bag.”

“No,” Artemis said. She shifted uncomfortably. “I have to pee.”

My mom rolled her eyes, looking slightly annoyed. “I told you to make sure you went before we left.”

“I didn’t have to go then,” Artemis countered.

My mom pressed her lips together and blew out an irritated breath through her nose while I just stifled a snicker. Compared to everything else going on, this felt bizarrely mundane. “I’ll pull over as soon as I get to an exit, but next time please try to listen to me, Artemis.”

Artemis sat back, and when I saw her reach into my mom’s bag for a granola bar, I grinned to myself. My mom and dad loved road trips, and every summer we’d pack up the car and go for long drives to see new states. My dad would put little checks on the paper atlas he kept in the car, marking all the places we’d visited. They’d *ooh* and *ahh* at fields of corn and state capitol buildings, but I’d just sit in the back seat, wishing for someone to share my boredom. And now I had Artemis, so in a way I finally got my wish.

But—I glanced over my shoulder at her—I couldn’t shake the worried feeling I got every time I looked at her. It was this low-grade fear I had in the pit of my stomach. Artemis had just been acting so *strange*. And then, when this trip had come up, she’d been so eager to get out of the house—she’d volunteered without even letting Steinar finish talking. I wanted to get to the bottom of what was going on, too, but I was just surprised at how enthusiastic Artemis had been.

And that she hadn’t even asked if Rishika could come along *really* surprised me. They’d been joined at the hip lately, and it kind of shocked me that Artemis would want to leave her behind.

I turned in my seat to look at her. “So, I couldn’t help but notice that you and Rishika seemed pretty sleepy the other morning.”

Artemis swallowed the last of her granola bar. “What are you talking about?”

I grinned. “Oh, you know, you didn’t come out of your room until after lunch.” I winked. “Guess you two really needed the rest, huh?”

Artemis didn’t answer.

My mom shot me a sideways glance. “Cali, don’t tease your sister.” She glanced into the rearview mirror. “I think Rishika is a very nice girl, Artemis,” she said with a smile.

Artemis crossed her arms over her chest and looked out the window, her expression suddenly stony. “I don’t want to talk about Rishika.”

I glanced at my mom, who looked as surprised as I felt, instantly taking the wind out of my sails. I had waited an entire lifetime to tease a sibling about a crush; guess I would have to wait a bit longer.

“Did something happen between you two?” I asked Artemis cautiously.

Artemis shook her head, just once.

“I just ask because I thought you two were really hitting it off,” I added.

Artemis didn’t answer for a moment. It looked like she was chewing the inside of her lip. “We were,” she finally said. “*Are*,” she corrected. Then she frowned, looking angry. “I don’t know. Stop asking me stupid questions!”

“Did you girls have a fight?” my mom asked, her face creased with concern as she looked at Artemis in the rearview mirror.

Artemis tightened her arms around herself, like she was bracing herself—or protecting herself.

“Listen, Artemis,” I started, “I know that Rishika can be kind of brusque sometimes, but that’s just how she is. That’s her personality, you know? She doesn’t mean to be rude or anything—”

“No,” Artemis said, her gaze still out the window. “We didn’t have a fight. It’s nothing like that.”

I stared at her, confused. “Then what is it? What’s going on?”

Artemis looked out at the passing trees and didn’t answer.

“Artemis,” I said, leaning toward her. “What’s up with you? Is everything okay—”

Artemis whipped around to face me. “I told you, I don’t want to talk about it!” she snapped, her voice sharp as flint.

I drew back instinctively, then I shot a look at my mom, who had craned around in her seat to look at Artemis, her eyes wide.

Artemis clapped a hand over her mouth, her own eyes wide with shock. “I’m so sorry, Cali. I—” She shook her head. “I haven’t been myself lately. I’m sorry.”

My heart was pounding now. I could hear it in my ears. This is what I’d been scared about all along—that if Artemis hadn’t been herself, then who *had* she been? I took a deep, shaking breath and leaned forward.

“Artemis,” I started slowly, “we’re your family. You can tell us anything. You know that, right?”

I watched her face carefully, and for an instant, I thought I saw something dark flash across her eyes, but it was gone too fast to be certain.

She didn’t speak.

My mom looked into the mirror. “Artemis, sweetheart, we love you, but we can’t help you if we don’t know what’s going on with you.” She gave Artemis a long look. “You can trust us.”

The air in the car grew charged, like there was electricity moving between us all.

“Artemis, what’s going on?” I asked, willing her to look at me.

Finally—*finally*—Artemis looked up into my eyes. She was *right there*, right on the verge of confessing whatever was on her mind—whatever secret she’d been carrying around, whatever information had been weighing her down. I felt a chill race up my spine. Something told me that whatever she was going to reveal… I wasn’t going to like it.

“Artemis,” I said, looking at her intently. “Is there something—anything—that you want to tell us?”

**Episode 1324**

XAVIER

In a heartbeat, I had shifted and was moving into fighting position, putting myself between the attackers and Kira, who was backing away, looking terrified.

For the briefest moment, I thought of Cali, and how determined she always was to help out in fights, which always made it so much harder to defend her. It was fucking annoying, and endearing as hell. Her refusal to sit on the sidelines—even when it was clearly the safest option—was one of the things I loved most about her, and I was hit by a sudden wave of longing for her.

But I couldn’t think about her—not now.

As I faced my attackers, I could only hope Kira would prove easier to protect.

The first fighter—a massive black wolf with eyes like flat grey stones—came at me like a freight train. He was heavy but slow, and I dodged easily, using his momentum to push him into a table. The rickety wood shattered beneath his weight, and the bastard whimpered as a splinter the size of a small log pierced his side.

I barely had time to register any of that before another two wolves came charging at me, fangs bared.

I batted one away, but the second sank his teeth into me. I growled as pain exploded in my neck. The rest of the bar crowd was on their feet, yelling, stamping, and screaming.

“On your six!” someone yelled, just in time for me to turn and kick away another wolf charging at me from the other side. He flew across the bar and slammed into the jukebox, which sprang to life. Elvis Presley’s voice crooned “Heartbreak Hotel” as the brown wolf slid to the floor. The way this crowd was reacting had me thinking they’d be placing bets before too long.

Things were getting dicey. Kira was behind me, and I could feel her spells shooting around me, but they didn’t seem to be attack spells. Apparently, she was only using her magic defensively, because a grey wolf with a black stripe down his back charged her and was bounced back, repelled by some kind of shield charm.

I gritted my teeth and pulled the wolf away from my neck, wondering why Kira couldn’t have cast the shield charm over both of us.

The skunk-striped wolf decided to come after *me* instead, but he had only made it a few strides before a chair shot out in front of him—moved by Kira, I assumed, unless I had gained telekinesis in the last hour. The skunk-wolf growled and smashed the chair with a paw, but it had slowed him down, and I was better able to prepare for his attack.

I appreciated Kira’s assist, and I knew I was stronger than any of these guys individually, but the reality was, I was outnumbered five to one, and unless she was going to bust out some offensive moves soon, we were going to be overwhelmed.

And what had happened to Miss “I’m going to kill Garren myself”? She was never going to kill the dude with defensive spells.

Another wolf came at me—ginger, with bald spots—and Kira shot a spell that blasted him backward. He landed with a yelp but was back on his feet in an instant.

*Okay, that’s an improvement.*

With a growl, I charged at him, swiping him hard and catching him off-guard. The balding ginger went down again, knocking over a table and sending a collection of glasses to the floor. He was on his paws again in an instant and swiped at my feet, knocking me down into the pile of shattered glass.

“FIGHT! FIGHT! FIGHT!” the crowd began to chant.

With a growl, I leapt to my feet and snapped at the ginger wolf. He moved aside, but not fast enough, and he yipped as I sank my teeth into his neck. But the grey was advancing on me again, so I let the ginger go. He slunk out the door with a whimper, but I didn’t have time to celebrate—not with the grey advancing on me. The brown and the two others had joined him, and I took a deep breath, wondering how the hell I was going to make this work.

My attack was halted by an ear-splitting gunshot that echoed around the bar, setting my and every other wolf’s ears back.

I looked over to see Jamie standing on top of her bar, looking down as she reloaded the shotgun in her hands. She dropped the empty box of shells, brought the shotgun to her shoulder, and looked through the sight as she spoke.

“That was a warning shot, fellas,” she said, addressing the attackers. “But the next one has your name on it unless you take your troubles out of my bar. You hear me?”

The whole place had gone silent. The attackers all shifted back, and I did the same, still standing in front of Kira, panting from the exertion.

One of the guys, the wild-haired one who’d first spoken to me, looked up at Jamie. “We’ll go,” he said, then turned and pointed a massive finger at me. “But you haven’t seen the last of us.”

“Out!” Jamie commanded, narrowing her eyes as her finger twitched over the trigger.

The men stormed out, yanking open the door so hard the top hinge pulled loose.

The men were gone, but the door swung crazily in the doorframe, and I looked around at the rest of the bar—tables crushed, glasses smashed, chairs flung across the space. The jukebox in the corner was now blaring “Jailhouse Rock,” but I could see there was a massive crack in the glass. The place had been destroyed. And when my gaze made it back to Jamie, she was glaring at me. “Jamie—”

“You’d getter get out of here, Xavier,” she snapped. “Before the owner gets back.”

“I’m really sorry about all of this,” Kira said, her face flushed. She pulled her wallet from her back pocket and scooped out all of the cash. “Here, for the damage,” she said, putting eleven dollars in singles onto the bartop.

Jamie looked down and snorted. “Yeah, that’ll take care of everything,” she said, rolling her eyes.

This made Kira blush harder, and she slipped her wallet back into her pocket.

“I’m sorry about this, Jamie,” I said. “I’ll make it up to you someday, but right now we have to get out of here.”

I ran a hand through my hair, and shards of broken glass fell onto the floor. So much for keeping a low profile. It was just a matter of time before word spread around town that there was an Alpha wolf on the prowl, accompanied by a witch. I blew out an irritated breath. This was the *last* thing I wanted.

Jamie dropped the shotgun. “Whatever. I’ll see you around, Xavier. Just be careful out there, okay?” She hopped down behind the counter and reached beneath it, then tossed a cloth bundle at me. “Lucky for you we’ve got a robust lost and found. You’re going to want these.”

“Thanks,” I said gratefully, pulling on the pair of khaki pants. They barely fit, but it was better than walking around butt-naked. “Let’s go,” I said, glancing at Kira.

Walking out the door, I kept an eye out for the belligerent wolves, just in case they’d decided to stick around to finish what they started, but the street looked clear. But as I pulled open the car door, I felt a sharp pain in my shoulder, and I twisted around to see what had caused it.

“It’s glass.”

“What?”

Kira pointed to my shoulder. “It’s a shard of glass. Right there.”

“Oh, thanks.” I reached around and pulled a sizeable chunk of glass from my shoulder. I had been knocked around so much in the fight that I hadn’t even noticed it entering my shoulder. “Dammit,” I said as the cut started to bleed.

“I think it’s okay,” Kira said quickly. “It’s not that deep.”

“No, it’s not that,” I said, irritated. “It’s the blood. The upholstery in this car is custom. I’ll never get blood out of it. And this is my favorite car.” This day just kept getting worse.

A surprised grin broke out on Kira’s face. “Hold still.”

I was wary, but I held still and watched as she took a step toward me and focused her eyes on the bleeding cut on my shoulder. Her energy seemed to turn physical, and when she moved her hand over the cut, it healed immediately, far faster than even my abilities could have closed it.

“*Damn*,” I whispered, looking down at the newly healed skin. No matter how many times I watched Torin heal—and then Kira, when I’d been at Iñigo’s—it always seemed like a miracle to me. I rolled my shoulder, testing it. It felt perfect, completely painless. “All better. Thanks.”

She smiled. “You’re welcome.”

“Okay,” I said, nodding to her door to indicate that she should get into the car. “We need to get out of here.”

Kira nodded and climbed into the car. “Do you think those guys are going to find Garren? Tell him we’re looking for him?”

I started the car. “Let’s just say this: I know the kind of people who come to the Tooth and Claw, and they’ve got big mouths.”

“What does that mean?” Kira asked worriedly.

“It means that by the end of the day, every supernatural in town is going to know we’re looking for Garren. We might as well be holding a neon sign over this car right now saying ‘Here For Garren’.”

Kira swallowed hard. “So not great, I get it. Well, where do we go from here?”

I pulled the car into the street and headed west. “We’ve lost the element of surprise, that’s for sure, but it’s too late to turn back. We’re going to finish what we started. We’re going to track down Garren and the Blood Moons.”

**Episode 1325**

AVA

The dining room of Iñigo’s estate had a pair of large French doors that looked out over manicured lawns. The ceilings of the room were high, and the giant, intricate oil paintings lining the walls looked expensive enough to be originals. I glanced across the table at Iñigo. Though he looked like a brute, I had to admit, the vampire had excellent taste in design.

As though he’d heard my thoughts, he looked up from the heavy goblet in his hand. He was sipping blood—O-negative, judging from the label on the bottle next to him—and he raised his cup to tap it softly against mine. “To our partnership,” he said, raising his eyebrows.

I took a sip of the excellent champagne in my own glass and gave him a sultry smile. “We do make quite the pair, don’t we?”

Iñigo smirked. “*For now*, my little lap dog. But don’t forget that our entire deal hinges on your willingness to hold up your end of the bargain.”

“I know that. And I will.” I let his derogatory remark slide off of me. Now wasn’t the time to let him know how easily he could rile me up. I had to keep up this aura of confidence, but the reality was I couldn’t get rid of the knot of unease I felt in my stomach about the whole situation. When I’d made this deal, I’d told myself I was only using Iñigo as a tool to achieve my ultimate goal—*Xavier*. But I had to admit that I might have gotten in a little over my head. Iñigo was far more powerful than I’d realized, and I didn’t feel like I had total control over the situation. I’d promised to deliver six Fae to him, but I had no idea how the hell I was going to manage that.

The pack house was well protected, and even though I’d gone over dozens of possible plans in my head, I still hadn’t landed on a good idea for luring Cali and the rest of the Fae out of there.

I took another sip of champagne—draining the glass—and tried to calm my racing heart. There was still plenty of time to iron out the details.

“In fact,” Iñigo said, interrupting my train of thought, “you’ll be able to make good on your deal tonight.”

I choked, and the last swallow of champagne came up through my nose. “What?” I asked, wiping my face with a napkin. “*Tonight?*”

Inigo nodded calmly. “I have a very special client coming in tomorrow, and I’ve promised her a sumptuous feast.” He grinned wickedly. “Fae blood.”

“I—” I swallowed hard. “I’m not sure I’ll be able to get them tonight. Not all the details are in place. I’m going to need a couple more weeks to get—”

I jumped up in my seat as Iñigo slammed his hand down hard on the table, making the silverware rattle.

“Enough stalling!” he snapped, his dark eyes flashing dangerously. “When I make deals, I expect the job to be done promptly. Time is money, Ava. And it is time for you to prove your loyalty to me. We are leaving directly after dinner.”

I stared at him. “You’re coming with me?”

He rolled his eyes. “Of course I am. How else will I make sure you don’t just run off?” The look he gave me was ice-cold. “It’s called protecting my investment.”

Fear washed through me. I needed to be careful around him, and I needed to remember that. Despite the expensive champagne and the lavish suite and the wild sex we’d been having, I knew this vampire wouldn’t hesitate to kill me.

I might do the same to him, given the opportunity.

I knew he was dangerous as hell, and I didn’t want to die.

Not again.

But the idea of simply strolling into the pack house and somehow convincing six Fae—one of whom was *Cali*—to walk out of there with me was absolutely *insane*. I twisted my hands nervously in my lap. “You know you can’t actually come anywhere near the pack house, right? The pack will sniff you out in a second.”

Iñigo just laughed. “It’s true that I’m a vampire,” he said, his tongue caressing his fangs seductively, “but have you already forgotten that I don’t smell like one? Kira might have left, but her magic is intact.”

Of course. That was how he did it. I shook my head, feeling like a fool. I didn’t know why it hadn’t occurred to be before. Magic was what masked his smell and made him so hard to identify.

“I can do this on my own.” It wasn’t my smartest bid, but I had nothing else left to lose.

But Iñigo shook his head. “You can’t take on the whole pack and capture six Fae all on your own.” He gave me a grin that looked slightly feral. “That’s why we have magic, and that’s why you’ll have this.”

From the seat next to him, he picked up what looked like a small grenade and a gas mask.

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“This is close enough,” I said, motioning for Iñigo to pull his car over to the side of the lonely road. I grabbed the smoke bomb and the mask from the floor at my feet. “You’ll have to wait here. The witch that’s been staying with the pack put a protection spell around the house, so you couldn’t come any closer even if you wanted to.”

Iñigo’s eyes narrowed with suspicion, but he nodded. “Very well, but remember, Ava, if you’re not back in twenty minutes with six Fae…” He smiled, but the expression was cold as ice.

He didn’t have to finish the sentence. I knew what he meant, and my mind was racing as fast as my heart. Even with the device he had given me, I still wasn’t sure I was going to be able to drag all the Fae back here to the car. On the other hand, it wasn’t like I really had a choice. I had to focus on why I was doing this. Xavier. It would be worth it once he was *mine* again.

Picturing my mate in my mind, I pushed the door open and climbed out. I made my way down the quiet road toward the pack house. The night was growing dark, and as I drew closer to the house, I could see that people were starting to gather in the kitchen. They were probably making dinner, though I couldn’t make out any of their faces.

My hand was growing sweaty with nerves, and I gripped the grenade tightly as I crept around the side of the house to the front, and then up the porch steps. As long as I made it inside, I’d be fine. I paused just before the door and, taking a deep breath, slipped on the gas mask. Then, without giving myself time to think better of it, I pushed the door open.

The first person I saw was Greyson, who was sitting in the living room, looking down at his phone. When he looked up at me, his eyes went wide with shock. Whether he knew it was me behind the mask I didn’t know, but he leapt to his feet and charged toward me. I had about three seconds before he shifted to attack, and I wasn’t going to give him any chances. So—heart pounding—I pulled the pin on the grenade and hurled it toward him.

It hit the floor of the living room and immediately began to spew thick yellow smoke into the air.

Greyson looked down at it, confused for a moment, and then his eyes glazed and he began to sway on his feet. In an instant, he was on the floor, unconscious.

From the kitchen I heard confused voices, then yells, then coughing, and then—eventually—the heavy thud of bodies hitting the floor. I could feel my heart beating at the base of my throat as I hurried into the kitchen and started kicking people face up. Greyson was still in the living room; Cali’s father, Sage, Zainab, Rishika, and that one-eyed idiot Jay were in the kitchen.

I ran upstairs, my breath loud in the confines of the mask, and started wrenching open bedroom doors. Most of the rooms were empty, but I found Violet passed out on her bed, and that old werewolf woman who made the shitty coffee in a crumpled heap at the top of the stairs.

“*Dammit*,” I whispered to myself, running back downstairs to check the living room again. Where the hell *were* they? Where was Cali? Where was her mom? And that other Fae girl who was always hanging around? Where was Maren? And those other two—the boy and the girl? Where *was* everyone?

There was a ticking clock in my head as I ran, but I double- and triple-checked every room before I finally had to admit to myself that the Fae were gone. I stood panting in the middle of the living room, surrounded by unconscious werewolves, and thought of Iñigo waiting for me in the car. I’d had no contact with the Redwood pack, and there was no way I could have known the Fae were all going to be gone tonight, but I doubted very much that Iñigo was going to be sympathetic to my problems. In fact, I was certain he was going to think I was lying, and that he was going to kill me for it.

What the hell was I going to do?

**Episode 1326**

LOLA

When my eyes slowly fluttered open, it took me a moment to make sense of what I was seeing. It was Emmett’s face. That was weird. Why was I looking directly into Emmett’s face? Not that I was complaining—he had a nice face. But, seriously, what the hell was happening to me?

And then, as the puzzle pieces slowly fell into place, my horror began to grow. Emmett was *carrying* me. I was lying in his strong, muscular arms, and he was carrying me through the halls of the school because—*oh shit*—I had *fainted*.

I closed my eyes, wishing that I’d just stayed unconscious. Where was a good long-term coma when you really, *really* needed one? Had I seriously gotten so horny in the kitchen that I’d just… *passed out?* Had that ever happened before in the history of the world? The arousal faints? Was that a *thing?* Everything about this was so completely, utterly, hugely humiliating.

*Jay.*

And now I felt guilty as well.

I wondered, briefly, if I could make a break for one of the windows and throw myself out of it.

Emmett looked down at me. “Oh, Lola, you’re awake,” he said, and a look of pure relief washed over his face. “You gave me quite a scare back there. Are you feeling all right?”

I squirmed a little in his arms, feeling his rock-hard chest and the iron bands of his arms around me. “Um, yes, I’m fine, thanks. I can—um—probably walk myself back to bed now. I’m probably just a little tired, I’m sure that’s all it was back there.”

But Emmett was already shaking his head. “No, I’m afraid not. I’m not taking any chances with you. I’m taking you to the infirmary. I want you to get checked over. Make sure there’s nothing wrong.” He gave me a searching look. “You know you are quite unique for a vampire, Lola.”

My face flamed. “What? No—”

He nodded. “Yes, you are. And because of that, we can’t be exactly sure what you’re going through.”

God, could this get any worse? I wished he would stop looking at me so intensely, telling me how damn special I was—it was doing terrible things to me. “I don’t think that’s necessary,” I said, squirming again and trying to make a break for it. “I really am fine. I should just get to class…”

But Emmett kept walking, ignoring me. He carried me through the halls to a part of the house I’d never been to before. He pushed through a swinging door to a small, empty room, and gently settled me onto a low cot.

I looked around, confused. Apart from the cot, the room didn’t look remotely medical. The were no exam tables, no machines, no signs of medications. I frowned up at Emmett. “Okay, where’s the doctor? Or is it a nurse?”

Emmett laughed. “Well, vampires don’t get sick, and we’re rarely injured, so the infirmary is really just one in name only.”

My confusion must have been stamped on my face because Emmett merely shrugged. “It’s really just a comfortable place to rest. We have no need of doctors around here.”

I stared at him, trying—and failing—to understand his tone. He’d seemed quite concerned when he was carrying me over—had refused to take no for an answer—but now he seemed so casual.

“So… then why am I here, exactly? I could just as easily rest back in my room.” I asked.

He raised his eyebrows. “I think you’ve been over-exerted. I think you need to lie down, and I think you need this.” He moved away to a small refrigerator on the far side of the room. He reached in a pulled out a small bag filled with a dark liquid. When he brought it closer, I saw that it was filled with blood.

Instinctively I made a disgusted face. “Sorry,” I said, shaking my head, “but no. No offense, but I’m still not all that crazy about blood.”

Emmett held it out to me, and—weirdly—there was something about the sight of it that made my mouth water a bit. Almost like when I smelled Pops’s lasagna—his specialty.

But still I shook my head. I couldn’t deal with these new cravings. Sure, my vampire body may want all that blood, but all my brain could think was that it was *freaking blood.* I craned my neck to look hopefully at the small fridge. “Anything else in there? Lemonade or Diet Coke or something?”

Emmett laughed and poured the blood into a small paper cup. “Trust me,” he said, handing it to me. “This is exactly what you need.”

My hand shook as I took the cup, but in a strange way, I *did* trust Emmett, so I took a small sip. And it actually tasted pretty good. Salty and sweet and kind of perfect. I took another, bigger sip, and tried not to think about what I was drinking, or where it came from.

Emmett smiled. “See?”

I took another sip, and to my surprise I found that I *was* starting to feel better. My head stopped swimming, and the headache between my eyes eased. I felt calmer, too, more in control of myself.

Emmett sat next to me on the cot and watched me, a soft smile on his lips, and in that moment, holding my little cup, I felt very warm and very cared for.

*Don’t trust that man.*

Like a bucket of cold water, the memory of Ras’s comment intruded into my moment.

She was right. I had no reason to trust him. I didn’t know anything about him, or his past. I looked down at my cup.

“Could I ask you something, professor?”

He laughed lightly, “Emmett, please, and you might as well.”

“What was your life like?” I asked hesitantly. Then I hazarded a glance up at him. “Before the whole vampire thing, I mean.”

The smile faded from Emmett’s face, and he looked away, his gaze going distant. “I have to admit, I don’t often think of it, if I can help it. It’s too painful.” He paused long enough that I wondered if he was going to go on, but then he did. “I was born in Philadelphia in 1823. I suppose that sounds like a very long time ago to you,” he said, looking over at me with the ghost of a smile.

“You could say that.”

He chuckled, but his eyes were sad. “We lived there all through my childhood. I was quite happy. My father drove a cart delivering milk, and my mother took in washing. Our apartment was in the city, and it was very crowded, but we were happy. When I was eighteen, my father got it into his head that we should go west, and we traveled to Oregon—”

“Wait!” I said, sitting up straight, suddenly very interested. “Does that mean you actually traveled the *Oregon Trail*?”

Emmett nodded. “Yes.”

My eyes went wide, and I scooted closer to him in my excitement. “Are you *serious*? That’s *amazing*! Did you ford rivers? Do you actually have to caulk the wagons? Did you hunt bears? How many people got dysentery? How many snakebites did you get? When you shoot an elk, is it true you’re only allowed to carry a hundred pounds of meat back to camp?”

Emmett looked baffled by my rapid-fire questions. “No—and yes. We forded rivers, and we did shoot elk. But no snake bites.” He smiled sadly. “My family all made it safely across the country, which was a feat for that time. My parents, my two brothers, and my two younger sisters. But we were healthy and strong. Most families weren’t so lucky.” A shadow passed over his face. “But then, three years later, our luck ran out.”

The temperature of the room hadn’t changed, but I felt a chill shiver down my spine. “What happened?”

He was staring at the opposite wall, but I suspected he wasn’t seeing the whitewashed plaster at all. “We settled outside a small town called Beaverton and took a homestead claim. We were making a go of it, learning how to mill the lumber when there was an attack.”

My hands around the cup were cold with sweat. “An attack?”

He nodded grimly. “Vampires, from the north. They’d attacked the town and were working their way through the lumber camps. They just stumbled onto our homestead by accident. If they’d been half a mile to the east, they never would have found us…” Emmett shook his head, his eyes bleak. “I’ve never seen anything like what they did that night. Not in all the years I’ve lived since. My parents, my brothers, my little sisters—” His voice caught, and he took a moment, collecting himself. “Everyone was killed. I don’t know why they chose to leave me alive, but I suppose the rest is history.”

My heart thudded painfully. “That’s awful, Emmett. I’m so sorry.”

He glanced over at me and gave me a smile so sad it nearly broke my heart. All I wanted was to comfort him, and so, without even thinking, I put my arms around him and pulled him into a tight hug. When I pulled back to look at him, the beauty in his face was so intense, so powerful, the impulse was overwhelming. I could feel myself being drawn to him, closer and closer, and I realized with a mixture of excitement and horror that I had no intention of stopping myself.

**Episode 1327**

The ferry cut through the mist over the water and I stared ahead, waiting for the island to appear in the distance. But we were still far enough away that all I could see was the wet, grey, swirling mist. I wrapped my arms around myself, wishing I’d brought a heavier jacket, and shot a glance at Artemis.

She was standing a ways away from me, by herself, pressed against the edge of the railing and staring down into the iron-grey water.

I couldn’t shake the heavy feeling of worry I got every time I looked at her. I’d been so *sure* that she’d wanted to tell me something in the car. She had looked like she had been on the *cusp* of telling me something important—something that might have given us all some more insight into whatever the hell was going on in her head—but then, at the last moment, she’d stiffened and looked away, saying it was nothing at all. And when my mom and I had tried to press her on it, she’d only clammed up even more until she’d become completely silent.

My mom slipped her arm around my shoulders and pulled me into a hug. “Don’t worry, sweetheart,” she whispered, pressing a kiss to my temple. “Artemis is still learning that she doesn’t have to carry everything herself. She’ll tell us what’s going on with her, in her own time.”

A derisive snort came from my other side.

I looked over at Big Mac, who had obviously overheard my mom. “Is there something you’d like to add?” I asked testily.

The witch shook her head. “I wouldn’t be so sure about Artemis sharing anything with you.”

I frowned. “Why do you say that?”

Big Mac shrugged. “I have a feeling that what’s going on with her isn’t something that girl is ever going to share—at least not willingly.” She shot Artemis a dark look. “I don’t trust what’s going on. She was affected by that Orb once. I don’t trust her at all.”

I gritted my teeth. My instinct was to defend Artemis against Big Mac, but deep down, I agreed with the witch. I had seen Artemis among the revenants with my own eyes. I looked at my sister again, and my stomach clenched with unease. Just because Big Mac could be a little insensitive at times didn’t mean she didn’t have a point. Even for Artemis, all this silence and these sullen looks were a little much.

But maybe we were both wrong. Artemis seemed fine now—she looked totally normal, all things considered. Not like… *before*.

On the other side of my mom, Torin and Astrid were enjoying the ferry ride. Torin was leaning way over the railing, far enough that Astrid had to grab the back of his jacket and haul him backward.

“I’m just trying to feel the salt spray on my face!” he yelled. “It makes me feel *alive*!”

Astrid looked out at the water. “It really is so beautiful,” she said. “Oh, and look!” She pointed as the island came into view. “*Oh!* Wow!”

The island was densely wooded with towering pines, and it appeared from the mist like it had been enchanted. It was beautiful, but I didn’t share Astrid’s excitement. Neither, it seemed, did Big Mac, who glowered as the island came into sharper focus.

“How do you think Steinar expects us to fix the library?” I asked, turning to her. “And what do you think could have destroyed it? What are we even dealing with here?”

Big Mac shrugged. “I have no idea. And I don’t plan on staying long enough to give it any kind of a fixer upper.”

I shot her a sideways look. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t care about fixing the library itself,” she said frankly. “I’m just hoping there’s enough of those books left for us to find what we’re looking for in order to handle these revenants.”

I let that sink in as I looked toward the shore. It was strange, going back to the Obaltarion. I couldn’t help but think about the first time we’d visited, when I’d been looking for answers about *due destini*. My stomach clenched as I thought about how little progress I’d made since then—if anything, things had gotten even more complicated.

These visions with Greyson, the dream we’d had about our *daughter* Sabine—it had all felt so real, and so *right*, at least in the moment. But my rational mind knew reality could never be like that. Even if I someday chose to be with Greyson in that sweet, peaceful nursery, there would always be a part of me that would yearn for Xavier, too.

And it wasn’t just that—as hard as that would be. If I did try to build that future with Greyson, it would literally kill Xavier.

The wind turned sharp, and my eyes began to tear up as I thought about how impossible everything felt. No matter how I looked at it, there was no happy ending.

When the boat docked at the shore, Torin was the first one ashore. “Alright, off we go, Fellowship of the Library.”

“Don’t call me that,” Big Mac barked at Torin, who only laughed.

“Aw, why not? It makes us sound *epic*!”

“Makes *you* sound damn foolish,” Big Mac muttered. I couldn’t help but laugh a little behind my hand despite everything.

“It’s this way,” Artemis said, pointing toward the cemetery that housed the library’s entrance.

We separated from the tourist crowd and headed toward the more isolated part of the island. The days were short at this time of year, and the sky was already growing dark as we reached the cemetery. So when a giant figure leapt out from behind a tree, we all jumped back in fright.

“Hello!” Steinar shouted jovially. “I’m so glad you’re here!” He waded into our group and gave each of us huge, unwanted, and distinctly painful slaps on the shoulders. “I cannot thank you enough! And you’re just in time!”

“In time for what?” I asked, rubbing my sore shoulder.

Steinar’s stone face grew grave. “I think whatever has happened to the library is getting worse. Growing, or rather, decaying as the case may be.”

“*Worse?*” I asked, shooting a look at Big Mac. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“I should say so,” Steinar agreed. “It’s almost like the library has been abandoned for many hundreds of years. A natural process if it truly were left alone, but whatever magic has touched this place has made it much, much faster than any kind of organic process. And the magic protecting the library should have prevented it from *ever* aging.”

Suddenly I was very glad that Big Mac said we weren’t going to be staying to fix the library. I wasn’t even sure where we would start with something like that.

“But that’s why you’re here!” Steinar grinned at us. “That’s what I’m hoping you’ll be able to do with your magic—fix it right back up.”

And there went the guilt. I didn’t like lying to Steinar, even by omission. He was always very chipper and kind, and he had helped us so much before. I nodded my head a little and offered up a hopeful smile, which seemed to be all he wanted to see.

“Let’s go!” he called and waved us forward.

When we finally reached the cemetery and Steinar led us toward the library’s secret entrance, I was struck by the changes I saw. Steinar had *not* overstated things—it looked as though the entrance was decaying, almost right before our eyes.

“Right this way,” Steinar said, gesturing toward it.

As Torin and Astrid filed in, I heard their gasps as the entrance gave way, and I flinched, remembering the Obaltarion’s unique way of welcoming guests—a freefall into the lobby. I managed to slide most of the way down and then sat there, dumbstruck, looking around the cavernous library. If I hadn’t walked in through the same entrance and been greeted by the same stone giant of a gatekeeper, I wouldn’t have known it was the same place. The towering stacks of books were there, but they were moldering away, as though they’d been abandoned centuries ago. But that wasn’t possible. I’d been here with Artemis, Jay, and Lola less than two months ago. A layer of dust covered everything, so thick it obscured book titles and the faces of the paintings on the cracked walls. Spiders spun cobwebs the size of swimming pools, and the winding staircases that led to the rows of rotting books were splintered and treacherous-looking.

“You see?” Steinar said, looking around, distraught. “Hypatia would never stand for this. She would…” He trailed off and blinked hard.

After a moment, I realized the great stone man was crying.

“Oh, Steinar,” I said, my heart breaking for him, “this must be so hard for you. But don’t lose hope. Don’t assume the worst. Maybe Hypatia is out somewhere, looking for a solution to all of this.”

Steinar dashed the tears from his eyes, but before he could respond, there was a strange rustling sound and we all scrambled to our feet, looking around for the source.

The rustling changed to an odd flapping sound, and our attention turned to one of the massive piles of discarded books that littered the floor. It was moving, and from it, pages and pages of ruined books began to swirl upward as though caught in a strong wind. We all stared in amazement as the pages—from not just one pile, but every one of the hundreds of piles of books—flowed upward. Then, like a flock of paper birds, the pages swarmed together, converging into a massive, twisting, moving form. It had a long body, stretching twenty feet up into the cavernous room, two long arms, two long legs, and one head.

As suddenly as it had started, all the flapping sounds ceased. The paper-creature slowly raised its massive head and opened its paper eyes.

I let out a small, choked gasp.

The eyes inside the paper skull were right on us, and they burned like orange fire.

**Episode 1328**

GREYSON

I woke with the sour, acrid taste of smoke on my tongue. My head pounded, my ears were ringing, and there was an ache pulsing down my cheekbone. Judging by the way I’d woken up face down on the hardwood floor of the pack house, my own body weight likely had a lot to do with the pain in my face. But that acrid taste? The burning scent that clung to my nostrils? Where the hell had that come from?

I pushed myself to my knees and let out a racking cough that rattled its way down my throat and into the deepest part of my lungs. What the fuck had happened to me? I leaned heavily against the wall as I forced my body upright, coughing and hacking the whole way.

“Is everyone o-okay?” I choked out as soon as the coughing subsided.

My voice sounded like I’d just swallowed a pound of gravel. I looked around wildly for the rest of the pack, staggering from room to room and counting heads as I went. Each pack member looked the way I felt—confused, disoriented, and still recovering from whatever the hell had happened to us.

Fury sparked to life amidst all that confusion. Someone had come into my pack house and attacked us. Had left me and my pack members unconscious, vulnerable and reeling from smoke inhalation, at minimum.

I stumbled into the kitchen and found my mother kneeling next to Sage and patting her back while she coughed.

“She good?” I asked.

Sabine nodded. “Once the poison works itself out of her system, I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

It took me a moment to understand my mother over the unending shrill tone echoing in my ears, but I nodded and moved on. Despite everyone being knocked down and disoriented, it didn’t seem like anyone was hurt. *What, exactly, was the point of knocking us all out?*

It didn’t even seem like anything had been stolen, either. To my knowledge, nobody had even come into the house after the hit. It seemed so senseless to render us all unconscious and then not do anything with that advantage, so I couldn’t quite accept that knocking us out was the worst of it.

I did a full circle of the main floor, coming back to the room. Rishika was climbing to her feet, leaning heavily on an armchair that had been knocked over—by the attacker or the weight of her own body, I wasn’t sure.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“Fucking peachy.” She leaned down and grabbed something from the floor. “I saw someone at the door—”

“I saw the same thing,” I said, thankful someone else saw something. “Did you recognize them?”

She shook her head. “It’s… hazy. And I’m pretty sure they were wearing a mask or something.” She held out the object in her hand. “They threw this.”

It looked like a grenade, of all the fucking things.

Anger burned through my chest and up my throat. Who would do this to us? Sure, we had probably more than our fair share of enemies at the moment, including the vampires and whatever the fuck was bringing the undead revenants back to life. But using a smoke bomb to try to take out a pack? That seemed far too sophisticated for a revenant.

*Maybe a vampire…*

But even that didn’t quite seem right. If a vampire had used that gas grenade to knock us out, why hadn’t it gone in for the kill while we were all out cold? Why just… leave us alone? I sighed and nodded at Rishika. “I’ve checked the main floor. Check upstairs, make sure everyone’s okay.”

“Where are you going?”

“Outside.” It was time to find out who had done this.

The front door slammed open as I rushed through it, glancing at the porch and then leaping out onto the grass. Sharp pain jolted up my leg with every step—somehow, I’d hurt myself when the smoke bomb had gone off. I pushed through the pain, moving from a stagger to a clumsy jog. I scanned the forest surrounding the pack house and took in a deep breath.

*And there it is.*

Vampires. And alongside their sweetly rotten scent was something else. Another scent. One I’d come to know fairly well over the past couple of months…

*Ava*?

The memory nearly knocked me off my feet.

*That’s right…* If I thought hard about it, I could recall seeing someone at the door who looked like Ava from what I’d been able to see before everything had gone to shit. Her scent… It couldn’t be a coincidence. Had Ava been the one who’d tossed that smoke bomb into the pack house?

It sort of made sense. She was like a bad penny—she just kept coming back again and again, regardless of whether or not any of us actually wanted her here. And each time she came back, it was part of some ploy to get to Xavier. It had always been painfully obvious. You’d have to have been an idiot to not pick up on it, and while my brother was many things, I would never consider him too stupid to see through his ex-mate’s thinly disguised schemes.

*But Xavier isn’t even here…*

Ava must not have gotten the memo about that. Maybe that was why she’d dropped the bomb and left? But… that still didn’t make sense. If she was really trying to get Xavier back, how would smoke bombing the pack house make that happen for her? Was she trying to *kidnap* an Alpha werewolf?

I knew she was crazy for Xavier, but I hadn’t pegged her as stupid.

Doubt began to creep in. Something wasn’t adding up. Why *would* Ava attack the pack house unprovoked? And where were the vampires I’d scented her with?

A new, somehow more terrifying thought slipped in. Was I hallucinating again? My ears were still ringing, though less than they had been when I’d woken up on the floor. And I’d had one of those crazy dreams again, thanks to the witches.

Maybe the reason none of this made sense was because I couldn’t trust what I was sensing.

I let out a ragged sigh and rubbed my still-aching face. Thank god Cali hadn’t been here for the gas attack—I couldn’t even imagine what I would have done if she’d gotten hurt.

It wasn’t a thought I wanted to dwell on.

I headed back into the pack house. Everyone had gathered in the kitchen. They stood and faced me when I walked in, all looking shaken but no worse for wear. I was glad to see nobody was hurt.

“Did you find anything?” Sabine asked.

“Signs of Ava,” I said. “I think they worked with someone to attack us.”

Jay growled, his lip peeling back from his teeth. “You really smelled Ava?”

I nodded. “I believe so.”

Jay smacked the kitchen counter so hard the sound reverberated through the room. “She’s been obsessed with Xavier ever since she came back. Xavier might not want to admit it, but this just proves that she’s out for revenge. She probably got sick of Cali standing in her way and came back here to take her out.”

My eyebrows rose a bit. Even for the situation at hand, Jay’s anger seemed a little extreme. But he was one of Xavier’s best friends. He probably knew more about Ava being a problem than I did.

“Then it’s all the better that Xavier and Cali aren’t here right now,” I said.

“We need to track that bitch down,” Jay said. “She’s more than outstayed her welcome.”

On the other side of the kitchen, Rishika nodded. “We need to find her and make her pay for what she’s done.”

The idea was tempting, but I wasn’t about to leave the pack house unprotected mere hours after an unprovoked attack. Who knew if the vampires would decide to circle back, or if the undead would start popping out of the ground again?

Jay looked furious enough to jump out of his own skin. It was a rare thing to see—more often than not, he was the reasonable one in the house. But clearly he wanted to hunt Ava down, and nothing was going to hold him back.

My gaze landed on Rishika. “You’re in charge, Rishika. I know you’re one of our best fighters… The pack is in your capable hands. And make sure you keep an eye on York.”

Her lips thinned. “Yes, Alpha.”

I crossed the kitchen and patted her shoulder. “I know I can trust you to take care of the pack while I’m gone.” I turned back to the rest of the pack. “Be on guard—we still don’t know exactly what happened here, but we’re going to do everything we can to find out.”

I headed out the door, followed closely by Jay. We shifted and split up to investigate the perimeter to try and pick up Ava’s scent. Jay started off in one direction while I took the other. I was just coming around the corner of the house when I stopped short.

Someone was watching me, but it wasn’t Ava.

It was the witches.

**Episode 1329**

*Oh my god! What fresh hell is* this*?*

The book monster stared at us with those bright orange eyes that never failed to fill me with dread—no matter who had them. I shuddered, staring back at the creature in horror, waiting for it to pounce on us and try to tear us apart in the same reckless, feral way that Arlo had attacked Greyson.

*Yeah, this can’t be good.*

But instead of attacking, or even going on a rampage through the ruined library, the creature just stood there, staring at us. Was it waiting for us to make the first move, or something?

“What do you think it wants?” Torin whispered, loud enough for anyone in a fifty-foot radius to hear. “It’s just staring at us!”

Next to me, my mother rolled her eyes. She was probably second guessing our choice to bring Torin along. If he weren’t our only healer, I would’ve been inclined to agree. I loved Torin, but he wasn’t exactly the type to thrive in high-tension situations like, say, being stared down by a potentially rabid revenant-slash-book monster.

Hearing Torin’s loud question, the creature’s head swiveled to stare at the Fae man.

“Let’s all take a step back,” Big Mac whispered—an actual whisper this time. “Slowly.”

Her genuine whispering didn’t help. The creature’s head swung to watch Big Mac.

*It’s listening to us, reacting to whoever speaks.* It was a perfectly logical explanation, but that didn’t help the chill that slipped down my spine. *Can this thing… Can it understand us?* I couldn’t explain why, but somehow the thought that this wild and dark creature was sentient enough to wait and listen and understand made me even more terrified than before.

The only advantage we’d had against Arlo and the revenants was that for the most part, they didn’t seem to have the faculties to plan or understand what was really going on. Even with the right trigger, they were simply mindless killing machines.

But what if they weren’t mindless? What if, like this book monster thing, they were just as capable of thinking and planning as we were? How were we supposed to beat them then?

I glanced at the rest of the group, who were standing still and watching the creature. Everyone seemed to be glancing at the creature and then at each other, as if asking without words what we were supposed to *do* with this thing.

Everyone except Artemis.

My sister’s attention seemed entirely fixated on the creature, almost the same way the creature’s attention was glued to whoever dared to speak in front of it. Artemis hadn’t even taken a step back from the creature like the rest of us had. She’d just stood there, staring, and was now sticking out as an obvious target.

I reached out to pull her back, but Artemis didn’t even seem to notice. She moved forward—toward the creature—at the last second, and my fingers closed on air.

“Artemis, what are you doing?” I hissed. “Come back!”

My sister paused, just briefly, and glanced at me over her shoulder. “Are we going to just stand here staring at each other until we waste away? We need to get to the books, and that creature is in our way.”

Then she took another step closer to the creature, her body shifting into a fighting stance.

*Oh, crap, crap, crap!* Of course my magic-less sister was going to rush into a fight with a creepy book monster before the rest of us.

I couldn’t let that thing hurt her. I held up my hands, calling on that pool of magic inside me, and let forth a blast at the creature. Energy surged outward, and a few shelves were knocked over, books and scrolls flying in every direction.

The creature was unaffected.

*What the hell? Did I miss it, somehow?*

I blasted it again, but once more, only the surrounding library—crumbling as it was—took the hit.

“My library!” Steinar gasped.

“We have bigger problems right now!” I yelled.

My mom scrambled forward and pulled Artemis back. The creature lunged for them but just barely fell short. It hit the stone floor with a hiss. While the creature was down, the rest of us wasted no time scrambling backward.

Big Mac conjured a bright purple spell and tossed it at the creature. Again, it was unaffected. How was it possible for this thing to be immune to magic? What even *was* it?

Artemis jerked out of our mother’s grip and raced toward the creature with a growl. She lunged, wielding a sharp-edged piece of wood that had broken off from one of the ancient bookshelves, but the creature easily dodged out of the way, and Artemis crashed to the ground.

The rest of us threw all the magic we possessed at the creature, but all it did was further wreck the library. The creature remained unaffected.

“Stop!” Steinar cried. “You’re destroying the library!”

UGH.

Okay, it looked like a change of strategy was in order. We started circling the creature, and it followed our lead. On the other side of the monster, Artemis got to her feet. We were going to have to fight it the hard way, but at least it was outnumbered and surrounded.

*We might just have a chance here.*

Artemis picked up her homemade stake again and let out a battle cry as she lunged for the creature. And then we all burst into motion. My mom grabbed an old chair and swung it above her head to smash against the creature, Big Mac stood back a ways and began lobbing old books at it, Astrid and Torin stumbled through the debris and tried to push an entire bookshelf down onto the monster, and I grabbed an old, metal candlestick holder to use as a weapon.

But the monster still kept the upper hand, dodging and weaving and snarling and swiping. It went after Artemis first, and then turned on my mother when she broke the chair over its back. Astrid and Torin caught its attention and pushed the shelf down on top of it. Books and debris exploded in a cloud of dust around it—and none of it seemed to make so much as a dent in the creature.

I panted, sweat and dust clinging to my skin as I raced through the library after the monster, tripping over pretty much every single obstacle along the way.

*Is this thing even stoppable? Or is it just going to keep fighting us until we tire out, and then take us out one by one?*

*Oh my god. Am I going to die here?*

The thought of not seeing Xavier and Greyson again was like a punch to my stomach. No, I wasn’t going to let that happen. I *would* see my mates again!

I chased the monster into an open space in the library, away from the stacks. Tables and chairs were scattered around the open area, and an old-timey chandelier hung above them.

And then I got an idea. If I couldn’t use my powers directly against it, maybe I could use them another way…

The monster turned to face me, standing directly beneath the chandelier. I raised my hands, directing a blast at the chandelier, and *bam!* It rocked from side to side once and then crashed down directly onto the monster.

Triumph soared through me, and then came crashing back down just like the chandelier. The creature hadn’t been knocked down—it had been split into pieces. And like some kind of scary Hydra, the pieces began to sprout limbs and heads. We didn’t have one big book monster to fight anymore—we had a bunch of little ones!

“There are *more of them?*” Big Mac gasped from the other side of the study area. “What have you done?”

“It was an accident!” I protested, then scrambled backward as one of the smaller creatures lunged at me, snapping and snarling. I broke into a stumbling run, only peripherally aware of the chaos that had broken out in the library as the other small monsters fought my friends and family. Guilt hugged my every breath.

*Way to make things even worse, Caliana!*

I turned a corner, ran down a narrow passage between two bookshelves, and then met a stone wall. The creature snarled behind me. I was trapped.

I spun to face it, my hands out in front of me. “Don’t come any closer! I’ll blast you!”

The creature opened its toothy mouth, ready to leap forward and take a bite out of me.

I screamed and let loose a blast of energy that slammed right into the creature in mid-air—and then bounced off it. The magic shot back at me faster than I could guard against, and I was slammed into the wall behind me.

The breath was knocked out of my lungs, and the world around me spun on its side as I slid to the floor.

Several more tiny creatures joined the one that had chased me, and now they loomed over me. No! I was not going to be eaten by these nasty little book gremlins. I kicked out at the closest one, but it grabbed my foot and started to drag me toward its gaping maw.

I screamed and fought and slammed my eyes shut. This was it. I was going to be eaten by these monsters. I would never see my mates again—

“*Stop.*”

Artemis’s voice rang through the stacks, strong and commanding, but with a shadowy quality to it.

I cracked my eyes open. Artemis was standing behind the group of creatures, staring at them intently. Was she… Was she *commanding* the monsters?

The creature paused for a second before it started yanking me toward it again.

Artemis’s eyes narrowed. “*I said* stop! She’s *mine.*”

**Episode 1330**

LOLA

Never in my life had I felt so consumed with need.

Every beat of my heart, every ounce of blood pumping through my veins, every gulp of Emmett-scented air, every place our bodies touched… They all swirled together, making me practically throb. It was a lust that bordered on painful—the desperation, the overwhelming onslaught of feelings—and it all drew me closer and closer to Emmett. To his delicious-looking lips that I’d been fantasizing about kissing from the moment we’d met.

Somewhere in the back of my lust-addled brain, I knew this was wrong—but I couldn’t stop myself. I needed him. Needed to kiss him, to taste him. To feel lips moving sensually against mine, to hear the gorgeous sounds I could pull from his chest…

My arms still linked around his neck, I leaned in even closer. Suddenly my awareness shifted, no longer consumed with everything *I* was feeling, but instead zeroing in on every detail of the man in front of me.

It wasn’t warmth that radiated from Emmett’s skin, but a silky kind of coolness. My skin pebbled, and not in an altogether bad way. I could hear the pulse in his veins, the vampire blood flowing through him like a million different rivers, all singing my name. I felt the steady rise and fall of his chest pressed against mine.

All the sounds of the room and the hallway outside and the world beyond faded away. My attention, my focus, my entire universe had narrowed down to Emmett. His dark eyes, the pupils blown wide. The firm planes of his body pressed against mine. His full, kissable lips, parting slightly to reveal the barest hint of his fangs.

He was all I could see. All I could feel. All I could smell and hear—and all I wanted to taste.

The closest thing I’d ever felt to this was when I’d been in my wolf form. But this was a million times stronger.

If this was how it felt just standing close together, locked in the aftermath of an embrace, then how would it feel when I finally did kiss him? Would it slake my need, or would I burst into a fireball of lust?

Or maybe I’d orgasm from a kiss alone.

One of my fingers brushed lightly against his hands, the ghost of a caress. But the simple touch sent a ripple up my arm and across my entire body. I felt my breathing speed up, nearly on the verge of panting, and suddenly my legs felt weak, like they couldn’t hold me up when all they wanted to do was wrap themselves around Emmett’s waist—

The thought sent a hot bolt of lust through me, and a breathy moan slipped free. *Oh my god. This is going to kill me.* I couldn’t wait anymore. I couldn’t continue hanging from the edge of this sweet torture.

I had to kiss him. I had to know what he tasted like. I had to feel him.

Rational thoughts fuzzy, I leaned in to close the space the between us, my breath ghosting over his lips. His hands closed over my arms—*Yes, it’s happening! It’s finally happening—*and then he gently pushed me back.

“Lola, stop.”

I didn’t recognize the whine that slipped out of my mouth. Seriously? He was seriously telling me to stop? Now? That couldn’t be right.

He wanted me. He was drawn to me, just like I was drawn to him. I knew I wasn’t imagining the heated quality of his gaze, or the way his eyes kept dipping down to my mouth. I wasn’t imagining the way his fingers wrapped tight around my arms, just this side of too hard, like he was holding onto the small shred of control I’d forsaken.

No, we were the same. We felt the same. I wanted him and he wanted me. And, held tight in his arms, I’d never felt so deeply connected to someone. I was experiencing everything he was. We were two bodies and minds melded into one.

Or, at least, we would be, as soon as he let him kiss him. I leaned in again, and he let go of one of my arms just long enough to catch my chin between his thumb and forefinger.

*Yes, yes! It’s happening. Finally, it’s—*

“Lola.” His voice gently caressed the syllables of my name. God, I loved the shape of my name on his lips. “Lola, look at me. Look at my eyes.”

My mouth dry and my body practically vibrating with need, I lifted my gaze from his lips.

“We should stop,” he said.

That might be the stupidest thing I’d ever heard. Stop? We were just getting started!

“Why?” I breathed, my gaze locked with his.

Some of the heat had disappeared from his gaze, but not all of it. I could still see some of my own lust mirrored back at me. A strange expression passed over his face, something like… anger? No, concern?

The mere concept of something more than animal lust existing between us had my heartrate slowing. I blinked sluggishly, like I was coming out of a trance.

He cleared his throat. “I’m a professor here.” Emmett paused, letting his words sink in for a moment. “You and I… We can’t do this.”

“Oh.”

He gave me a small, wistful smile and stepped back. As soon as he broke physical contact, I was flooded by a wave of disappointment and shame.

*That damn vampire heat!* I slammed my eyes shut, breathing deeply. Slowly, the awareness of things other than my throbbing lady parts was starting to come back to me.

My eyes shot open and I let out a gasp. *Jay. I love Jay. Fuck!* Of course Emmett and I had to stop. Of course we couldn’t push things any further—

Another thought hit me, followed by a whole new wave of horror and regret. *Did I just cheat on Jay? My* mate*? Oh my god!*

Okay sure, so all Emmett and I had really done was hug, and beyond that I’d barely even touched him. But… I’d wanted to do more. Hell, I probably could have come from a kiss alone. I’d felt that with *another man*.

*No*, this couldn’t be happening. It wasn’t possible. Emmett wasn’t my mate. How could I be feeling something this potent for someone who wasn’t my mate?

I stumbled back, putting some much-needed distance between Emmett and myself.

“Oh my god. I’m so sorry. I, um, lost… myself?” I blurted out. “I mean, I lost track of myself. I… I didn’t mean to… like, come on so strong. Or at all.” I grimaced.

Emmett reached out and caught my hand. Another jolt of need crawled up my skin from where his cool hand touched mine. “It’s okay, Lola. It’s not your fault.”

If only that were even remotely true.

I wanted to believe that I was somehow the victim of my newfound vampire biology, that I could just chalk it all up to “vampire horniness,” but I knew what I’d felt. And if Emmett hadn’t stopped me… I didn’t even want to think of what would have happened.

He let go of my hand. “You should get to class.”

And just like that, he was gone. Leaving me alone, awash in guilt, frustration, and more questions than my brain could handle.

So I did what Emmett suggested.

I felt like I was in a daydream as I headed to class, moving through the halls like a sleepwalker. I was only vaguely aware of where I was and what was going on around me, but even as I took a seat in my class, I didn’t pay any attention to the other students.

My mind played over the moment with Emmett over and over again, and some sad, panicked little voice whispered that I’d ruined everything, that I’d cheated on my mate and there was no undoing it.

I went through the motions during my class, so caught up in my guilt that even Jacqueline’s little comments had no effect. All I could think about was Jay.

I needed to talk to him. To hear his voice. I raised my hand.

“Yes, Lola?” the professor said.

“Can I go to the bathroom?” I blurted out.

“Um, sure…”

I was already in motion, rushing out of the room and into the safety of the nearest bathroom stall. I pulled out my phone to text Jay, but I had no idea what to say to him.

How about “I almost had an orgasm while standing next to a super-hot vampire”? That’d go great.

But before I could even try to craft a message, Jay’s name appeared on my screen. He was calling me!

My heart pounded with terror. What if he could tell what had just happened? Was that why he was calling?

I swallowed roughly and accepted the call. “H-hello?”

“Lola, don’t come back to the pack house.”

My eyes widened. Was he… Was he breaking up with me?

“The house was attacked,” he continued quickly, and then rushed into an explanation about a smoke bomb and Greyson pursuing Ava as the culprit. “We’re searching for her now.”

I couldn’t believe any of this. “Be careful, Jay.”

“We can handle her. I’ll call you soon, okay? When things have calmed down a bit. I love you.”

“I-I love you too,” I stammered.

Jay ended the call, and suddenly I felt even more guilty than before. I returned to class just as it was ending and followed the herd of students to my next class, still thinking of Jay. As soon as I stepped into the classroom, I realized I’d left my assignment in my room, and I raced back to the dormitory to get it.

I opened my bedroom door and a note fluttered to the ground at my feet.

*Meet me at the greenhouse tonight.*

—*Emmett*

**Episode 1331**

CHARLIE

My parents dropping me off at hunter camp would have felt a lot more like when they’d dropped me off at college if there had been fewer deadly weapons involved. And if I hadn’t been fielding texts from Violet about how the pack house—her home—had been attacked.

*Are you okay?!* I texted. *What happened? Are you hurt?*

My duffel bag was sitting on my lap, and I tucked my phone behind it, using it as a cover from my parents as I texted Violet. My heart ached as I read her account of the incident that had happened at the pack house. It seemed like there was still a lot that they were all figuring out, but the long and short of it was that some kind of grenade or smoke bomb had been thrown into the house and had knocked everyone out.

My mate had been knocked unconscious by a mysterious threat—one they were still investigating—and I was halfway across the country about to be thrown into training camp to learn how to kill monsters. I’d never felt so torn. I knew I needed to be here, to learn about my heritage, to understand the part of me that my parents had hidden from me for so long, but that didn’t make being apart from Violet any easier.

I would never forgive myself if something truly awful had happened to her while I wasn’t there to protect her.

My phone buzzed, and the display lit up with a reply from Violet.

*I’m okay. I promise.* 😘

I looked at the kissy face emoji, and I felt my racing heart begin to slow.

Another text came through. *Rishika is making everyone pitch in to clean things up. We’re all a little shaken, but nobody is hurt. Greyson and Jay are out searching for leads. It’ll be okay.*

I sighed. Nothing had felt okay since the moment I’d left her behind in Oregon, and there was nothing okay about my mate being vulnerable to some unknown threat, either. But… I’d chosen to leave. To complete my hunter training. And the sooner I followed through, the sooner I could hurry back to Violet and beat the living shit out of anything that dared to threaten her.

*I’m glad you’re okay*, I responded. *Please try to stay safe.*

*No promises.* 😉Then she added, *What do you have planned for your exciting first day of hunter camp?*

*I’m not sure.*

*Sounds like it’s off to a great start.*

A smile tugged at my lips. I could hear her teasing tone, even in a text message. I knew Violet wasn’t any happier than I was about being separated right now, but I appreciated that she wasn’t trying to convince me to come back.

I glanced up at my parents in the front seat. They were focused on the road ahead and probably weren’t wondering why their morose son suddenly had something to smile about. I reached into my duffel for my schedule and looked it over quickly, then grabbed my phone.

*I have a bunch of orientation stuff… Go on a tour, meet my roommates. Can you believe I have to have roommates?*

😂😂😂

Message received. I would get no pity from her.

Another message came through. *I miss you.*

Just like that, a wave of sadness crashed into me, and I felt my smile slip. As much as I was excited to learn about being a hunter, it was heavily overshadowed by how much I missed my mate. The longer we were apart, the more the ache of longing felt like physical pain.

It was so strange—I really hadn’t known Violet all that long, and yet it felt like I’d known her my entire life. *Is that what it means to be mates?*

“—it, Charlie?”

My mom’s voice pulled me back to the present, and my head snapped up to look at her. “Huh?”

I quickly sent Violet a string of kissing emojis and put my phone away. Mom pointed to the camp ahead. “What do you think, Charlie?”

My eyes widened, and I sat forward to get a better look. “Huh.”

It looked like one of those stereotypical army training camps from the movies, only with strange-looking obstacle courses—way beyond the usual stuff—fighting rings, and racks filled to the brim with the kinds of weapons I’d only seen in TV shows and movies. As we crossed over a wooden bridge and came closer to the camp, I spotted a sign on the side of the road that read “Camp Bridgeham”.

The car slowed to a stop in front of a dirt road that led to a large building. I got out of the back seat and slung my duffel over my shoulder.

Mom was smiling wider than I’d ever seen before, and she wiped her eyes. “I know you’re only going to be gone for a while, sweetheart, but I’ll miss you every day.” She hugged me tighter than she had since she’d found out about me being a werewolf.

My dad hugged me, too, and clapped me on the back. “I know you’re going to be the star of the camp—I’ve already seen you in action. It’s incredible. And who knows? Maybe you’ll meet someone special here. It’s where I met your mother.”

I forced a smile. It was kind of sickening, how desperate my parents were for me to meet someone—anyone—who could keep my mind off Violet.

“I’m not here to find a girlfriend. I’m here to learn to be the best hunter I can be.”

“Well, try to lay low at the start,” Mom said. “Our friend Vonn will come find you, so you’ll have an ally here. You’ll be just like any other new hunter in training, and you’ll have nothing to worry about with the werewolf part of you.”

I had no idea what she meant by any of that, but I pushed the thought aside. I’d probably find out soon enough anyway.

I said goodbye and watched my parents drive off. It felt as if a weight was lifted from my shoulders, the more distance they put between us.

I headed to the main building, feeling a little nervous despite myself. After I introduced myself, a friendly staff member pointed me in the direction of my dormitory. “Go drop off your stuff and be back in an hour for orientation.”

Hopefully my parents’ friend would find me before orientation. I had a feeling it would be best to get this whole werewolf thing squared away before jumping right into a huge group of hunters and hunters in training.

The staff member had pointed me to another building and told me that I’d find my dormitory on the second floor. I climbed the stairs, my schedule clutched in one hand like a lifeline, and stopped in front of the open doorway to what I was pretty sure would be my home away from home for the next few weeks. How had I not known that this place was here my whole life?

It wasn’t anything like I’d expected.

Music blasted into the hallway, and there were a bunch of people inside rocking out. I took a deep breath and headed inside, tossing my duffel bag onto one of the unmade beds. Another guy standing next to one of the beds turned to look at me, and we stared at each other in shock.

“Charlie?”

“*Zach?*”

Surprise turned to joy, and we hugged each other, laughing.

Zachery pulled back. “I haven’t seen you since last summer!”

I blinked. I was staring at the son of one of our close family friends. Like, go-rent-a-cabin-with-for-a-week-every-summer-on-the-lake family friends. “You’re a hunter?”

He pointed to our other two roomies, a young man and woman. “Yeah, man! We’re all hunters here. This is Reggie and Aisha.”

“Charlie. Nice to meet you.” I’d had no idea these were going to be co-ed dorms.

As I unpacked my duffel, each of my roommates revealed how they’d found out they were hunters. Just like me, they’d only found out recently.

“You think it’s, like, a rule or something that your hunter parents lie to you for half your life?” Aisha joked.

I grimaced. “It’s starting to feel that way.”

Like me, Reggie, Zachery, and Aisha were also going to be members of the Land O’Lakes Defenders.

“Maybe that’s why we’re bunked together,” Reggie suggested. “We’re already practically neighbors.”

“What have you been up to, man?” Zachery asked. “How did you find out about all of this?”

I thought fast. “Oh, you know. One of those ‘important family talks.’ I um, I was at college before I found out. Just living the normal, human life.”

*Oh god. Why did I emphasize human? That’s exactly what a nonhuman would do.*

I couldn’t exactly tell them that I’d been turned into a werewolf and I’d found out the truth about my parents at around the same time they’d tried to kill me. Not only would it blow my cover, but it was a pretty freaking personal thing to tell a bunch of mostly strangers.

Suddenly Aisha’s face lit up, and she rushed to the door and hugged a girl standing in the doorway. “Guys, this is my friend Sophie.”

Sophie smiled as Reggie and Zachery waved, and then she turned to me. Her eyes locked onto mine, and I felt my stomach twist. She was… striking to say the least. But so was Violet.

I swallowed and waved. “Hi, I’m Charlie.”

Her mouth formed the subtlest of smiles. “It’s good to meet you.”

Heat rushed into my face, and I was about to turn away when a piercing alarm ripped through the room. We all covered our ears in shock, and I looked around wildly. “What’s happening?

**Episode 1332**

“*I said* stop!She’s *mine*.”

Artemis’s words hung in the air for a long string of seconds. I didn’t move, didn’t blink, didn’t even breathe. The creature froze again, my foot mere inches away from its wide mouth full of razor-sharp teeth. The rest of the creatures froze too, their eyes locked on Artemis.

And then the creature let go of my leg, and it thumped to the floor. It turned to look at Artemis with the rest of the small, feral monsters. She stared back at them with glassy eyes, her expression set with concentration.

Suddenly, even though I’d nearly been turned into monster chow, I felt outside of whatever was happening between my sister and the horde of evil creatures. And now that my life no longer seemed to be approaching its end, the confusion set in. I was so relieved to not be a snack for this supernatural beast—or beasts, as was now the case—but there was a foreboding edge to Artemis’s words that I just couldn’t ignore.

What had she meant when she’d said, “She’s mine”? Had she meant, like, *don’t kill her—she’s my sister*? Or had it been something worse? Something darker that I didn’t really want to think about?

My sister hadn’t been herself for a long time now, and even Big Mac had confirmed that Artemis had been touched by the Orb, that at some point she’d been under its control. What if… What if there was some of that power left inside her?

What if all the monsters we’d been fighting weren’t the thing I should’ve been most afraid of?

“A-Artemis?” My voice was shaking as hard as my body. “What’s going on?”

My sister ignored me. Her eyes were still glued to the monsters—the one that had tried to eat me in particular. Her eyes widened slightly, and her head tilted forward, as if she were trying to see something beyond the surface of the creature.

And then, to my complete astonishment, the creature dissolved into a fluttering cloud of book pages.

*What the—*

One by one, Artemis’s eyes moved to each monster. And one after another, the creatures were turned from vicious, humanoid beasts with heads and limbs into a harmless cluster of floating pages.

I looked beyond the pages that coasted down onto the stone floor, beyond my glassy eyed sister, to the rest of the group. Everyone looked bedraggled, and a bit worse for wear. My mother was in a fighting stance, holding a lit torch out like a sword. Big Mac had a small end table lifted high above her head, and Torin and Astrid were both holding shards of wood out in front of them.

It was almost comical, really, seeing the group poised to fight monsters that no longer existed. Monsters that were now harmless pages, scattered across the library floor.

“Um. What the hell was that?” Big Mac demanded, setting down the table.

“Where did the monsters go?” Torin whisper-yelled, and then looked around wildly as if he was expecting another one to hop out from behind a shelf or something.

My eyes never left Artemis’s face as I scrambled to my feet. I held my hands out in front of me as I approached her—not as a threat, but as an instinctive gesture to show that I meant her no harm. I wasn’t even aware that I was doing it until my sister’s eyes flicked down to my outstretched hands.

I dropped them to my sides and forced myself to ask, “Did you do that?”

Artemis swayed a bit, the glassy sheen disappearing from her eyes. She caught herself on a shelf and then stood upright, looking around slowly. “Yes…” She looked just as confused as I felt. “But I don’t know how.”

Great. That wasn’t incredibly concerning or anything.

“What did you mean when you said that I was yours?” I asked.

She blinked, as though thinking through something, and then shrugged. “I had to think of something to grab that thing’s attention.”

Big Mac stomped over, her footsteps echoing through the ruins of the library. “What did you do?” the witch snapped, glaring at Artemis.

My sister looked at me, her face paling. I didn’t even try to ignore the protective instincts that surged up. Big Mac had had it out for Artemis since before we’d ever come here. She wasn’t going to believe anything that didn’t support her theory about my sister being secretly evil, or whatever. And while I had a lot of questions about what was going on with my sister, the one thing I knew for sure was that Artemis *wasn’t* the bad guy here.

I stepped in front of Artemis. “She saved our lives. We should be thanking her!”

The witch scowled. “I’ll thank her when she explains how she controlled and destroyed those creatures. Now get out of my way.”

I looked back at Artemis over my shoulder. She looked lost, confused, terrified. I hated seeing her like this. I squared my shoulders and faced the witch again. “She must have used her manipulation magic.”

“Artemis doesn’t have any magic—not anymore.”

I pursed my lips and shook my head. “I guess she must have gotten her powers back. Maybe…” I searched wildly for something resembling a reasonable explanation. “Maybe because we’re surrounded by all this magic!”

Big Mac scoffed and grabbed me by the shoulders. With a physical strength I hadn’t known she possessed, she bodily pushed me out of the way and faced down Artemis.

“Show us,” the witch demanded.

Artemis frowned, crossing her arms over her chest. “Show you what, exactly?”

“According to your sister, you’ve miraculously been healed. Congratulations,” she deadpanned. “I’d love to see you use these ‘restored’ powers of yours.”

I watched helplessly as Artemis stared down Big Mac, who was supposed to be on our side. But my sister no longer possessed the quiet, thrumming command of magic that she’d had when she’d stared down the monsters. Now she was just Artemis, and Big Mac had never been so imposing.

Finally, Artemis nodded. “Okay.”

*What could Artemis possibly show her? She doesn’t really have magic, right?* I racked my brain for some kind of loophole as Artemis turned away from Big Mac, back toward the path leading to the stone wall where I’d been trapped, and raised her hands.

She took a deep breath and then tensed, and I knew she was reaching for her magic.

But there wasn’t any magic to reach for… Was there?

Nothing happened, and Artemis dropped her hands at her sides with a hitch in her breath. She swayed again, and I rushed forward to catch her. Was she really this weak, or was she putting on a show for Big Mac?

I helped her stand upright, and then looked over at the witch. She didn’t look impressed.

“Try again,” she said.

My mom pushed past Big Mac. “That’s enough. We didn’t come all this way just to persecute my daughter! Cali’s right. Artemis saved us, and if that’s not enough for you, then I don’t know what to tell you.”

Big Mac glared at my mom, and I knew by the look on her face that she wanted to push the issue. Just like I knew from my mother’s unforgiving stance that she would push back. Were they going to fight?

“Help me!” Steinar rushed around behind us, gathering up the fallen pages. “Please, everyone. We must collect them all!”

Mom wound an arm around Artemis’s shoulders and pushed past the witch. “Come on, Caliana. Let’s help Steinar.”

After giving my mom and Artemis a dirty look, Big Mac stepped back and started to collect pages as well, but I knew she wasn’t just going to let this drop. She would keep watching and hounding Artemis until she got what she was after.

*I wish Xavier or Greyson were here. They’re good at taking charge. They would make sure that everyone worked together.*

I wanted to learn to command people like they could, but right now all I could do was worry about Artemis and try to run interference between my family and Big Mac. And the thing was, I knew Big Mac was right to be concerned.

How *had* Artemis commanded all those creatures? And why had she seemed so out of it when she was using that power? The whole thing left a sour taste in my mouth.

“When you’re done with cleanup,” Big Mac called to the group, “be on the lookout for information on revenants.”

To Steinar’s dismay, the cleaning soon shifted back to searching the stacks for the information we’d come for.

I sidled up to my mom, who was searching through the same stack as Artemis. From the way her eyes kept shifting from the books in front of her over to Artemis, I had a feeling she wasn’t paying super close attention to the search for information.

“Is Artemis okay?” I asked.

“I don’t know, but I’m not going to let Big Mac keep accusing her of something she has no control over.”

Torin rummaged through a pile of books nearby, and Astrid was flipping through a stack of worn books on a nearby table. “Oh!” she gasped, holding up a huge, old book. “This has something about revenants.”

We all turned to look as she began flipping through the pages. She let out another gasp, and I could have sworn I saw colored mist in Astrid’s breath.

She bolted upright, the book falling open in her hands. Her voice came out flat and lifeless. “In order to stop the beasts, you must cut off the living head.”

**Episode 1333**

GREYSON

I skidded to a stop, my eyes landing on the witches. *What the…?*

I did a double take, but when I refocused, my least favorite trio of magically inclined women was gone. How was that possible? I stepped back and looked around again for a sign of the witches, for an explanation as to how I’d seen them—or thought I’d seen them—mere moments ago.

My gaze zeroed in on a misshapen cluster of trees on the other side of the clearing. Could I have mistaken the trees for the witches? They were both sort of… pointy?

*Am I losing my damn mind?*

I blew out a breath. Maybe my mind was still reeling from the explosion and being knocked out. *That* was a much more reasonable explanation. Something as traumatic as that was bound to mess with your head for a while. *I probably shouldn’t even be out here.*

I pushed the thought away. My brain might’ve been addled, but that didn’t mean I was going to abandon my pack when they needed me. I was their Alpha, and that job tended to involve protecting my pack from any threats—inside or out.

And Ava was a little of both.

I pushed forward, seeking out her scent. First things first, Jay and I needed to make sure Ava and her new vampire friends weren’t hanging around, waiting to attack the pack again. Because Ava *was* with the vampires now, right?

I vaguely remembered some half-assed explanation about Ava helping Xavier escape from the vampires who’d held him captive, but I never had heard how she’d ever gotten close enough to be of any use to Xavier. Maybe she’d been closer to the vampires than she’d let on. But, if that were the case, why had she ever let Xavier come back to the pack house? Was it all some kind of batshit crazy plot to get Xavier to be with her again?

I shook my head. Nothing was lining up. I still wasn’t quite sure what they’d been hoping to accomplish the first time around, but one thing was certain: there would not be a second time.

I wandered through the woods, searching for any threatening scents. What I found, however, was a whole lot of nothing. I could only imagine Jay wasn’t finding much either, since he didn’t howl for me to join him.

And no matter how hard I concentrated on scenting out Ava and the vampires, I couldn’t stop my mind from wandering back to the witches. Their offer was as haunting and tempting to me now as it had been before. And the dreams… The dreams I’d had about Cali, *with* Cali, each of them had been so beautiful and so fucking perfect that I hated waking up from them.

Except for maybe that last one. It had been perfect, too—so wonderful it hurt to think about—until things had gone sideways.

I stopped, letting myself linger in the last dream I’d had about that beautiful and impossible future with my mate. The pure happiness I’d felt, the complete peace in that moment when Cali I had stood together, our children between us. The future had never seemed brighter than in those fragile moments—before the blood had appeared.

It was a dream, those visions of a different future with Cali—in every sense of the word. A different past. An entirely new life, unburdened by all the things that had kept us apart.

I had never wanted anything so badly in my entire life.

But I’d learned the hard way that if something seemed too good to be true, it usually was.

I needed to find out what was happening to me, what this “time limit” meant, and whether or not I should accept the witches’ offer. And I needed to do it soon—before it was too late.

A familiar scent hit my nose, and I froze. A twig cracked nearby, and I turned to see Jay loping toward me. Jay’s voice slipped into my mind.

*I picked up her scent.*

*Me too.*

Jay sniffed at the ground and then looked off into the distance before looking back at me. *It’s difficult because she used a car, but still manageable—*

A wolf let out a mournful howl, far off in the woods. Neither one of us recognized the voice, but we burst into motion, heading toward the sound.

*We need to take it slow*,I cautioned Jay. *We still don’t know what’s really going on here. Who’s behind all of this.*

*Got it.*

Jay’s reply was curt, borderline snippy. He really was taking Ava’s attack personally, wasn’t he? I knew he and Xavier were close, but this level of fury still surprised me, coming from Jay. Xavier? Hell, yeah. His temper was notoriously short, and Xavier had a slew of personal reasons to want to rip Ava’s throat out for a second time—I was frankly surprised he hadn’t done it already.

But mild-mannered Jay? I hadn’t seen this coming. Which made me wonder if Jay had some personal beef going on that I didn’t know about.

*How are you feeling after what happened with York?* I asked. *Are you sure you’re up for this?*

*I’m sure.* There was that curt tone again. He must have realized he was pushing his luck, because he added, *I know you and Xavier aren’t on the best terms, but know that I’m not just mad for his sake. This wasn’t just an attack on Xavier—it was an attack on the pack. Even if Ava’s plan was to somehow get Xavier, she went too far. What if Lola had been there?*

*Right.* I severed the link, privately mulling over Jay’s words. I knew how close he and Xavier were, and yet I still didn’t fully buy in to Jay’s explanation.

But what did I know about how friends protected each other? It wasn’t like I had a lot of my own. That was probably the only thing Xavier had over me—he’d always been better at creating and keeping friendships. Maybe it came from growing up with a twin brother, from never being alone.

Or maybe I’d just spent too much time alone. First during my childhood, and then as a Rogue.

Jay’s voice slid into my mind again. *The only way to find out the truth about all of this is to catch Ava.*

*I can’t disagree with that. Let’s go.*

We were following her scent through the woods when I felt the earth lurch beneath my feet. I knew the Pacific Northwest was due for a big earthquake. Was this it?

My vision wavered as I tried to run across ground that wouldn’t stay still. I slowed, unsteady on my feet.

Jay lurched to a stop just ahead of me. *What’s wrong?*

Had he really not felt the ground shifting like fucking ocean waves?

*Oh.*

*Oh, fuck.*

I knew what was happening—I was being pulled into another one of those blackout dreams from the witches. At what might have been the worst possible time.

But I couldn’t tell Jay that.

I couldn’t tell him what this really was—what had been affecting the Alpha of the Redwood pack for so long.

*I thought I heard something*,I replied instead.

I focused on a tree a few feet away, something solid to latch onto and use to fight the blackout. I didn’t have time to get caught up in a witch dream. I had to catch Ava, to find out what or who had attacked the pack.

*You sure?* Jay asked. *You, uh… You don’t look so good.*

My claws dug into the dirt. *Don’t lose her scent.*

The witches’ voices slipped into my mind, sounding every bit as real as Jay’s.

*Time is running out, Greyson*,they whispered.

*Greyson?* Jay asked.

*Keep moving!* I urged.

I followed behind him, only half-aware of the forest around me. I couldn’t smell Ava at all anymore.

*Why are you doing this?* I asked the witches. *What do you want from me?*

*What do* you *want, Greyson?* they asked. *Perhaps they are one in the same.*

What kind of godawful non-answer was that?

*How much time do I have?* I asked. *And what happens when the time runs out? If you’re going to help me, I need to know what I’m dealing with.*

I stopped suddenly, swaying on my feet. I could barely stay upright, and suddenly following Jay was too much for me to handle.

*Keep going*, I told him.

*I’ve had it with all of you!* I told the witches. *I saved your rotten lives and this is how you repay me?*

Their laughter echoed through my mind, and then the spinning suddenly stopped. The ground stayed exactly where it was. The blackout stopped trying to pull me under. I was free of them.

*Thank god.*

I needed to catch up with Jay.

I lunged forward—and in a blur of movement, the air was knocked out of me. I found myself flat on my back, Ava’s wolf going in for the attack.

**Episode 1334**

I stumbled backward with a cry. “What’s happening *now*?” I wailed. Could the universe not give us a freaking *break*?

Astrid had always seemed so sweet, so gentle. All that was good and light. But now… There was nothing good or sweet about the emptiness in her voice, or the strange, distant look on her face.

“Is she possessed?” I blurted out. “Astrid, are you possessed?”

“You think she’d be able to answer you if she were really possessed?” Big Mac snapped.

“That would answer the question then, wouldn’t it?” I turned to my mom. “What did she say about cutting heads off?”

Torin had gone terribly pale. “The living head,” he said, his voice soft and breakable. He swallowed. I imagined it must be hard to see his best friend like this. “She said that in order to stop the monsters, we need to cut off the living head.”

A terrible, weighted silence set in. This was… worse, somehow, than facing down those creepy book monsters. Seeing Astrid—sweet Astrid—held like a puppet under the control of a dark master, spouting something about cutting people’s heads off…

“Okay, but *whose* head?” I asked, breaking the silence. I looked around for someone to answer me.

*Not… Not one of our heads, right?*

I looked from my mother to Artemis to Big Mac to a terrified, heartbroken-looking Torin. No. Definitely not. Not a single one of us was going to lose our head today.

Torin reached out for Astrid, his eyes wide with worry. “Astrid, can you hear me? It’s Torin. Are you okay?”

Big Mac pulled him back before his fingers could make contact. “Don’t disturb her.”

She looked at Steinar, who still had the stack of once-monstrous papers in his arms. I kind of hoped he hadn’t managed to find all of them. Maybe I could step on a few of them on the way out of here.

“What book is she holding?” Big Mac asked him.

He squinted at the tome still held open in Astrid’s hands. “Not one I recognize.” His expression softened, and then became very sad. “It must be from the restricted area…” His voice took on a rough edge, and his face screwed up.

*Is he… Is he going to cry?*

“Everything is so disorganized now!” he cried, slamming the stack of papers down onto the closest flat surface—an end table with spindly legs, which broke under the pressure and sent the papers flying in every direction. Steinar squeaked, and then let out a loud sob.

“All of my work is ruined, now. RUINED!”

“You can cry later,” Big Mac said, striding toward Astrid. “Right now, I want to see that book.”

*Big Mac might be a competent witch—you know, when her spells aren’t ruining your life—but wow, she is* not *sensitive!*

Really, I had no idea how Mrs. Smith put up with her. I guessed they balanced each other out, huh?

Big Mac reached for the book, but then Astrid spoke again in that same deeply unsettling voice.

“*Revenants arise*,”she said, fixing her gaze on Artemis, “*when there is a disturbance in the balance of magic.*”

I looked over at my sister in confusion. She was staring at Astrid with unabashed fear. Our eyes met for a brief moment, but then she looked away.

“Yes, I agree,” Big Mac said briskly. Was she seriously trying to have a conversation with… whatever was controlling Astrid? Like it was some kind of business transaction? “After my conversation with Marta and Lilac,” she continued, “I’m sure that’s what happened. Now, the book, please. I need to look at it.”

Astrid shook her head. “You want the book? You can’t handle the book.” She slammed it shut.

Steinar slowly approached Astrid. “You can’t take the book with you—you need to return it to me.”

I didn’t know what I expected Astrid to do next—chant some creepy warnings, maybe, or start speaking in tongues and spinning her head around. What I didn’t expect was for her to hand it over to Steinar, no questions asked, no weird advice given.

Steinar then took the book and offered it to Big Mac.

“Thanks,” she grumbled, clutching it to her chest.

Astrid slumped to her knees like a puppet whose strings had been severed. Torin rushed over and wrapped an arm around her to keep her upright. She looked around, blinking slowly. “What just happened?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. Then he threw his other arm around her and hugged her tightly. “I was so worried you were possessed!”

Astrid hugged him back, still looking confused.

Big Mac, oblivious as ever to the feelings of others, flipped through the book. “Finally, this is what we’ve been looking for. Here, it says that revenants can arise from necromancy…”

*Violet will be interested to know that, since she wants to bring Lilac back to life.*

“… high concentrations of magic…”

We’d been bursting at the seams with magic ever since Silas stole the Orb. And with it out and about in the world—wherever it is—that could definitely cause a high concentration of magical energy.

“… and unrest in the spirit world.”

And that explained literally all the other weird stuff we’d been dealing with.

Which was… shit. Which was probably really, really bad.

Big Mac skimmed down the page. “As for how to kill revenants, let’s just say it’s not easy.”

I shuddered, remembering the terrible way Arlo had finally been killed. It hadn’t been pretty. And then I imagined the exact same scenario, only with an entire army of revenants.

*Even less pretty.*

Big Mac snapped the book shut. “We should get going. If this book has taught us anything, it’s that we can’t waste any more time. Who knows how many more revenants are out there.”

“Wait!” Steinar held up his hands. “You were supposed to help me fix the library! That was part of the deal.”

I looked around dubiously. “No offense, but this place is literally crumbling before our eyes—”

“No thanks to all your roughhousing,” he grumbled.

“Yeah, sorry about that. But in our defense, those book monsters *were* going to eat us.” Steinar’s expression didn’t give, even a little bit. I sighed. “What I mean is, what can we do to help?”

“That’s why I asked for all of you Fae to come. A little Fae magic might be useful here.”

“Be quick about it,” Big Mac grunted.

I gave Steinar a weak smile. He had done so much for us, and I was happy to help him, but I still didn’t really understand what I could possibly have to offer. I was a lot better at blasting things apart than putting them back together. And I had a feeling that if I were to wreck anything else in his precious library, Steinar might lose what little sanity he had left.

Torin helped Astrid to her feet, his arm still wrapped tight around her. “Can we do this before those creatures come back? This place gives me the creeps.”

The gargoyle glared at him. “My library is an ancient and powerful institution of great learning! Have some respect.”

Torin’s eyes went wide, and he squeaked, “Yessir!”

Steinar’s anger faded, and he looked around wistfully. “Or at least, it was.”

*Poor guy. He’s given centuries of his life to the care of this place. It’s his home…*

“We’ll do our best,” I said brightly, forcing a smile so wide my face kind of hurt.

“Follow me.” He led us away from the stacks and to the exact center of the great hall, where an iron compass was set into the floor. “Form a circle around it, but don’t—”

“Touch it,” Mom finished. “Yeah, we know. Fae and iron don’t mix.”

Torin, Astrid, my mother, Artemis, and I formed a circle around the compass.

“Now what?” I asked, then gasped when Steinar pulled out a knife. “What are you going to do with *that*?”

My mind jumped to worst-case scenarios: Steinar wasn’t really the nice gargoyle he made himself out to be—he was actually a serial killer who targeted Fae. Or he was going to punish us for messing up the library in the fight with those monsters, or—

*Focus, Caliana!*

He held up the knife. “I’m sorry, but I need a drop of blood from each of you. Just one drop. One for east.” He nodded at my mother. “West.” He nodded at Torin. “North.” Artemis. “South.” Astrid. And then his gaze settled on me. “And one for the center.”

He handed the knife to my mother, and each of us nodded and did as he instructed. I winced when I pressed the tip of the knife into my finger and a drop of bright red blood bloomed in its wake. I squeezed the drop of blood onto a line of iron that ran right to the center of the compass.

Then, slowly, the compass began to turn, gradually speeding up.

I glanced around to see that the other Fae were just as fascinated as I was. The blood drops rose from the compass, joined together in one larger sphere of blood, and moved to hover right in front of me.

I blinked. “Am I supposed to do something?”

The blood bathed me in a bright red light, and then the ground beneath my feet began to rumble. The walls began to shake, and I looked at the other Fae in horror.

The library was going to collapse!

**Episode 1335**

GREYSON

I tried to buck Ava off, but she managed to get me pinned. I was still too weak from fighting off the witches and that blackout to overpower her like I normally would have. I snarled and growled and clawed at her, but I was just as stuck as I’d been the moment she’d slammed me to the forest floor.

There was a crashing sound nearby and then Jay was there, tackling Ava at full speed and knocking her off me. I heard the *thwump* her body made when she hit the ground, along with the wheeze of the air being knocked out of her lungs. Feral satisfaction pulsed through me.

*Feels good, doesn’t it?*

Jay didn’t stop there. He slammed her even harder into the ground, pinning her there with the weight of his body. His jaws snapped as he snarled, coming dangerously close to her throat.

Instantly, Ava shifted back to human—the absolute stupidest thing she could’ve done when faced with the full fury of another werewolf.

She threw her hands up in front of her face, still pinned to the ground by the gigantic wolf. “Please! Please, don’t! I’m not trying to hurt anyone!”

Jay growled and leaned forward, putting more of his body weight on the paw that pinned Ava down. She squeaked out a breath, her eyes going even wider in sheer terror. “P-Please!”

Jay could’ve crushed her chest with half a thought. He knew it, and so did she. And *I* knew exactly how much Jay had it out for the woman pinned beneath his claws. It would’ve been the easiest thing in the world for him to kill her now.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t allow him the satisfaction. There was still too much we didn’t know. There was no room for a personal vendetta when the pack was still in danger.

I shifted back to human and clambered to my feet. “Jay, ease up.”

He didn’t move an inch. His sharp teeth were inches from Ava’s throat, and that heavy paw still weighed down her chest, forcing her to pull in tiny wheezing breaths.

“Jay!” I snapped. “Get the fuck off her.”

His head swiveled to look at me. The fury in his gaze was so powerful it bordered on mutiny. I mind linked with him, since I could as Alpha.

*Get your shit together. Now. We need answers more than you need revenge. And whatever happens afterwards…*

I let him fill in the blanks himself. With an annoyed grunt, he stepped back. I noticed he didn’t shift back to human, though. It was a good strategy, reminding Ava just how tenuous her continued existence was.

Not that she seemed to need the reminder. She kept looking back over her shoulder, as if she were waiting for something more terrible than Jay to swoop down on her. “We have to get out of here,” she whimpered. “Please. We don’t have much time.”

I cocked my head and knelt down in front of her. “And why is that?”

“I’ll explain on the way—”

“You’ll explain *now*,” I interrupted. “What’s going on, Ava? Why is your scent all mixed up with a bunch of vampires? And what kind of sick game were you playing back at the pack house?”

She shook her head. Her entire body was shaking now, so hard that her voice shook with it. “Please, Greyson. I’ll exp-plain later. Just… please. We have to *go*.”

She got to her feet, no doubt planning to make a run for it, but Jay was on her again. In a blink, Ava was pinned to the ground once more, with Jay’s snapping teeth mere inches from her face.

I rose, too. “The thing is, Ava, you’re not going anywhere until you tell us why I shouldn’t let Jay rip you to pieces. You know he wants to.” I smirked. “He really, *really* wants to.”

“I ran away!” she cried. “That vampire—Iñigo—he forced me with his vampire persuasion. He *made* me attack the pack house. I didn’t want to. You’ve always been so kind to me, but I didn’t have a choice!”

Hearing Ava describe me as *kind* set my teeth on edge. It was just the kind of thing a liar would say to soften up their mark. But the part about her being compelled by vampires… That was possible. I remembered how Cali had acted when she’d been under Sabyr’s control. She’d snuck out of the pack house and walked for miles under his compulsion—all so he could drink from her.

Was it possible Ava was telling the truth? Yes. But did I believe she was being honest? That, I wasn’t so sure about.

My skepticism must have showed on my face, because she kept talking. “I even tried to warn you, but it was too late. Look!” She bared her vulnerable throat to Jay and me, showing off a fresh vampire bite, still struggling to heal. “He did that to me. Iñigo. He forced me to be his toy while Xavier was being used as a blood bag. But I helped Xavier escape with Kira. Just ask him if you don’t believe me!” Her voice took on a raw, desperate edge, practically dripping with fear. “I know Xavier doesn’t want me around,” she continued. “And I’m trying to accept that.”

Jay let out a snort.

“It’s the truth! That’s why I left after we brought him back to the pack house, but Iñigo found me. And that was when he forced me to attack the pack house.”

I crouched down again to her level, but I didn’t tell Jay to let up. “Why did he attack us?”

“I don’t know. For revenge, maybe? For killing vampires.” Some sorrow slipped into her wide eyes. “I hope nobody got hurt.”

Well, her story checked out as far as stories went. If I wasn’t mistaken, there was genuine fear and remorse in her eyes and in her voice. But I remembered what Jay had told me earlier about her obsession with Xavier, the crazy lengths he believed she would go to in order to get her mate back.

Jay suddenly shifted back to human and backed away from her. “You really think we’re going to believe this, Ava? After everything you’ve done? All the lies you’ve told?”

She didn’t try to sit up, probably because she was worried about Jay’s hairpin trigger and didn’t want to give him an excuse to lunge at her again.

“I understand if you don’t believe me,” she said with a grimace. “But it’s the truth.”

Jay gave me a long, skeptical look. He had a point. I knew his disbelief was well-reasoned. But I also knew that there would never be an explanation Ava could give that would make him believe her—truth or not. He didn’t want to see her as anything but a villain. And to be fair, she very well could’ve been one.

But then again, perhaps not.

I sighed. “Why did you stop us out here? We were hunting down whoever attacked us. If any of this is true, why would you stop us from getting revenge? What Iñigo did is a cry for a war. If that’s what he wants, he’ll fucking get it.”

She swallowed roughly. “That’s *exactly* what he wants. I’ve been to his estate, and we aren’t far from it now. I can show you where it is without getting caught, but Greyson, he has so many vampires. I know you’re an Alpha—” I raised an eyebrow. She licked her lips and continued. “What I’m saying is, there’s way too many of them. And I’m still weak from being drained. We would be completely wiped out. Xavier, Kira, and I barely escaped with our lives. If we went back there, it’d be a death sentence.”

Jay shook his head and gave me a meaningful look. “Please don’t tell me you’re buying any of this shit. We all know she was at the house—she was probably the one who threw the bomb. And if she was so deeply compelled, how did she even get away?”

“I jumped out of the *car*!” she blurted out. “I know he’ll try to find me. Please, I need your help.”

I mulled this over, looking between her and Jay.

“They’ve got this forest surrounded,” Ava said. “Trust me, there are far too many of them for you to take on.”

With Jay tugging me in one direction and Ava pulling me in another, I weighed my options. I wanted nothing more than to storm into that bloodsucker’s estate and wipe them all out. That’d solve pretty much all of our problems. But even if I weren’t still recovering from the blackout, taking on a coven of vampires with just Jay was… a lot. Maybe too much.

Jay sighed. Clearly, I was taking too long for his taste. “Okay. Leave her, then. This vampire coming after her isn’t our problem.”

“No!” She clambered up onto her knees. “If you leave me here, they’ll capture me and use me against you again. Greyson, please. Can’t I come with you?”

**Episode 1336**

CHARLIE

My hands were sealed over my ears, but still the piercing alarm threatened to melt my brain. It reminded me of the alarm I used to hear whenever my high school made us do fire drills, but this was turned up to the max.

Or maybe I could just hear it better now. This was definitely one of those times when my heightened werewolf senses weren’t doing me any favors.

“What’s going on?” I called to the rest of the group.

They grimaced at me and shook their heads.

“No idea!” Zachery called, his hands pressed against his ears. “Do you think there’s a fire?”

I didn’t smell smoke. And thanks to my heightened senses, I was fairly certain that if there was no smoke, there was definitely no fire to worry about.

“Maybe it’s just a fire *drill*!” Aisha yelled.

Aisha and Sophie looked just as confused as I felt, and… strangely, whatever thread of attraction I’d felt for Sophie had suddenly disappeared. With the alarm blaring, now she just looked like a run of the mill pretty girl. The kind of girl I’d stopped noticing the moment Violet had come into my life.

*Yes, that’s right. You have a mate*, I reminded myself. *You shouldn’t be staring at other girls, anyway. For however pretty this girl is, Violet is radiant.*

Reggie had grabbed one of the thin pillows from the twin-sized bed next to him and wrapped it around his head. Judging by the look on his face, it wasn’t helping much. “If this is a fire drill,” he called, “then let’s get the hell out.”

Wise words from a guy named Reggie. We didn’t waste another second, hightailing it out of the room and down the stairs. I followed the others out, struggling to understand what was happening.

*What if I set off some kind of werewolf alarm and now people are looking for me? Hunting me down for invading the camp?*

I still hadn’t met that Vonn guy, whoever he was. Was it too late for him to swoop in and “take care of this werewolf situation,” or whatever my mom had promised he’d do? Should I try to escape, just in case?

*It was pretty stupid to come here. A werewolf among hunters.* If any of them found out the truth about me…

My mind filled in the blanks.

I was sorely outnumbered.

Surrounded by people who had trained extensively to kill monsters just like me.

Caught out here in the middle of nowhere…

*Oh god. What have I done?*

I eyed possible escape routes as we spilled out of the building and into a larger group of people clustered in front of the dorm. Only instead of confused fellow trainees like myself, all I saw were threats to my life.

I took a step back. One wrong move, and I was hauling ass out of here.

Someone pointed up at the dorm building. “Is that smoke?”

I looked up, confused. Despite the still-wailing alarm, my senses told me there wasn’t a fire anywhere nearby.

The “smoke” turned out to be a wisp of fog, settling onto the highest points of the building. I found the urge to smile. My werewolf senses came in handy sometimes.

But that still didn’t explain what the hell was going on.

Aisha pointed to a man standing in the training field several yards away, watching us. “Who is that guy? And why is he staring at us? Kind of creepy, if you ask me.”

I shrugged. “No clue.”

But creepy staring guy or not, the tension in my chest was beginning to loosen. We’d been clustered outside for a few minutes now, and nobody had swooped in with a silver knife and screamed, “Werewolf!” at me. And the longer that didn’t happen, the less I felt like I was on the verge of being outed in the worst possible place.

Suddenly, the creepy guy started marching toward us. Even from this far away, I could tell he looked pissed off. The group started whispering to each other as he approached.

“I heard he’s a famous hunter,” someone whispered.

“Yeah, he took down an entire coven single handed,” another added.

Reggie scoffed. “Don’t believe any of that crap.”

Aisha turned to him. “Oh, do you know him?”

“I know his type. I’ve seen enough war movies. That guy’s a drill sergeant.”

I glanced over at the man again. I’d also watched my share of war movies—it was something my dad and I had done together, back when things had been so much simpler.

*Reggie’s right. This guy is straight out of every war movie I’ve ever seen.*

Despite myself, the beginning of a smile tugged at my mouth. I could tell from the man’s scowl that he expected to be taken seriously, but now that I’d figured out who he was, it was hard not to see a caricature.

The guy stopped a few feet away and gestured at us with short, jerky motions. “Assemble!”

We all looked at each other and then shuffled into a mostly straight line. I hadn’t done ROTC in school, but it was easy to pick out which of us had.

The man slowly walked up our line, scrutinizing us the whole way. He was a few years older than us, maybe in his early 30s. His eyes met mine, and I quickly looked forward. Now that he was right here in front of me, he didn’t seem so funny anymore, and I was reminded again of exactly what I had to lose if anyone found out I was a werewolf.

*He can’t tell… Can he?*

He turned and addressed the group in a deep, gruff voice. “I’m Sergeant Pepperdine—and the first one of you little pipsqueaks to make any snide comments about my name will regret it, so I’d suggest you keep your thoughts to yourselves. Believe me, I’ve heard them all. You’re here for training, and I’m here to turn you into the best damn hunters in the world, but it’s not going to be easy. While you are here, I expect you to follow my orders, watch out for your fellow hunters, and pay attention to your surroundings like your life depends on it—because one day, it will!”

Someone down the line snorted. “Dude, it’s a *camp*. Chill out.”

Sergeant Pepperdine froze and turned to the young man with what was easily the most terrifying expression I’d ever seen—and I’d fought werewolves, vampires, poltergeists, and my own parents.

Sergeant Pepperdine stomped over to the trainee, his eyes narrowing. “You think this is funny?” He ripped off his shirt to reveal a muscular torso, crisscrossed with scars. “Have a good laugh!”

Aisha leaned over to whisper, “I wouldn’t mind being bossed around by that.”

I didn’t say anything out of fear of drawing the sergeant’s attention.

“All right, then. Your training begins *now*. Take three laps around the field and then assemble over by the obstacle course. Go, go, go!”

We immediately broke into a jog.

*Geez, I’m really just getting thrown into this, aren’t I? At least I’m in good shape.*

It was crowded at first, but as the laps continued, the larger group broke down by level of athletic ability. I stayed with Reggie, Zachery, and Aisha to avoid standing out.

“Watch out for the twins.” Reggie gestured ahead at the identical twin guys jogging in unison.

I watched them for a moment. “They don’t seem so bad.”

Zachery laughed. “You didn’t arrive when they did. You’ll see. Trust me.”

Once we’d finished our warmup laps, we gathered at the obstacle course, which was like nothing I’d ever seen. It twisted through the forest with rope ladders and wooden walls, tunnels suspended ten feet in the air, and what looked like deep pools of muddy water.

Sergeant Pepperdine gestured to the course. “Whichever team gets all of its members to finish first wins. The losing team gets a penalty!” He blew his whistle. “Go, go, go!”

Everyone took off, climbing up the rope ladders suspended over the first obstacle and launching themselves to the muddy forest floor below. I tried to keep up with the rest of the group, not leading but not bringing up the rear, either. I didn’t want to stick out in any way.

But then I saw the twins racing up ahead. They were about to enter one of the suspended tunnels behind another trainee. I gasped when they shoved him out of the way and into one of the deep muddy pools.

Zachery was right. I got it now.

I put on a burst of speed, nearly sprinting across the forest and launching myself through the suspended tunnel behind them. They jumped out right before I did, but I made my leap count.

I flew through the air and landed in a puddle of mud right in front of them, splashing mud right up into their shocked faces.

“See you at the finish line!” I laughed and raced forward, climbing another rope ladder and then crossing a tightrope suspended over another pool of deep mud. It was all so easy, and it was actually kind of fun.

I crossed the finish line with a wide grin on my face. I wasn’t even out of breath.

I looked back, and my smile slipped. *Oh, no.* I was the first one to cross the finish line. By a lot.

*I… might have overdone it.*

Suddenly, a heavy hand landed on my shoulder. “You. Come with me.”

Oh shit. Had I just outed myself as a werewolf?

**Episode 1337**

XAVIER

I gripped the steering wheel as the Tooth and Claw got smaller and smaller in the rearview mirror. First things first, we needed to get the hell out of dodge before any more trouble found us. That would be easy enough—it was the next move that had me stumped.

Finding Garren and the Blood Moons was gonna be a hell of a lot harder.

I pulled out onto the highway, periodically glancing at the rearview mirror to make sure we didn’t have a tail. I would never have admitted it to Kira, or anyone, probably, but things really could have taken a turn for the worse back at the bar if Jamie hadn’t intervened when she had.

Five to one, as it turned out, had been pretty damn optimistic odds. And while Kira was probably good at a lot of things, holding her own in a bar fight was clearly not one of them. I really hoped we weren’t going to make a habit of this while we tracked down Garren. Cali would never forgive me if something happened—after all, I’d promised her I’d look out for myself.

And I wasn’t about to break a promise to my mate. Especially not now.

Kira reclined the passenger seat slightly, tapping her fingers on the passenger side door as she stared thoughtfully out the window. She didn’t say anything, but the tapping continued.

And continued.

And kept fucking going until the beginning of a headache was tapping away at the inside of my skull.

“Care to share with the rest of the class?” I asked.

She looked over at me, her eyes slightly wide, as if she’d been so caught up in her own thoughts that she’d forgotten I was there.

“I was just thinking,” she said. “If Garren was on some kind of blood drug when Jamie last saw him, then he might still be using. And if he is, then chances are he got his fix through Iñigo.”

I glanced away from the road for a split second to throw her a confused look. “Iñigo? Seriously? He does blood drugs?”

She shrugged. “Probably, but that’s not what I’m saying. Think bigger.”

I stared at the road ahead for a moment, piecing together all the scraps of information I’d gathered while being held hostage. And then realization hit. “He’s a kingpin.”

“Bingo. How else do you think he pays for that giant-ass estate? It’s all drug money. And as far as I know, he’s the main supplier around here. Probably the only one. He’s thorough like that. But that means if Garren is using, chances are it’s coming from Iñigo. We might be able to track him down through one of Iñigo’s distributors.”

“His distributors,” I repeated. “You on a first-name basis with them or something?”

“I’ve met a couple of them.” She shrugged as if she hadn’t been part of a huge underground vampire empire. “I know where they hang out. We can question them.”

I threw her a look, and she rolled her eyes. “Don’t act so surprised, Xavier. You were basically being passed around like a drug yourself—what do you think I did for entertainment during all that time you spent passed out?”

“No, I get it. Making nice with dealers is all in a day’s work for you.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her give me the finger. I resisted the urge to smirk.

“You know where these guys hang out and you wanna question them,” I said. “Won’t that tip Iñigo off to where you are?”

She was silent for a moment, and then she squared her shoulders. “I guess that’s a risk I’m going to have to take. If Garren is being supplied nearby, they would know. They have tight supply chains. It’s our best lead.”

She didn’t have to say that it was also our only lead. I could read between the lines. I adjusted my grip on the steering wheel.

“Wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world to draw Iñigo out…” I mused. “I have plans for that motherfucker after what he did to me.” I glanced over at Kira. “But first, let’s deal with Garren. Now, where am I going?”

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Kira directed me back into the city, to a sketchy warehouse area on the docks that was obscured by a thick fog. I had a feeling that wasn’t an accident.

I turned off my headlights as we cruised closer, then parked the car in a dark alley a ways off from our destination. We’d go the rest of the way on foot—or paw, as was likely the case for me.

Still in the driver’s seat, I turned to Kira. “You sure about this?”

But she was already pushing the passenger door open and getting out of the car.

I rolled my eyes and let out a long sigh. This had all the makings of a big mistake. And while I took paying my debts very seriously, I didn’t really want to get murdered and tossed in the bay in the process.

I got out of the car and crept up behind her. “This doesn't exactly look like a place where anyone would come to buy drugs,” I whispered. “There’s nobody here.”

Her lips twitched. “Something tells me you’ve never bought drugs before.” She gestured to the docks. “Iñigo supplies the crews that work on those ships. And there are new ships every day—”

“Shut up,” I said softly, holding up a hand. I smelled humans. I grabbed her hand and pulled her down behind a bunch of crates. We crouched there for a moment, listening as a woman’s voice echoed across the docks.

Kira stood up, and I yanked her back down. “What the hell are you doing?”

“That’s Yasmin. She knows me.”

“But—”

Once again, she was already walking away. “Hurry up, wolf boy.”

“God dammit, Kira,” I muttered. I had no choice but to follow her. She led me to a goth girl who seemed to be guarding a ramp that led to a large ship.

The girl blew out a cloud of pink smoke from her vape, and her eyes lit up when she saw Kira. “Hey, you’re the witch! What are you doing here?” Then her eyes landed on me, and she smiled. “And who’s the arm candy?”

I smiled back, thinking fondly of how fun it would be to yank that stupid vape away and crush it in my bare hands. *I’m Cali’s arm candy—nobody else’s.*

“I was just in the neighborhood and thought I’d stop by,” Kira said breezily. “How are sales?”

That easily sounded like the worst lie I’d ever heard, but Yasmin ate it up. She scanned my body, like it was much more interesting to look at me than it was to talk about being part of an illegal drug ring. She shrugged. “There’s a ship coming in from Vancouver tomorrow. I expect to move a lot.”

“You sell to others?” I asked.

Her head tilted to the side. “Like you?” With the vape in her mouth, she kind of looked like a kid with a lollipop. But the heated look in her eyes was anything but innocent.

I flashed her a smile. Maybe I could flirt some information out of her. I was a bit rusty, but it had been a pretty effective trick, back in my mercenary days. “I’m not interested in drugs.” I let my eyes play over her for a beat, counting the seconds to make sure it looked perfect. And then, just like clockwork, a deep blush spread across her cheeks.

*Yeah, I’ve still got it.*

“Do you ever deal with the Blood Moons?” I asked.

Kira tensed beside me, and Yasmin’s eyes went wide. All the simmering lust in the human’s expression disappeared.

“Are you fucking crazy?” she hissed. “You don’t want to mess with them.” She turned to Kira, her expression flat. “You guys had better get out of here.”

“What’s the rush?” Kira said with a smile. “I just need some information about one of the members—Garren. Do you know him?”

Yasmin bit her lip, then sighed. “He comes by a couple times a week—he’s a heavy user. Bad news.”

“Do you know where he lives?” I asked.

“His stuff shipped to Spokane.”

A harsh voice called out from the ship. “Yasmin, who you talkin’ to?”

I watched, my hackles rising, as a couple of huge, mean-looking guys hustled down the ramp. One of them pointed at Kira. “Ain’t that Iñigo’s witch?”

The other sneered at her. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

The flash of his fangs in the dim light was the only warning we got before he attacked. I tensed, ready to shift and tear these bloodsuckers apart, when I noticed a dozen more vampires watching us from the deck.

Once again, the odds were not looking good. And I’d learned my lesson the first time.

Kira blasted one of the charging vampires with a spell, which was just enough to slow them down.

I grabbed her hand. “Get on my back!”

I shifted, and Kira grabbed on for dear life. I sprinted along the dock, looking for a place to hide, but then I heard a cry and felt Kira slip off my back and tumble into the water.

**Episode 1338**

I stared up in horror. The enormous, ornate columns were shuddering. They had always seemed so solid and sturdy, and yet here they were, shaking violently. I let out a small cry—I couldn’t help myself. It had to be an earthquake, magical or not.

Books were flying off the shelves and hurtling to the floor. Huge chunks of debris and parts of the walls and ceiling broke off and smashed to the floor, deadly as bombs. Ugly, massive cracks appeared like monstrous spider webs and raced up the walls. It was like being in the world’s most dangerous snow globe, except instead of snowflakes, there were falling chunks of stone and flying shards of wood.

I could hear various haunting cries coming from somewhere in the library. Gooseflesh rose, prickling at my arms. I swallowed hard and tried not to panic, but it was difficult.

*Oh shit.*

What the hell was making that noise? More creatures? Could they be on their way to find us, or were they being crushed by the falling debris? One thing was for certain—there was no way I wanted to stand around and find out. Time for a family check.

I looked for my mother—there she was, looking remarkably calm, if pale. Okay Mom, check. Then I looked around for Artemis. I finally spotted her standing a few feet away. I must have been more panicked than I’d realized. I couldn’t believe I’d missed her when she was just standing there.

“Artemis!” I called. She didn’t respond. “Hey, Artemis!”

Nothing. She just stood there, staring into space and looking totally zoned out. I glanced up again and shrieked. A column of books was about to fall and crush her.

*Oh my god!*

“Hey!” I yelled, for the third time. “Artemis! *Move*!”

She didn’t even blink. What was going on with her? Was she catatonic? It didn’t matter now. I grabbed her arm and pulled her toward me, out of harm’s way.

Steinar’s rock face was lined with concern. “My library!” he wailed, clearly distraught. “My beautiful library is falling down! Help me! Save my library!”

“Enough!” Big Mac cut him off, cool and to the point. Did anything ever rattle her? “We need to leave, while we still can!”

While I didn’t always see eye to eye with Big Mac, right now, we were in total agreement. I looked around, trying not to give in to the panic that threatened to overwhelm me

Where could we go? How were we going to get out? Were we going to be crushed?

“Don’t worry!” Torin squared his shoulders. He looked anxious but determined. “If anyone gets hurt, I’ll heal them.”

“No need,” said Astrid.

I stared at her. She looked back at me, open and easy. It looked like she was totally back to normal and—best of all—no longer inhabited by some weird-ass zombie. She even smiled faintly and gestured around her.

“Look carefully, everyone. The library isn’t really collapsing, in fact just the opposite! It’s putting itself back together!

For a moment, I didn’t believe her. Maybe I was wrong—maybe the zombie was still inside her, trying to trick us and get us all killed. What she’d just said just couldn’t be right! My urge to run was still so strong, but I forced myself to calm down. I took a deep breath and tried to really take in what was happening. And sure enough, Astrid was telling the truth. Everything was coming back together—the walls were sucking up the chunks of debris, the columns were filling back in and rising higher and higher. Even the books were flying back to the shelves. Everything was returning to normal.

Steinar’s agonized expression relaxed in amazed delight. “My library!” he crooned, like he was talking to a favorite pet. “Oh, my most wonderful library is being restored.”

It was true. All around us, it seemed like huge invisible hands were reshaping and rebuilding the space. We watched in awed silence, just taking it in. It was truly incredible to witness. It reminded me of playing with wooden blocks as a little kid, building wonderful towers and just as casually knocking them down. I wasn’t sure how long we all stood there—it was oddly hypnotizing, in the best kind of way.

“All right, Steinar. Are you satisfied now?” My mom’s voice shook me out of my trance. “It seems like the problem’s been resolved. Can we all return to the pack house?”

As wonderful as it had been to see the rebirth of the library, it was clear that she’d had enough of all of this and was more than ready to go back.

“I don’t see why not,” Steinar said, now clearly living his best life. He beamed magnanimously at us all.

“Hold on!” Big Mac’s voice was sharp

My mom sighed audibly, but Big Mac continued unabashed. “We still don’t know what happened here. Think about it—all you’ve done is apply a Band-Aid to a wound, but we don’t even know what caused the wound in the first place. There are still revenants around—and there could be more!”

I wheeled around to her, surprised. “Wait—you think this could all be connected?”

Big Mac nodded solemnly. “I do. Everything points to dark magic.” She glanced at Artemis, and her expression was unreadable. “We need to find the source,” she added grimly.

I nodded. “I agree. We need to figure out the riddle and what it means for all of us.”

“Well, why not take the book with you?” Steinar said expansively. “You’ve all earned library cards for life.” At that point I was pretty sure he would have given us anything. It was like he’d just won the lottery. “I’ll stay and make sure the library is restored to its full glory. And of course, I’ll contact you if there are any changes—or if those creatures return.” He shuddered with theatrical distaste at the very thought.

“Great, great.” My mom was clearly eager to get going. I didn’t blame her—it was time to head home.

We turned as a group and started moving toward the door, but then a loud bang stopped us dead in our tracks.

*Oh my god, what now?* My nerves were shot.

A large cloud of dark, swirling smoke appeared in front of us, and when it dissipated a figure emerged. It was Hypatia.

“Hypatia!” Steinar was ecstatic, overjoyed to the point where I was a little concerned for him. His face could’ve cracked into pieces, he was grinning so hard.

Hypatia, for her part, was shaking her head. Her normally flawless look was ruined. She stood there, disheveled and dazed. Her hair was standing up on her head, and she looked like she’d emerged from a clothes dryer on high speed. Nevertheless, she pushed her glasses up her nose, cleared her throat, and seemed to try to get it together while we all stood staring at her.

“And what is going on here, exactly?”

*Oof.*

“Well, the thing is, we came to help Steinar—”

Everyone chimed in, all trying to explain at the same time.

“The library was destroyed.”

“The riddle said—”

“Revenants have been attacking us!”

“And there’s this book—”

To her credit, Hypatia stood there and listened, clearly processing and taking it all in. What was even more impressive was that she clearly understood it all. It must have been her librarian’s brain, organizing information at lightning speed.

“Ah,” she said, when we all finally fell silent. “So that would explain it.”

“You don’t say,” Big Mac grumbled. “And where were you this whole time?”

Hypatia gave her a look. “I’ve been trapped in the restricted section. I wasn’t able to get out—until now, that is. The magic of the library was revolting against my own.”

Her tone was calm and satisfied, and I would have bet that she was more upset about not knowing *why* she’d been trapped than actually being trapped. Knowledge was everything to this woman. I was itching to ask her about the revenants, but before I could even open my mouth to do so, Big Mac beat me to it

“Do you know anything about the revenants?”

Immediately, Hypatia’s calm demeanor became stormy and her expression darkened. She turned to Big Mac.

“Why?” Her voice was cold, but behind the anger I thought I could sense real fear.

Big Mac didn’t back down. She stared unblinkingly into the librarian’s eyes. “Because that’s what all this shit was.”

Big Mac was never one to mince words really, was she?

“Yes, and there’s this riddle about cutting off the head,” Astrid added, gesturing to the book.

Hypatia pinched the bridge of her nose. “This is even worse than I thought.”

“Why?” I pressed. I didn’t really *want* to know, but I was highly unsettled by her reaction. If a witch like Hypatia was upset… That couldn’t be good.

“Because,” Hypatia answered slowly, “if this is like last time, then we’re in a lot of trouble.”

**Episode 1339**

GREYSON

We returned to the pack house. Jay was absolutely silent, not saying a single word. He was more than angry—downright pissed would’ve been a better description. I tried mind linking with him, thinking maybe I’d have a better chance of communicating if we could bypass the words, but Jay completely ignored me. I was shut out.

That wasn’t my only problem—not by a long shot.

I couldn’t let myself get too distracted—I was very aware that the woods were behind us, and I was also very aware of what they might hold. There was a high probability that Iñigo and the vampires were tracking us. I had to get Jay and Ava back to the pack house safely, the sooner the better. We could be attacked at any moment. At least if the vampires were stupid enough to attack the pack house, I knew that Cali wouldn’t be in danger—for the first time, I felt truly relieved that she’d gone to the library.

*Cali…*

Was she okay? What havoc was she causing? The thought brought a small smile to my face. I hoped she was safe and happy. It was how I always wanted to be with her, how we were in some of those dreams from the witches. Could the witches make those dreams a reality?

I shook my head, trying to clear it. I couldn’t focus on that right now, not when we were fast approaching the pack house, and I would need my wits about me if I was going to handle things properly. I took a deep breath and tried to ready myself for the onslaught of questions.

“Pack meeting,” I announced loudly when we entered. “Now.”

Once they were assembled, I studied their faces—some of them would have made fine poker players, but that wasn’t the case for all of them. Violet’s hands were balled into fists, Rishika’s shoulders were rigid, and although Sabine was always poised, I could tell by the darkness in her eyes and the way her lips thinned that she was far from happy. The questions and comments rained down immediately.

“*Ava*.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Yes, what *is* she doing here?”

“Is she joining the pack?”

“I don’t understand why she’s here. What’s going on?”

I had to step up as Alpha, now more than ever—and quickly, too, before things got worse. Calmly, but with authority, I explained Ava’s situation, the violence she had faced, the threats, and Iñigo’s plans.

“Ava needs our protection.” I said. I stared hard at every member of the pack. Most lowered their eyes deferentially, but there were quite a few objections, and a bit of dark muttering.

“I don’t trust her,” someone said.

“She’s lied before,” Sabine said. “She’ll do it again.”

“Stop.” I said. “I know that some of you are unhappy with this decision. But let me remind you—this is my pack, I am your Alpha, and Ava will be staying with us.”

Each word was like a stone, dropping into an ocean of silence. No one said anything.

“Sabine, can you show Ava to a room, please?” I asked.

My mother said nothing but nodded. I turned to see Jay glaring at me—did we have a problem here? He hadn’t been talking to me since we’d brought her back, but now he clearly had plenty to say.

“Can I talk to you?” he asked, keeping his voice low.

I crossed my arms. “Something wrong?”

“Yeah,” he said. “You’re a fool.”

I blinked. “I’m sorry, what did you just say?”

“I said you’re a fool for letting Ava come to you for protection!” he said. “Have you lost your damn mind?”

“No,” I said coolly. “I don’t believe I have.”

“Oh, really? And how do you think Xavier is going to react when he returns to find Ava here?” Jay took a breath mid-rant and paused. Then he narrowed his eyes. “Or was pissing him off your plan all along?”

“What?” Now I was genuinely puzzled. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Jay laughed scornfully. “Oh, please. Is that why you let Ava come back? Are you doing this to help your chances with Cali and to piss off your brother?”

“Jay, where are you—”

“You think that if you antagonize Xavier enough, Cali will choose you as her mate!”

Part of me wanted to laugh. I couldn’t believe that Jay would think I was the kind of person who would do something like that. I’d bring Ava back only to piss Xavier off? That sounded like something Xavier would do, not the other way around. I had to shut this down.

“Jay, in case you hadn’t noticed, I don’t need Ava to antagonize my brother—he does that well enough himself,” I said, keeping my tone even, “and I certainly wouldn’t expose the pack to unnecessary danger for personal gain! I can’t believe you would think that of me.”

“Then I just don’t understand it, Greyson.” Jay didn’t even seem abashed. “What other reason could there be?”

I pulled Jay aside, away from the others who were still lingering in the living room. I lowered my voice, my words coming out in a rush. “Listen to me, Jay. I agree with you. Okay?” I said. “I don’t believe Ava.”

Jay looked surprised. “Really?”

I shook my head. “Some of what she was saying might be true, but we all know that Ava’s record for telling the truth isn’t stellar.”

He snorted. “You’ve got that right.”

“I feel better having her close—that way, we can keep an eye on her,” I explained. “Because I really don’t like the idea of setting her free, so she can do… Well, who knows what. It’s the lesser of two evils—I keep my friends close and my enemies closer. Do you understand now?”

Jay nodded grudgingly. “I guess so.”

I let out a long breath.

“But,” Jay continued. Fuck. “If she does anything—and I mean *anything*—that looks suspicious, it will be the last time. I will personally ensure it. Do you understand?”

I really hated the way this had gone down, but I wasn’t sure how to make it right.

“Jay,” I said, putting my hand on his shoulder. We couldn’t keep going back and forth like this. “I know you’re being defensive of Xavier. He’s your friend, and I understand that. But I am looking out for the pack, always. I know the risk bringing Ava here poses, and I don’t do it lightly.”

Jay nodded slowly. “Okay.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you for trusting me with this.”

If I’d hoped the gesture would somehow bring healing or closure, I was doomed to disappointment. Jay shrugged off my hand and stared at me. He gave a short bark of laughter, without warmth.

“You’re wrong about one thing, though—I don’t trust you.” He turned abruptly and left.

I stood there alone and sighed.

*Great.*

Our little exchange was just another reminder of everything I’d been forced to deal with, ever since I’d become Alpha. I closed my eyes. In that moment, I felt totally overwhelmed.

*Cali, where are you?*

I really needed her. Cali was the one person I could have trusted to get me through this. I stood and thought about the witches and their offer. Was it meant to change my destiny? Could Cali actually be mine?

*If Cali were mine…*

*God*. If Cali were mine, then it wouldn’t matter what I had to go through—everything would be worth it. I would have her waiting for me, like the light at the end of the tunnel. Could I do that? Would the witches’ spell make it possible? I knew that I was being selfish, that I should have been thinking of the pack, putting their needs before my own, but honestly, when it came to Cali, I couldn’t help being selfish.

The truth was, I wanted her for myself. All to myself.

I sighed again. Things would be so much easier if Xavier were still with Ava, but I knew that wasn’t my choice to make. Anyway, I wanted Cali to choose me because she *wanted* to choose me—not because I was the only option left.

I reluctantly pushed the thoughts away. Time to get back to reality. I wanted—no I *needed*—to talk to Rishika about the Ava situation, and really fill her in on what was going on, too, the way I had with Jay. I also had to check on Sage and see how she was doing with York. There was way too much going on with this pack.

“Hey, can we talk?” It was Rishika.

I nodded. “Was just looking for you.”

Then, there was suddenly a loud banging noise. Rishika and I looked at each other, then took off in its direction.

“What the fuck was that?” I asked.

It came again—from the basement door. The basement, where Sage was guarding York. A chill went down my spine. Was she okay? *Someone* was pounding on the door with all their strength.

“Let me out of here! Let me out!”

**Episode 1340**

CHARLIE

*Oh shit*. I froze in horror. One thought was playing over and over again in my mind.

*I’ve been found out. I’ve been found out.* *I’ve been found out.*

Meanwhile I was being pulled along by the short woman, who had a remarkably iron clad grip.

“Come *on*,” she insisted.

“I can’t,” I said. “I’m supposed to be on the obstacle course!”

One thing was for certain: Sergeant Pepperdine was not going to like this. In fact, judging by what little I’d seen of the man so far, that was a bit of an understatement. He was going to *hate* it, and he would let it be known. I could already imagine the fallout. Everyone would be forced to run a hundred laps, and who were they going to blame?

Yours truly, obviously.

But this woman wasn’t taking no for an answer.

“Okay, okay!”

She stopped when we were close to the finishing line. At least now I could hear my fellow recruits gasping and panting as they struggled to complete the course. Meanwhile, the woman was giving me some serious side eye. Or so I thought. It was hard not to be paranoid.

“What?”

Finally, she grunted. “You. You’re so easy to spot. You look just like your mom.” Having delivered this observation, she held out a hand.

“My name’s Romilly.”

I let out a small sigh of relief as I took the offered hand and shook it. She had a seriously firm grip—this lady was strong.

She smiled. “And speaking of—how is your mom doing?”

I paused. That was a trickier question than she knew. Normally I would have just answered “fine,” but I couldn’t help thinking about how my mom had tried to kill me and my girlfriend. But really, there was only one answer to this question.

“Fine,” I answered, as casually as I could. “She’s doing great… Are you her… friend? Vonn?”

I was struggling to work out how to ask this. After all, I couldn’t come right out and say, “Hey, are you my mom’s friend who knows I’m a werewolf?” Especially if this wasn’t the right person. I was in luck, though. Romilly looked pleased and gave a broad grin.

“Yes, I’m Iris’s friend,” she said. “Romilly Vonn. I’m here to look out for you.”

Relief flooded through me. “Great. So, you’re not going to turn me in?”

She laughed. “Not a chance, at least not unless you do something to my beautiful rose garden.”

I laughed too, and her eyes narrowed.

“Actually, I’m not joking about that. At all. You see, I’m the groundskeeper here, and I take my job very seriously.”

Fair enough. I could feel my shoulders relaxing as I took a breath. “I have no plans to mess up your plants.”

I meant to reassure her, but instead she looked tense.

“Not just plants!” It would have been funny if her tone hadn’t been so ferocious. “I landscape as well, so don’t go disturbing any of my rocks either.”

“Okay, okay, got it. No rocks either.” By then, I could hear more and more of my campmates crossing the finishing line. “I should probably get back. It was nice meeting you!”

I turned to leave, but Romilly gripped my arm. “Not so fast, Charlie.”

*Uh oh…*

“But I really have to get back, don’t I?” I stammered. “Won’t they notice I’m gone?”

Romilly shook her head and reached into her bag. “No way. You’re not going anywhere, not without this.” She pulled a woven bracelet from her bag and tied it around my wrist.

I stared at it. “What? But why?” I’d never had to wear anything like it before.

Romilly sighed. “It’s a charm,” she explained. “It’s there to protect you. As long as you have it on, even the hunter trackers won’t be able to tell that you’re a…” She lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “A you-know-what.”

I took another look at the bracelet, examining it more closely. It didn’t look like it was anything special. It looked like something I would’ve gotten at an actual summer camp when I was eleven years old.

“Okay, but a *charm bracelet*? It doesn’t look very protective—”

Romilly cut me off with a roll of her eyes “That may be so, but as long as you keep it on, it will work.”

“Oh,” I said. “Thank you.”

She clamped another firm hand down on my shoulder, still not done and determined to have her say.

“You know, kid, it’s a damn shame about what happened to you.” Again, she lowered her voice. “What with the you-know-what.”

“Becoming a werewolf?” I finished for her. It kind of pissed me off that she couldn’t even say it.

“Right.” I raised my eyebrow. I couldn’t help it. I wondered if this woman was really looking out for me. I would give her the benefit of the doubt, though—for now. “Thanks,” I said, as casually as I could, “but it wasn’t really that big a deal.”

Now it was her turn to raise an eyebrow.

I went on. “Sure, it was confusing and scary at first, but I had some help adjusting to it.” A lump formed in my throat as I thought of Violet. She was the one who had shown me the way. “Anyway,” I continued, “the truth is that my added power helped me crush that obstacle course today.”

She nodded at this but looked wary. “About that—I’d advise that you try to keep to the middle of the pack. If you stand out, you’ll only draw more attention to yourself.

“I promise I’ll keep that in mind,” I said. “And thank you for the charm.”

As I said it, I was suddenly struck by a new thought

*If this charm bracelet actually works and helps hide werewolves from hunters, then could I get one for Violet?* *If I did, could she safely visit me? Could I protect her from all hunters that way?*

I jogged over to join the group, and my new roommates. I took care to seem like I too had just finished an intense obstacle course, breathing heavily out and making a show of wiping the sweat from my face. I hoped that I got my timing right this time. Romilly’s words were already echoing in my head.

*Try to keep to the middle of the pack. If you stand out, you’ll only draw more attention to yourself*

Zachery spotted me first. He immediately came over and slapped me on the back.

“Hey man, that was so awesome! I couldn’t believe you did that! You totally smoked the twins!”

I grimaced. So much for not standing out. Oh well. Maybe next time.

“Yeah, I’ve been practicing a lot back home.” I winced inwardly at how lame that sounded and did my best to smile, as if that made any sense.

But least Zachery seemed to buy it. He grinned back easily. “Hell of a lot of practice then, I guess.” A thought struck him. “I wanted to congratulate you, but you disappeared. Where’d you go?”

*Oh shit. Think Charlie, think!*

“Uh.” I lowered my voice conspiratorially. “I had to pee.”

Zachery laughed again. “Whatever, man. You have to be on my team next time for sure.”

I nodded and smiled. We did a few more drills and then Reggie, Aisha, and Sophie joined us and we headed for the mess hall together. When we got there, I couldn’t help noticing that many people were coupling off so that they could sit together. I even saw two hunters holding hands.

I whistled. “Wow. That was quick; we just got here and those two are already an item?”

Aisha glanced over to the couple in question and smiled. “They’re from neighboring hunter families. They’re betrothed.”

“*Aisha*!” Sophie cut in, rolling her eyes. “Hunter families don’t do that anymore.”

Aisha rolled her own eyes. “Whatever, fine. The point is, their families have always expected them to get married one day. And look, now they’re dating, so they’re *practically* betrothed.”

I turned back to look at the couple. I had to admit that I was surprised and a little disconcerted that these kids would just go along with whatever their parents expected of them. I would never, not in a million years, leave Violet for a hunter girl, even if my family expected it of me. *Especially* if my family expected it of me.

Now Zachery chimed in. “You know that even though *theoretically*”—he made air quotes toward Sophie, who shook her head but smiled—“there aren’t any betrothals anymore, most hunter couples meet each other right here at this camp. After all, it’s where my parents met.” He winked and gestured to himself. “And look at the incredible result! Think about it—I just bet our parents are expecting all of us to come home paired up.”

Shock ran through me.

*Was this the real reason my parents sent me here?*

**Episode 1341**

With Hypatia leading our group, we wound our way back through the endless twists and turns of the library, carefully picking our way through the rubble. I guessed that the magic repairing the place only went so far. I wondered how Steinar and Hypatia would deal with the mess after we left.

I glanced at Steinar, who’d been so relieved and happy to see his library restored. I was so happy for him. He really loved this place with his whole heart. If he had one of those… Was it made of stone too? Now, he seemed to be taking everything in stride, even the massive chunks of rubble and debris. Especially now that Hypatia had come back—or had been freed from the restricted section.

I wished I could have been just as calm, but my nerves had been shot to pieces. Everything we’d been through… It was all too much. I glanced toward Hypatia, whose mouth was pursed in concentration as she pushed past a piece of stone the size of a small boulder. Her warning rang through my head.

*Because if this is like the last time, then we’re in a lot of trouble...*

I couldn’t stop thinking about it. Hypatia was not the type of person to just make some random declaration. There was no drama for drama’s sake with her. When she said something, she meant it. Weren’t all librarians supposed to be based on facts and the Dewey Decimal System or whatever anyway? This was definitely something to take seriously.

It was too much. I had to know. I pushed past everyone until I was right by Hypatia’s side and put my hand on her arm.

“Hypatia?”

“Yes?” She frowned “What is it?”

“I have to know—what did you mean when you said that we were in a lot of trouble? What kind of trouble were you talking about?!”

Hypatia sighed, but to her credit, she didn’t dodge my question. It was more than could be said for some of the werewolves I spent time with.

“I was speaking about how the library is responding. There has only been, to my understanding, one other instance when the library was affected this way, thousands of years ago.” Her voice had gone soft with a mixture of awe and horror, as if she were telling the most impressive, scariest ghost story ever.

Honestly, not helpful right now.

Big Mac, who had clearly been paying close attention, spoke up. “Yeah? Thousands of years ago? What was the cause then?”

Hypatia shot her an icy look. “The Obaltarion was a resource for all worlds, with portals allowing access to all,” the librarian explained. “But then something happened that caused the portals to close. It’s still unclear.”

“Wow,” I said, genuinely surprised to hear all of this. It wasn’t like they’d taught me the history of magic in school. “Is that true? Even with all the research and resources you guys have? You still have no idea?”

Steinar shook his head. “For a while, chaos erupted everywhere. It was truly frightening.”

Great, the guy made of literal *stone* had been afraid?

“Over time, however, a new portal system was developed. It allowed books and resources to travel to other worlds, but living creatures were no longer able to access the library directly,” Hypatia said. “It was for the best ultimately to try to prevent it from happening again.”

She paused for what seemed like an eternity and then continued, her voice becoming even more quiet and thoughtful. “This time, just before the library began to disintegrate, the entire portal system shut down.”

“But I don’t understand…” My mom, who had been silent throughout the exchange, now turned to Hypatia, looking puzzled.

“What don’t you understand? There was no more access to the portals,” Hypatia’s voice rose—apparently, my mom had struck a nerve. “I went down to the restricted section to investigate, and then I got stuck and couldn’t get out. ”

Clearly, she was more rattled than she’d let on. Hypatia’s calm demeanor was a front. This scared me, almost more than anything else. If all of these powerful witches were getting rattled, then how was I supposed to be feeling? I was just a half-human, half-Fae. I wasn’t quite equipped for a giant disaster like this one…

“What about the revenants?” Big Mac was like a dog with a bone.

Hypatia took a moment to get herself under control before responding. “Their presence clearly means that there is something larger at work here. Something is calling them, creating them, giving them power.”

Shit. That *did* sound like a lot of trouble.

“What are we supposed to do to stop them?” I asked. Honestly, the thought of facing more of those undead creature things had me deeply unsettled. I glanced over at my sister who was soaking all of this in, expressionless.

“You’ll just have to be extremely careful and hope that whatever was causing it is now resolved.”

Big Mac’s laugh was more of a caw. “Yeah right. Hope alone isn’t going to get us out of this mess. Magic and a fucking whole lot of luck.”

I ignored Big Mac to the best of my ability and pressed on, determined to get some answers. “But what does the riddle mean? Like, the bit about cutting off the head? Is that how we fix this?”

Hypatia sighed, but she was back to her calmer librarian self. “Yes, it seems to mean that you must find the source of the disturbance and cut it off.”

“Do you mean *literally* cut it off?” I put a self-conscious hand to my neck.

“Could be,” she said, shrugging.

Images of cutting off someone’s head rose in my mind, making me I shudder. I guess I’d been hoping that the riddle had been a bit more metaphorical than physical. Like in high school English class when the color of the curtains or the dead flowers on the table symbolized the relationship of the couple in the story deteriorating. I’d been in fights before—I’d even *killed* when necessary—but it wasn’t something I wanted to make a habit out of…

I involuntarily glanced over at Artemis again. Was she caught up in all this? And if she was, what would happen to her? My mind took me back to Arlo and the pack house and then, of course, to Greyson. I knew he was there, but was he okay?

And then there was Xavier. He had assured me that he would take care of himself, but how could he keep that promise when the world was being overrun by these revenant creatures?

“What happens to revenants?” Artemis asked. She was standing a little bit apart from the group, but her attention was focused on the conversation. “Or anyone connected to what’s happening?”

Hypatia turned toward Artemis. “I couldn’t say for sure, but it’s possible that if you stop the Orb, the revenants would return to the spirit world.”

That sounded all well and good, but if we managed to cut off the head of whatever this was… could it have a negative impact on my sister?

Big Mac threw a quick glance my way, as if she could read my mind. Damn witch.

“What we need to do,” Big Mac started, looking at Artemis, “is locate the Orb, and fast. Before anyone else does and things get even worse.”

“And just how do we do that?” I sounded defensive, but as usual, I didn’t like the look the witch was giving my sister. She’d had it out for her this entire time, but Artemis couldn’t have the Orb. So sue me, I was protective of my older sister.

Big Mac stared at me coolly. “I don’t know. I can only hope that the answer lies somewhere in this book.”

“We certainly hope so,” Steinar said.

Hypatia pursed her lips together. “Indeed.”

After that, there was little to say, except goodbye. Everyone was pretty subdued by this point—except for Steinar, who couldn’t thank us enough for everything we had done. At least somebody was happy.

A little while later we were pulling off of the exit to the airport. Astrid and Torin were completely asleep in the back, practically drooling on each other. I couldn’t wait to be home. I glanced over at Big Mac, who had been engrossed in the book the entire time.

“Sooo,” I started, clearing my throat. “Tell us more about the book, Big Mac. Do you think we’ll really be able to find the source of the Orb?”

Big Mac grunted and turned the page. Lovely.

“Hey, my sister asked you a question,” Artemis said. I gave her a small smile—it was nice to have her on my side after what we’d been through earlier.

Suddenly, Big Mac slammed the book shut and made an announcement.

“If we have any hope of finding this at all, we need to get back to Marta as soon as possible,” she said. “Before it’s too late.”

**Episode 1342**

XAVIER

Given that Kira didn’t exactly have a great affinity for werewolves, I should’ve known she didn’t know how to hold onto one while it was running.

I could hear Kira nearby, splashing around in the water—or *flailing*, by the wet, panicked, echoing sounds of it. The vampires had to be closing in now. I needed to get Kira so we could get the hell out of here.

Of course, I could have just left her. It would have been so much easier to get the hell out of there and not have anyone slow me down. But leaving her in trouble? I could already hear Cali yelling at me.

What was a decent mercenary to do?

I leapt off the dock and shifted back to human as soon as I hit the icy water.

*Fuck*. It was freezing.

I swam under the dock. Despite the darkness and cold, it wasn’t hard to find her. Kira was clinging onto the pylon. With a couple of strokes, I was beside her.

“Kira,” I started to say, but she stopped me, pressing a finger to her lips and pointing upward.

I closed my mouth and listened. Sure enough, I could hear footfalls right above us, thumping hard and making the boards shake above our heads as they paced up and down, searching.

“Where the hell are they? Where did they go?”

“Find them!”

The voices, barking out questions and orders, were thick with anger and frustration.

Their smell overwhelmed me—that overpowering, sickly, inhuman scent of death. I gritted my teeth, trying not to wretch, but my stomach twisted and clenched. I spared a thought for what their boat must have been like—the stench of it—and almost threw up anyway.

Kira was next to me, shivering like a leaf. One thing was for certain, we couldn’t stay down here much longer. Hypothermia would soon set in. I drew close to her.

“Put your arms around me,” I whispered in her ear.

She did, and I began to swim as quietly as I could in the opposite direction, away from the vampires and toward the far end of the dock, where I could see a ladder. I climbed up cautiously and slowly and raised my head to see if the coast was clear.

The wind cut my wet skin like a knife as I scanned the area for the moment. The coast was clear. I pulled myself and Kira up onto the dock, then half-dragged, half-carried her behind a dry-docked boat for more cover. I could feel her body shaking with cold. She was freezing—fuck, *I* was freezing. We had to make it back to my car where I had dry clothes and blankets, and we had to do it fast.

“Kira, we have to run for the car. Can you make it?”

She nodded, her teeth chattering. I wasn’t convinced.

“Okay,” I said. “I’m going to shift. I want you to climb on my back when I do.”

“L-L-Last time I did that, I ended up in the w-w-water!” She was shivering so hard that she was stammering, barely able to speak, but there was no time to waste debating the issue—we needed to get out of here right now.

“Well hang on tighter this time!” I snapped. She was either going to do it or she wasn’t. We couldn’t waste any more time, so I shifted.

Kira managed to climb on, and this time she took me at my word. Her grip was so tight that I could barely breathe, but it didn’t matter. I raced toward the car, moving much faster now. When we arrived, I shifted back fast, but I heard, felt, and worst of all *smelt* the vampire that had arrived just behind us.

“Get in the car!” I barked.

I leapt into the driver’s seat, barely making it as the vampire lunged forward. I slammed the door as hard as possible, crushing him. The vampire screamed and went limp. I kicked him off and started the car, the ignition roaring to life. I peeled out with a screech of tires, taking a truly evil pleasure in the way the wheels rolled over the vampire’s body with a satisfying thump. Then I headed for the exit as fast as I could. There was a loud WHACK as yet another vampire landed on the windshield, blocking my view.

“Take the wheel!” I called to Kira, who leaned over to grip it with both hands while I rolled down the driver’s window.

I reached out, grabbed the vampire, and slammed him into the glass as hard as I could, then I yanked him clear and threw him under the car. This resulted in another satisfying thump. I’d only just taken back the wheel when Kira yelled “Look!” and pointed at a group of vampires running full tilt toward us. I considered keeping clear, but only for a moment. The temptation was too strong. I steered straight toward them, as if they were pins and the car was a bowling ball.

But one of the vampires saw me coming and landed on the roof. It wasted no time baring its fangs and coming at Kira through her window.

“Take the fucking wheel!” I called again, and as she did, I leaned over to grab the vampire.

We fought, the vampire thrashing and writhing, and as I struggled to get a grip on it, it sank its fangs into my shoulder. *Shit!* I winced as pain raced down my back.

By now the vampire was half-in, half-out of the car, and scratching and clawing with all its strength. Kira was doing her best, leaning forward and clutching the wheel to keep control, but it was hard to see, and we were swerving all over the road. If the vampire didn’t kill us, we’d definitely end up in a crash. The bite on my shoulder burned, and I grimaced—shit, I hated these motherfuckers! I finally managed to get a hold on the vampire that had bitten me, determined to rip his head off, but then I glanced up and saw we were heading straight for the warehouse.

“Kira!” I yelled, “watch out!”

Kira swerved at the last moment. The vampire jerked and convulsed, showering us in a hot red spray as blood spurted from its mouth. The car scraped along the side of the building with an earsplitting screech of metal and a shower of sparks. I looked down and saw that I was holding the upper half of the vampire’s body—the rest had been torn off by the building when we’d made that last minute turn. I shoved the disgusting remains out the window, reclaimed the wheel, and put my foot on the gas. We sped away.

We drove for a while in silence, just taking some time to try and process all the crazy shit we’d just experienced. When I felt like we were both calmer, I pulled over to the side of the road and turned to Kira, who was looking a little better. At least her lips were no longer blue, and there was some color in her cheeks.

“Can you drive?” I asked. “Less like a maniac. I need to heal.”

She glared at me, but nodded curtly.

We both got out of the car. I went around to the trunk and pulled on a clean shirt and some jeans. I immediately felt better—not being covered with blood, and being free from the rancid stench of dead vampire, made a difference. I handed Kira a blanket. She took it, her expression neutral as usual, giving nothing away.

As I moved, I aggravated the vampire’s bite and winced again . I wanted to get going, but before we went any further, it was time for a little chat.

“You know, if you’re planning to kill Garren, you’re going to have to do better than this.”

Kira blinked, but recovered quickly. “What do you mean?”

I nodded. “You froze back there. If the Blood Moons are as bad as Jamie implied, well… You’re gonna have to use some of that magic, not whatever the fuck all that was.”

Kira stared at me, her face impassive.

“Look, there’s a girl back home—my *mate*—and I promised her I’d come back,” I said. “That’s not a promise I plan on breaking.”

*God, Cali, I miss you so damn much. I can’t wait to see you again, to hold you again…*

“And just so we’re clear, that means I also want to be in one piece when I get back home.”

Kira managed to give me a frosty smile as she wrapped the towel around herself.

“Oh, don’t worry,” she said. “When the time comes, believe me, I’ll be more than ready.”

*Right. We’ll see.*

“Good,” I answered. “Ready to go?”

Kira nodded, and we got back into the car. She started adjusting the seat and moving what remained of the side mirror. I eyed it suspiciously.

“Before we get going,” I said, “one question—you do have a driver’s license, right?”

This clearly annoyed her, and she shot me a filthy look. “Yes, I do. And when I don’t have a werewolf and a vampire fighting to the death right in front of me, I happen to be a pretty good driver.”

Worked for me. I settled back in my seat. The pain in my shoulder radiated with low heat. *Fucking bloodsuckers…*

“What’s your plan now?” Kira asked. “How are we going to find Garren?”

My answer was to point to a sign. “Get on the highway. We’re going to Spokane.”

**Episode 1343**

LOLA

I looked closely at my image on my phone. I hated it. The lighting in my room was *not* flattering, and my phone was way too small to get a proper view of how I looked. It would be so much easier if I could use a mirror. I threw the phone onto my bed, feeling frustrated and hopeless. I couldn’t believe that I’d have to look at myself through a phone camera for the rest of my life if I wanted to know exactly how I looked. What a bummer.

There had to be a better way. I thought of Irma. Maybe she’d be able to school me on how vampires got ready for dates—not that this mysterious meeting with Emmett was a date! I didn’t know what it was, but it was definitely *not* a date.

I looked down at the low-cut red lace dress I was wearing, noting the way it clung to the contours of my body. It was floor length, with a split that started high on my thigh. Was it too sexy? I posed a bit, jutting out my hip and straightening my posture. It wasn’t anything I would normally wear. I’d bought it ages ago while out shopping with Cali, and had never worn it before. *Why hadn’t I? And why now?* *Is it because I feel different? Because I’m a vampire?* Then a thought hit me. *Is it because of Emmett?*

Consumed by guilt, I returned to my closet and searched through my clothes, determined to find the baggiest, most unflattering outfit I owned. I tore through hanger after hanger until I paused. *Was I overreacting?* There was no reason why I couldn’t dress the way I wanted.

I looked at myself again on my phone. This time, I felt a bit better about what I saw. My hair looked thick and shiny, and had the perfect amount of volume. My makeup was tasteful and not at all overdone. I’d decided on red lipstick, a hint of blush, a thin line of eyeliner, and an eyelash-extending mascara.

I looked good. So what if I was a little dressed up? Dressing up didn’t mean that it was a date—I just wanted to look cute. What was wrong with that? *I can do this. It’s not a date. It can’t be.*

But maybe I should call Jay first…

My finger was poised over the screen, ready to do just that, when I stopped myself. I couldn’t call him every time I felt guilty. Despite what had happened before, I would *never* cheat on Jay. There was no reason to feel guilty, anyway.

Without another thought I headed over to the greenhouse, trying to dull the feeling of anticipation racing through my stomach. This wasn’t a date, I just needed to remember that. That thought was challenged when I entered the greenhouse. Emmett’s eyes lit up when he saw me, and I felt super self-conscious.

He was dressed a bit more casually than his usual professor-type style. He looked crazy sexy in his dark-wash jeans and black cotton shirt, but he definitely didn’t look as fancy as I did. Maybe the dress *was* too much.

“You look lovely,” Emmett said, his eyes wide as he drank me in. “That is the perfect outfit for tonight.”

Really? What did that mean? “What are we doing here?” I asked.

“We’re not doing anything here,” Emmett said. “We’re going to a little off-campus gathering.”

“What type of gathering?” I asked, a spike of anxiety creeping into my stomach.

“You’ll see soon enough,” Emmett said cryptically. “Just trust me. I think it will help you deal with your little… *situation*.”

“Situation?” I asked.

Emmett smiled, then placed his cool hand on the small of my back and led me outside.

“Your vampire heat problem,” he finally answered.

I paused, wondering where we could possibly be going to solve a problem like vampire heat. There was only one solution I could think of, and I wasn’t willing to take that step.

The air outside was crisp, and the moon hung high in the sky, casting a silvery light over everything, including Emmett. I tried not to think about how handsome he looked in the moonlight. I looked around, expecting to see a car.

“How are we getting there?” I asked, once I realized that there was no vehicle in sight.

“We’re vampires,” Emmett said. “We can just go.”

He held out his hand, and I took it. It was so cool that it seemed to penetrate the warmth of my body, but I didn’t consider that for long before there was a *whoosh*, and we launched forward at lightning speed.

I’d expected everything to pass us by in a blur, but instead I remained acutely aware of every blade of grass, every grain of dirt, every stirring leaf as we raced by. It was exhilarating, to say the least. It reminded me of when I’d been a wolf, bounding through the forest at top speed, so in tune with everything around me.

Before long, we arrived at a red brick mansion surrounded by thick woods on the edge of a shimmering, moonlit lake. I realized that I was breathing hard—not from exertion, but from the excitement of warp speed travel. I could get used to that.

“What is this place?” I asked.

“It belongs to a Tottenville alumnus—which you’ll be one day,” Emmett answered, smiling at me.

I figured that if I were ever going to count myself among the alumni of the place, I’d need to do a better job of attending class.

“Have you brought a lot of other students here?” I asked.

Emmett looked down at me, his expression serious. “No, of course not. Most of them are too young.”

*Too young for what?* I wondered. We walked up to the front entrance, and Emmett knocked. A few moments later, the door was opened by a uniformed servant wearing a mask that covered the top part of his face. He gave a slight bow and motioned for us to enter.

I looked around at the grandiosity of the place, wondering what this was all about.

“After you,” Emmett said.

I stepped into the massive foyer, and the door slammed shut behind me. I turned and was shocked and confused to see that Emmett hadn’t followed me inside. *What the hell?* I was turning to go back through the door when the servant handed me a mask made of shiny black feathers.

“Follow me, please,” he said.

Unsure of what else to do, I slipped the mask on. I followed the servant through a grand hallway with grey marble floors and rich wooden walls to a set of ornate double doors made of heavy mahogany and stained glass. The servant threw open the doors with a flourish, and I gasped, completely shocked by what I saw.

It was wall-to-wall sex.

*What. The. Fuck.* Literally.

Oh my god.

Masked men and women slid against each other on red velvet furniture and thick black velvet pillows that covered the floors from wall to wall. Naked women dangled on swings suspended from the rafters, presenting themselves above the mayhem of writhing bodies like beautiful angels of debauchery.

Every sex position imaginable was at play, including plenty I’d never seen before. I stood there frozen, watching men draped over beautiful women whose eyes were closed in ecstasy as they were assailed with savage, yet languid, thrusts.

It took a moment before I realized that there was music playing. I spotted three masked musicians tucked into a corner—one with a violin, one seated at a piano, and another poised behind a drum kit. They played a slow, infectious rhythm that served as the perfect complement to the sight before me.

I gasped again as I realized that the drummer had a woman on her knees between his legs, her head bobbing back and forth as she enjoyed suckling him in her mouth. He never missed a beat, so I figured this wasn’t his first time playing for a crowd like this.

Despite my shock, I felt drawn into it all. As I watched from the threshold, I realized that from the looks of things, the festivities had only just begun. Many of the attendees were still fully dressed, though that didn’t last long as hands snaked over their bodies, unclasping belts, sliding off blouses, bras, and shirts and tossing them to the perimeter of the room where servants picked them up and disappeared with them.

My eyes drifted to three people who’d wasted no time enjoying the spirit of the evening. A woman in a red sequined mask lay prone on the couch with her fangs bared. She moaned loudly as two men took turns burying their faces between her legs, their tongues flicking like pistons against her shimmering wetness.

*Should I be taking notes?!*

Her hands clawed at the cushions, and she spread her legs wider and wider until another woman came and sat on her face and began riding it, throwing her head back in pleasure and taking her breasts in her hands and tugging at her pierced nipples.

Two muscular men in gold-plated masks sat just to the left of them. Each had a woman spread eagle and grinding hard on their faces, while two other women took each of their impressive cocks in their mouths, pumping their heads up and down until the men climaxed loudly and in unison. Their groans of pleasure melted into similar sounds, floating in and out of the beat of the music.

My breath quickened in my throat as heat spread through my body. I couldn’t believe this. Emmett had abandoned me at a full-blown vampire orgy!

**Episode 1344**

We arrived back at the pack house, and I instantly looked around as we filed inside, wondering if Xavier was back, and eager to see Greyson. I found Greyson standing in the living room, and his tense expression melted into a smile when he saw me.

I ran to him, and he pulled me close. I laid my head on his shoulder and inhaled his scent. He smelled familiar, and I exhaled against his chest, contentment washing over me in waves. I knew that I shouldn’t allow myself this pleasure—relishing the feeling of him holding me tightly in his arms—but I couldn’t help myself.

Besides, after what had happened at the library, I needed to be seriously comforted.

“Are you okay?” Greyson asked me. “I tried not to be, but I was worried.”

“I’m okay,” I assured him. “Now.”

I gave him a quick rundown of what had happened and what we’d learned. He seemed impressed that we’d been able to restore the library to its former glory, but a cloud passed over his face when I repeated the riddle that Astrid had spoken, making sure to mention how strangely she’d been acting when she’d said it.

“Cut off the head?” Greyson repeated. “I don’t get it.”

“Neither do we,” I responded. “All I know is that we probably haven’t seen the last of the revenants.”

The thought of seeing them again sent a chill racing down my spine. We had no clue what we were up against, and the warning in Hypatia’s eyes had only confirmed the fact that there was something powerful and dangerous afoot. Something that we would have to devise a plan to stop. It was a lot of pressure.

Rishika came into the living room to join us, her eyes lighting up at the sight of Artemis. She ran to her side, and they embraced. When I saw the look in Artemis’s eyes as she looked down at Rishika, I could hardly believe the way she’d looked before—with that strange look in her eyes, and accompanied by the undead.

I was happy that Artemis had someone to comfort her, too, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was very wrong with my sister, and I had no clear idea of how to get to the bottom of it without agitating her further. It was clear that she had no interest in talking about it.

I took a quick look around the room and noticed that there was a burn mark on the floor, and what looked like streaks of ash on the wall behind Greyson.

“What happened here?” I asked, alarmed.

“We were attacked by a vampire indirectly with a smoke bomb,” Greyson said. “But luckily no one was seriously hurt.”

I hugged him tighter, relief flooding through me. My mind raced as I wondered who would do such a thing. Honestly, with the way things had been between us and the vampires lately, it could have been any one of them.

“When were you going to tell me about that?” I asked, trying to keep the accusation from my voice. I knew that he was dealing with a lot—I didn’t want to stress him out even further.

“I’m telling you now,” he said. “I’m just relieved that you weren’t here.”

His words struck warmth into my stomach, and I was just about to reply when Rishika interrupted us.

“Hey, Zainab just reported that York has calmed down,” she said to Greyson, after giving me a quick nod of acknowledgment.

“What? Calmed down? What happened to York?” I asked. Life had become a non-stop series of shocking events. I wondered if I would ever get used to it, and I hoped that I wouldn’t have to.

“Sage was watching him when he started acting weird—got this crazy look in his eyes and all that. He looked like he was going to attack her,” Greyson said. “She had to get out of there. Whatever he did freaked her out so badly she practically forgot how to open the basement door.”

I flashed Greyson a puzzled look. “I don’t get it. Isn’t Sage a werewolf? She couldn’t hold her own against him?” I decided not to mention that this was the second time Sage had been bested by York.

“Yeah, I know, but I didn’t want to take any chances—not until we figure out what the hell is going on here,” Greyson said. “I’ve got Zainab monitoring York now. It’s not ideal, but it is what it is right now.”

I mulled this over. It was clear that York wasn’t an average human, and that we needed to figure something out beyond keeping him captive in the basement. The next time he broke free, we might not be able to get him back, or someone might get hurt. I didn’t want to see anyone else in the pack harmed.

“Big Mac might have some answers, and maybe Marta could help,” I suggested.

Greyson gave me a thoughtful look. “I hope so, because I’ve had about enough of this,” he said.

I could hear the weariness in his voice, and though I knew he’d probably never admit it, it was clear that he was feeling the pressure of leading the pack through all of the craziness that seemed to dog us at every turn. We couldn’t catch a break, and the worst part was that I knew that none of this was going to go away on its own—we would have to stop it no matter what, before it destroyed us.

My dad rushed into the room and kissed my mom. I was glad to see that through everything, my parents still loved each other. It was one less thing to worry about.

“Hey Cali,” Greyson said, pulling me from my thoughts. “There’s something I need to talk to you about. Maybe we could discuss it outside?” He grabbed my hand to lead me out into the back yard, but we stopped short when Big Mac and Mrs. Smith approached, hand in hand.

“Greyson, you have a serious problem,” Big Mac said. “We need to deal with it now. Where’s Marta?”

Big Mac pulled Greyson away, leaving me to wonder what he’d wanted to talk to me about. Maybe he’d had another one of those dreams.

I thought back to the last dream I’d had; how great it had felt to lose myself in the idea of being with Greyson and having a child of our own. For a moment, I allowed myself to enjoy the prospect without considering the reality: that *due destini* wouldn’t allow for such an outcome without deep tragedy. I pushed that thought out of my head. One problem at a time.

I glanced at Artemis. She looked better than she had in the library, but I was still concerned about her. I remembered the looks that Big Mac kept giving her, as if she were responsible for everything that had happened. It was even more painful to realize that deep down, I knew that Artemis *did* have some connection to the strange events that had been happening lately. But I knew that Artemis would never hurt us if she could help it, and this gave me a shred of comfort.

I yawned and headed upstairs. I was absolutely exhausted from all the travel and couldn’t wait to take a shower, settle into bed, and try to push all my worries out of my mind—even if only for the night. If I was feeling this burned out from all the things we needed to face to bring normalcy back to the pack, I could only imagine what Greyson was going through.

I couldn’t stop wondering what Big Mac was up to with Greyson and Marta. She’d said that he had a big problem, and I couldn’t help but think that Greyson couldn’t handle anything else right now.

I appreciated the fact that Big Mac was determined to get to the root of all these disturbances, but I was worried that she was going to do something that would hurt Artemis, and that I wouldn’t be able to stop it. It was clear that Big Mac hadn’t let go of her suspicions that Artemis was playing a role in all the crazy things that had been happening lately.

I was almost at my room when I noticed a light shining from under Xavier’s door. My heart skipped a beat. Was he back? I raced over and threw open the door. Ava’s head shot up from the bed.

I was in complete shock. “What the hell are you doing here?” I spat.

Ava stood up. “Your mate brought me here,” she said, a smug look on her face.

I was confused, but I tried to keep the surprise out of my voice. “Why would Xavier do that?” I asked.

“Wrong mate,” Ava said.

I was annoyed. I couldn’t trust Ava as far as I could throw her, and right now I wanted to throw her straight out of the window. “Well, it doesn’t matter how you got here, you don’t belong here,” I said. “You have no connection to this pack. Xavier unmated from you—get that through your head,” I said. I could barely contain my anger. It was clear that she couldn’t take a hint.

An annoyed look overtook Ava’s smug expression. I wondered how she still looked so beautiful and glamorous even when she was ticked off. Ava stepped close to me, gritting her teeth as she spoke. “Did it ever occur to you that Xavier lied?”

**Episode 1345**

LOLA

I stood stock still, taking in the sight of naked flesh that stretched as far as the eye could see. Having lived most of my life as a werewolf, I was used to seeing people naked, but not quite like this. It was a cornucopia of sex: head stands, splits, spread eagles, threesomes and foursomes and too-many-to-count-somes. I had never seen so many flexing asses in my entire life, not to mention a wealth of swinging breasts, prominent erections, and ass tattoos.

Seriously, should I have been taking notes? What *was* this place, and why was I here?

Anger rose in my gut, and I clenched my fists. I couldn’t believe that Emmett had done this to me! He’d said that this would help me with my problem, but I couldn’t figure out how the hell coming face to face with unbridled sex-mania would help lessen my *own* raging sex-mania. I thought back to what Ras had said about not trusting Emmett. She’d been so right.

I was getting madder by the second. I turned to storm out, but an attractive vampire blocked my path. She was petite and dressed in a white silk robe cinched at the waist, which was surprising since everyone else was stark naked by now. She offered me a glass of champagne and flashed a seductive smile.

“See anything you like?” she asked. Her voice was deep and sultry. I wondered who she was. “I’m Carolina,” she said, as if reading my thoughts. “I’ve been assigned to mentor younger vampires who are dealing with strong sexual feelings.” Her blue eyes sparkled mischievously from behind her diamond-encrusted white mask.

My cheeks burned with embarrassment, and my throat felt dry and scratchy. I took the champagne and swallowed it down.

“It’s okay.” Carolina smiled. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“Why am I here?” I asked.

“This place offers an opportunity to explore your sexual desires in a safe, non-judgmental way,” Carolina said. When I simply stared at her with a blank look, she added, “Perhaps you’d like to watch for a bit, dip your toe in before diving in?”

I nodded slightly and returned my attention to the mass of moving bodies. Somewhere deep down, I felt a stirring. *Damn it!* There was no way I could give in to this.

Carolina handed me another glass of champagne. “This will help release you from your inhibitions,” she said.

I took the drink and gulped it down—though I had no plans to lose my inhibitions so much that I would join in on the festivities.

“Would you like a tour?” Carolina asked.

I followed her hesitantly, my legs feeling like Jell-O. Clearly that hadn’t just been champagne. I could feel my lust building. All these people having sex everywhere were really starting to turn me on.

I forced myself to think of Jay. *Jay. Jay. Jay. Jay.* Thoughts of his naked body raced through my head, sending my yearning into a fever pitch. I remembered the sounds he made when we made love, how attentive he was, how he always made sure I was satisfied before all else… I missed him, and thinking about him was only making things worse.

I felt like I’d consumed multiple bottles of champagne instead of just one glass. Carolina suddenly excused herself and disappeared behind a door. I continued to take in my surroundings, still in disbelief at the scale of this event.

I watched as more and more people poured in through the double doors, wasting no time in peeling away their clothes and joining the press of bodies that grew by the minute and covered every pillow and piece of furniture in the room.

A tall blonde woman wearing nothing but a red leather corset had brought a whip, and she cracked it in the air, no doubt preparing to use it on a man who was bent over a chair, his ass already crisscrossed with welts. A group of vampires stood by, cheering her on, splashes of blood sloshing out of their champagne flutes. I turned away from the scene, realizing that these people meant business. Why would Emmett have thought that this place was my speed? I hadn’t even seen a whip in real life before.

I noticed that the woman who’d been pleasuring the drummer had moved on to the violinist, and like the drummer he continued to play his violin with expertise as the woman sucked with fervor, jerking his body back and forth in time with the music. I wondered if she was with the band. Maybe this was normal for them. Anything seemed possible in this place.

My ears took in the various moans, sighs, and screams of pleasure that accompanied the music, which had taken on a darker, more drum-heavy rhythm. I inhaled the sweet fragrance of the perfumed air, mixed with the earthy scent of sex and pheromones in overdrive.

*Good lord.*

I could feel the blood flowing and the hearts pounding, and I even caught sight of a few people in the throes of climax, their bodies vibrating and their eyes rolled to the whites. The air was so thick with desire you could have cut it with a knife.

Fangs flashed in the candlelight, and I watched as a group of women spilled dollops of blood all over each other only to have it licked off their flesh like it was whipped cream. I turned away from it all as I felt myself losing control.

I stumbled out onto a balcony, relieved to feel the cool bite of fresh air that sent sensuous vibrations up my body. *What’s happening to me?* I felt like I was losing my mind. I was completely overcome with pleasure and longing and pure horniness. I only hoped that I wouldn’t pass out from it like I had before, when Emmett had decided to make things worse with his ice trick.

I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths. When I opened them, I saw Jay coming toward me. I had to be imagining it—what was he doing here? And why was he dressed like a firefighter? A shirtless firefighter, with bright red suspenders. He looked *hot*.

He reached out and pulled me to him, pressing his chest against me. “You can’t contain this heat,” he grunted.

He pressed a trail of kisses down my neck all the way to my breasts then back up again. He kissed me softly on the lips as his hands ran over the lace of my dress. He squeezed my ass and pinned me against the railing.

I suddenly wanted him to take me back inside and have him go down on me right there in front of everyone. This thought surprised me, and I remembered that the champagne that I’d slammed down without a thought was probably making me feel this way: wild and adventurous and ravenous.

I threw my head back, losing myself in the feel of his hardness against my thigh. I reached down to touch it and started stroking it through his thick fireman pants.

“Jay, you’re so big!” I breathed against his cheek.

“Big enough to set you on fire,” he said. He picked me up, and I wrapped my legs around him, my dress rising to expose my bare ass to the wind that swirled around us. “Are you ready to burn?” he asked. Something about what he said pulled me out of the moment, and my eyes went wide. This wasn’t real!

I tried to catch my breath as my brain worked overtime to make sense of what was happening. My knees felt even weaker than before as I wavered on my feet. I shook my head and Firefighter Jay sort of disappeared, and then flickered before me with every blink. I swayed against the balcony railing and held onto it for dear life.

I couldn’t handle this right now!

I headed back inside, wondering where the bathroom was in this place and hoping there wasn’t a bunch of sex happening in there, too. I spotted Carolina coming toward me again, another glass of champagne in her hand. Oh no—I did not want any more of that devil’s juice! I had to avoid her. Mentor or not, she was up to no good. I took a frantic look around and spotted a door. I opened it and ducked inside.

The room was dark and cramped—it must have been a pantry. I could hear bottles clinking nearby, and I hoped that no one had seen me go inside. I just needed a moment to myself to gather my thoughts. This was turning out to be a bad idea. All I could think about was how much I wanted the real Jay—*not* some weird fantasy Jay who made creepy fireman puns.

The door flew open, and I gasped. There was nowhere to run. It was Emmett, and we were face to face, not an inch of space between us. I could still feel the drug coursing through me, making my pulse thunder with lust as I stared directly at Emmett’s full lips.

**Episode 1346**

I didn’t believe Ava for one minute. She always lied. However, I couldn’t help but wonder if there was a seed of truth in her words—and Xavier wasn’t exactly here to deny it. Xavier didn’t have the best track record when it came to telling me things, but he always seemed sincere. Conversely, Ava had done nothing but weave entire webs of confusion and deceit from the moment she’d returned from the dead, and I wasn’t sure that she even knew the meaning of sincerity.

No, I had to trust Xavier, especially when it came to pitting his word against Ava’s.

“You’re lying. Xavier told me that he unmated from you, and I believe him,” I said.

There was no way that he would have lied to me about that— not when the stakes were so high and it could be so easily disproven.

Ava shrugged. “Well, if the mate bond had broken, I would have felt it.”

She looked pleased with herself, and I knew that she thought she’d successfully sowed doubt in my mind. Every time I spoke to her, I was more certain that she was the type who’d tricked plenty of people simply because she was so amazing to look at.

Too bad that wouldn’t work on me.

Still, I mulled over what she’d said. I remembered that Xavier had said that he’d done it, but he hadn’t mentioned anything about how it had felt. Did breaking a mate bond hurt? Would he have even told me if it did? He wasn’t the type to complain, and he was way too macho to admit that breaking the bond had caused him any sort of pain. Surely breaking such a deep connection wasn’t easy…

But Xavier knew a lot more about this world than I did. I had to trust him.

I did.

Either way, I wasn’t about to start debating with this jerk. She certainly didn’t deserve any of my time or consideration, and there was no way I was going to expose her to even the smallest crack in my relationship with Xavier. I didn’t need to know her well to know she would do anything to get Xavier back. She could try as much as she wanted to, but he was mine.

I wasn’t going to give her the satisfaction of a reaction.

Xavier breaking their bond probably hurt her, but all that told me was he was absolutely done with her. That was all I really needed to know.

“I’m here because Greyson knows what’s best for the pack,” Ava said.

The more she spoke, the less I believed her. I held up my hand, gearing up to use my Fae powers again to blast her to smithereens, but then she kept talking.

“Listen, Cali, I’m here to help. Iñigo wants me to help him. If I’m out there, he’ll find me, and he’ll use me against all of you. So I either stay here where I’m safe, or I get roped into Iñigo’s evil plans—and not by choice,” Ava said. “Which would you prefer?”

I would prefer that she’d never existed. I was pissed. I needed to talk to Greyson about this. I hated Ava’s guts after what she’d done to both Greyson and Xavier, and I didn’t want her anywhere near the pack.

I turned away from Ava, too disgusted to continue talking with her. I sure as shit didn’t want to be in the same room with her. I stormed downstairs into the kitchen to confront Greyson and was surprised to find half the pack gathered there. The air in the room was tense. I wondered why no one had come to tell me we were having a house meeting. Everyone turned to look at me when I came in, and their expressions were a mixed bag.

Violet looked absolutely terrified. Jay looked calm but primed to react at any second. Marta wasn’t making eye contact with anyone, and Artemis, Mrs. Smith, my mother, Torin, and Astrid had neutral expressions on their faces. I went to stand across from Greyson, who watched me with a concerned look on his face.

“Oh good, you’ve decided to join us,” Big Mac exclaimed when she saw me. “We were just discussing our discoveries from the library.”

She continued her account of what we’d encountered: the destruction, the creatures, and even the way Artemis had taken down the threat.

I’d been there, so I tuned Big Mac out. There was something else on my mind. I shot an angry look at Greyson.

*What’s wrong?* he asked me through our mind link.

*Ava!* I shot back. *You brought her back here?*

Greyson winced slightly. *That’s what I wanted to talk to you about earlier. I’m sorry, but there is a real,* sensible *explanation for all of it. Just let me explain—*

Suddenly the tone of Big Mac’s voice changed, and Greyson and I could tell that she was saying something important and that we both needed to pay attention.

“I found a tracking spell in the book we got from the library,” she said. “It can lead us to the source—the power that is controlling the revenants.” Big Mac turned to Marta. “Which is why we need your help.”

Not only did Marta look unconvinced, she also looked horrified at the suggestion. “I’m not sure that I can,” she said softly. “I was trapped in that house for so long… I’ve never tried to do anything so… *big* with my abilities before.”

Even as Marta said this, I got the feeling that she was unaware of the bounds of her power. I could relate. I still wasn’t sure of all that I was capable of, but I had a feeling that Marta had more firepower than she thought.

Artemis stood up. “Maybe we should slow down,” she said. “Do we really want to mess with this thing? The Orb has already done so much damage—what if we do something to anger it or make things worse?”

“Well, if the portals are shut, things getting worse is relative,” Torin chimed in.

Mutters of agreement whipped around the kitchen.

“We can’t do anything right away, anyway. I’m going to have to ask Nneka to help, too,” Big Mac said, before giving everyone a terse goodbye and leaving.

Everyone looked at each other, talking among themselves.

“Does that mean I can go?” Marta asked. She seemed the most shaken up out of everyone, and I felt sorry for her. She’d joined us only to get wrapped up in the layers of drama that followed us at every turn. Now Big Mac was asking her to get tangled up with something as powerful and dark as the source of the revenants.

“For now,” Greyson said to Marta. “I guess this meeting is over.”

Everyone filed out of the room. I started to follow Greyson, wanting to get to the bottom of this Ava stuff. I was afraid that his explanation wasn’t going to be enough to warrant bringing that snake back into our house. But Artemis grabbed my arm before I could catch up with him.

“I really don’t like this,” she said. “The Orb is too dangerous. We’re playing with fire.”

Artemis’s reluctance was surprising; before, she’d been so gung-ho about destroying the Orb. I wondered what exactly had changed between then and now—so much had happened since then, especially to Artemis.

“I’m really scared, which, I’ll be honest, is rare for me. You don’t understand how it felt to be with that thing. It was like living in a nightmare,” Artemis said, a faraway look in her eyes.

I thought back to when we’d found her in the field. She’d seemed so confused, tired, spooked… I still had no clue what had actually happened then, and Artemis hadn’t been able to clear things up much—either by choice or because she really couldn’t remember.

“Don’t worry, we’ll figure it out together. You’re not alone. You have us now, and we’re not going anywhere,” I said.

I felt her pain. There’d been so much uncertainty recently that I could relate to the fear, to wanting to retain the last shreds of safety and control that we had. The Orb was dangerous, that was for sure, and it was unpredictable. How could we be sure that we would stop it this time? That it wasn’t too powerful to overcome?

“Thank you, Cali,” Artemis said. “I’m sorry that I’m causing all of this trouble.”

“What do you mean? This isn’t your fault, Artemis,” I said.

I flashed back to those frightening moments in the library, remembering what Artemis had said. *She’s mine!* Artemis’s words played back in my mind, and I could see again the strange look on her face as she’d said them. I needed to figure out what was going on before someone like Big Mac jumped the gun with something…

I pulled Artemis aside, afraid to ask the question, and even more afraid of what Artemis’s answer might be. “Artemis, what really happened in the library with that creature?”

**Episode 1347**

MARTA

There was nothing I wanted more than to be alone. I curled up in bed, closed my eyes, and let out a long breath. I was exhausted, overwhelmed, and totally maxed out—especially now that the fate of the world was apparently on my shoulders. I didn’t even know what kind of magic Big Mac was talking about. All I knew was that she was overestimating my powers.

I hadn’t dealt much with witches and spells. My expertise—and I didn’t even think of myself as an expert in much of anything—was dealing with ghosts, poltergeists, and the occasional annoying vampire. What more could a medium do than have a séance and talk to the dead?

As if on cue, Lilac appeared. “You’d better appreciate how good I’ve been. Have you noticed how I’m not bugging you with my every thought?” He paused. “What’s wrong? You’re looking kinda down.”

I shot him a look. “I have reasons to look down,” I said.

“Maybe it’s time we reverse things. Maybe you can do the talking, and I can do the listening?” he suggested. He sounded way too excited for my liking, and I truly doubted that he could keep his mouth shut long enough to listen to anyone.

I rolled my eyes. “Oh man, you’re not going to bring up couples therapy again, are you?” I moaned.

Lilac grimaced. “No. But I’m not really going anywhere, and I’m kind of tired of talking to myself.” He started whistling some annoying melody, off key of course, until I finally agreed to talk. Anything to stop the torture.

“The truth is, after what happened with Bert, I’m uncomfortable talking about my feelings with anyone—especially ghosts,” I said.

Lilac gave me a sympathetic look, and all I could think about was how happy I was that he’d stopped whistling. It was like “99 Bottles of Beer” all over again, and I’d take death over hearing that song ever again in life.

“I feel like people are always using me,” I continued. “Bert used me—granted, he was a poltergeist—but he used me all the same. Violet is using me to talk to you, and vice versa. And now Big Mac has set her sights on me and, you guessed it, she wants to use me, too. I’m tired of being used,” I said. “It never stops.”

I’d lost sight of who I was outside of constantly serving as a bridge for people to use to communicate with the dead.

What was expected of the average medium? Not this. Not bringing ghosts back to the world of the living, not using tracking spells to find powerful beings that controlled the dead. I was in way over my head, and I was tired of feeling this way.

Maybe I could leave this werewolf pack house and go be one of those mediums who simply scammed people out of their money. All they had to do was mention the first letter of their deceased loved one’s name, or “pass on” some sentimental message that they’d made up on the fly to make the person feel better. That trick really took the cake.

Or better yet, I could be one of those mediums who spouted general bits of information that could be true of anyone. The best part was, they got to makes all kinds of guesses before they even got it right—if they got it right at all!

All that bullshitting, and the money just rolled in. Maybe that would be all I was good for. Maybe.

“Anyway,” I continued, “I’m tired of being used, and even more scared of what Big Mac’s tracking spell thing could do. And I’m tired of feeling like no one listens to me.”

Lilac got up and put a hand on my shoulder. His touch was so gentle that it felt like air. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I totally get it. I was so young that no one in the pack ever took me seriously.”

I looked at him. He had a wistful smile on his face, and his gaze was far away, like he was remembering the pain of being a perpetual non-factor. I felt a little better that someone understood what I was going through. Lilac reached down and brushed a tear from my face. I hadn’t even realized that I was crying. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d cried.

We locked eyes for a beat. For a moment, I saw him not as a ghost, but as he must have been when he was alive. So vibrant and energetic. Maybe his annoying songs had been charming to his friends. Maybe he hadn’t even known any of those awful mind-raking songs when he was alive. That part really intrigued me.

He smiled at me, and again I was taken aback by how attractive he was… or used to be. Still was? I mean he was right in front of me, wasn’t he? I blinked and pushed the thought away. I was losing it. First, I was crying all over the place, and now I was thinking that a ghost was cute. Maybe being locked away in that house for so long really had messed with my mind if I was crushing on a ghost.

Where could things even go between us?

I recalled how his hand had felt on my shoulder—like almost nothing at all. I was sure that it would feel the same if we kissed… or decided to do other things. Not to mention that if I caught sight of our reflection during a make out session, I’d literally look like I was making out with myself, like a teenager practicing in the mirror.

Or what if someone walked in on us while we were in bed? I’d look like I was having some kind of episode. They’d think I was engaged in some sort of super involved brand of masturbation. I tittered at the thought. No way. I needed to get out more.

There was a knock on the door, and Artemis popped her head in. She had a cup of tea in her hand that she held out to me as I opened the door wider.

“How are you doing?” she asked. She had an unreadable expression on her face.

I wiped the remaining tear from my cheek. “Fine?” I replied.

I didn’t really know Artemis, and I wasn’t super keen on talking to her right now. After all, I’d seen Death following her—though it had been more of a feeling rather than an actual presence. It was like the Grim Reaper or something. There was just this dark, intense feeling that I’d gotten the first time I’d laid eyes on her.

Death was never a good thing in my book. Ever. That was one thing that wasn’t open to interpretation. Some people tried to say that Death signified change, nothing more. In that view, it was almost positive.

But in my experience, if Death was on your heels, then chances were that death was *literally* on your heels, and nothing good would come of it.

Even now, I still felt something weird from Artemis. Maybe it was how Big Mac had said that we were able to sense dark magic the way we had with Arlo’s body? Was there dark magic in Artemis?

I hovered near the door and took a quick glance back at Lilac.

“Was there something you needed?” I asked Artemis. I took the tea, knowing that there was no way I was going to drink it. I didn’t trust Artemis at all.

“Yeah, what is she doing?” Lilac said, knowing Artemis couldn’t hear him. “I’ve never seen her make tea.”

I glanced at him, giving him a look. It was hard to listen to two conversations—one of which only I could hear.

“Oh, I just wanted to check in on you, make sure you were feeling okay after being bombarded in the kitchen. You looked pretty stressed out,” she said.

She reached out and ran a hand over my hair. There was a sharp, scary look in her eyes. A bad feeling dropped into the pit of my stomach. I leaned away from her touch and tried to close the door.

“Well, thanks for stopping by, Artemis, but I’m fine,” I said. “Thanks for the tea.”

I clicked the door shut and breathed a sigh of relief. She was really creeping me out. Her eyes had looked strange—different than they’d looked in the kitchen, for sure. I turned and walked back to place the cup of tea on my bedside table. I’d pour it down the drain as soon as I was sure that she was gone. I didn’t need to drink it, but I didn’t have to be rude either.

I tried to calm down and push the worry out of my stomach. I turned around again and was shocked to see that Artemis was standing right behind me.

Then I gasped in shock as Artemis lunged at me. She caught me completely off-guard, and I couldn’t stop her as she wrapped her hands around my throat and started choking me.

**Episode 1348**

By now, I knew that there was something seriously wrong with my sister. After my conversation with her about the library monster, whatever *that* had been, I headed off to find Mom in her room. Artemis said she hadn’t felt the dark magic she’d described earlier—the nightmare—so I didn’t push further. I didn’t want to overwhelm her or make her think something was wrong when maybe there wasn’t.

But something still felt off. I just didn’t know what.

I found Mom sitting on the bed with a book open. “Hey Mom? I wanted to talk…”

Mom sighed, rubbing her temples. “Yes?” she said. “Is everything all right, Cali?”

“Artemis,” I said. “She’s being so… evasive. And even more cryptic than usual. She won’t open up to me.”

“This has been going on for a while, but I can’t figure out a way to make her open up to me either,” Mom replied. “Did she tell you anything about what happened in the library?”

I hesitated. How could I answer that? Artemis hadn’t really given me a satisfactory explanation of how she was able to control the creatures. That whole thing was so fucking creepy, and Artemis was just beating around the bush.

My mother looked at me worriedly, and I instantly regretted coming to speak with her. I didn’t want to concern her like this. I had to speak with Artemis again, try to find out what was really going on, and then I would bring up the issue again to my mother. All three of us would be able to speak about this, together as a family. Maybe Dad would be able to chime in as well, and also make us some waffles.

*Am I just indulging myself with some wistful thinking about how things will turn out?* I wondered. I was determined to make this best-case scenario a reality, though.

I realized that bringing up unfounded suspicions to my mother right now wouldn’t work out in the long run. Not while Big Mac and some of the others continued to suspect that Artemis was somehow involved with dark magic. There was no telling what they would do. Especially Big Mac.

*All I need to fix this is just a little more time*, I thought. *That’s all!*

Talk about being optimistic. Or in denial.

*Am I a fool for believing Artemis?* I wondered, but I didn’t dare give myself an answer.

I cleared my throat while my mother’s attentive, scrutinizing gaze roved all over my face. “Artemis wasn’t sure what happened back at the library. There was a lot of stuff going on…” I trailed off. “I think we’re all a little rattled.”

Mom pressed her lips together. “Sooner rather than later, Artemis will have to give us some answers, Cali. We can’t keep going like this. If she weren’t my kid, I’d lock her up in a room until she offered up some reasonable explanations.”

I blinked in alarm. My mother was always so mellow, but I knew there was another side to her. She wasn’t a very patient person, which probably stemmed from the fact that she could snap her fingers and make flowers bloom. Her power was big on instant gratification. Waiting was her least favorite thing in the world.

“I understand,” I said awkwardly. Because I had no idea what else to say.

Mom patted my shoulder. “You should get some rest. We can deal with Artemis in the morning.” She pulled me in for a hug, and I let myself be engulfed by her comfort and warmth. “I’m really proud of you, you know,” Mom said in my ear. “It’s amazing how protective you are of Artemis.”

“She’s my sister,” I whispered. There was a lump in my throat.

Mom faced me and smiled. She was beautiful. “I never imagined that I’d get the opportunity to be with both of my daughters.” Her eyes were glistening. “I love you both so much. I feel truly blessed right now, despite all the stress.”

Mom’s words were heartwarming but also heartbreaking.

Because I knew she’d only get even more anxious when it came to Artemis, and whatever it was that my sister was hiding.

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After returning to my room, I weighed my options. I wanted to talk to Artemis again, but perhaps it would be too soon. I didn’t want to pressure her too much. She seemed so vulnerable, but at the same time closed up. And I definitely didn’t want to run into Big Mac—not when there were so many unanswered questions about Artemis.

I wasn’t even in the mood to talk to freaking Greyson. Why would he have brought Ava back? *Ugh!* I resented her, and her perfect shiny hair. Also, how come she never broke out? All that werewolf dirt on her face, and she never got a single pimple!

How ANNOYING.

Why was I even thinking about Ava, though? I should’ve been ignoring her… But did Xavier know she was here?

*Either way, I really miss him*, I thought to myself, sighing.

I hoped that he was doing okay, but the only way to know for sure was to call him. I hesitated for a beat—I didn’t want to give him false hope about us—but whatever. I wasn’t calling as his girlfriend. I was calling as his… mate?

*Right. That’s better.* I scoffed at myself as I dialed.

He picked up on the first ring.

“Hello?” His husky voice sent a chill down my spine, and a calmness swept over me. He could ground me like no one else. Even though I’d broken up with him, I still couldn’t stop thinking about being around him. About touching him.

“How are you doing?” I asked. What I really wanted to say was, *OH MY GOD, come back here and love me! I MISS YOU!*

But I stopped myself, obviously.

“I’m on my way to Spokane,” he replied. “To follow a lead.”

“Oh, great,” I grumbled. “That sounds not dangerous at all.”

Xavier chuckled as someone muttered something in the background.

I was distracted.

“Wait, is that Kira?” Before Xavier could reply, I barreled through. “Because I have a question for her! I want to know if she, being a witch and all, has any knowledge of how to protect Artemis from dark magic?”

Xavier paused. “Why don’t you ask Big Mac about that?”

I groaned. “Because I don’t want to. Big Mac seems to have a thing against Artemis, and I don’t want to start her on a whole tirade again. My sister is a saint—everyone knows that!”

Xavier fell silent.

“I can feel you judging me,” I told him. “I know she was a bounty hunter, but so are you!” He chuckled again, and it made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside, despite all the bad stuff happening around me.

“I think you should take it easy,” Xavier said. “Don’t take it personally, either—Big Mac has a thing against everyone.”

I snorted. Xavier had a point, but still.

“Can’t you ask Kira my question, though?” I sounded a little whiny, and that did the trick. Xavier gave a long-suffering sigh.

“Ask away yourself,” he said. “You’re on speakerphone.”

“Hello?” I said. “Hi Kira, its Cali!”

The witch’s tone was deadpan. “Yeah. I gathered it was you when Xavier started wagging his tail.”

Xavier grumbled something about “the fucking disrespect” in the background, and I wanted to laugh but also cringe. I needed to stay focused. I repeated the question, and Kira replied right away.

“There’s no guaranteed way to protect someone from dark magic. Especially if dark magic has already been drawn to your sister,” Kira said seriously. “It can be difficult—even dangerous—to try to repel it.”

I groaned in exasperation. “There must be *something*.”

“In theory, there’s a charm you could try. I’ll have Xavier text you the recipe. But I can’t guarantee anything.”

Still, Kira’s words gave me hope. “Thanks so much!”

Xavier came back on the phone. “Happy now?”

I wondered for a moment if I should tell him about Ava—question him about the un-mating thing. But before I could decide, Xavier spoke up again. “I promise I’m coming back soon. Don’t forget that. I miss you too much to stay away for long.”

The way Xavier said that, all the longing in his voice, made me sniffle. I hated being away from him as well. I missed kissing him, seeing him smile.

*I miss—*

There was a knock on my door, cutting off my thoughts.

Greyson poked his head in. “We need to talk,” he told me.

At the same time, Xavier said, “I love you.”

*Oh, shit.*

I cleared my throat loudly and told Xavier, “What? I can’t hear you. You’re breaking up… I’ll call you later!”

I hung up and felt my cheeks heat as I tossed the phone down onto my bed. When I turned to face Greyson, he was eyeing me suspiciously.

“Who was that?” he asked.

I wasn’t about to lie. Even if it was awkward.

“Xavier. Just checking in. He’s on his way to Spokane,” I said. “Anyway, what’s up?”

Thankfully, Greyson didn’t press the issue. He took a deep breath and said, “I just wanted to explain why I brought Ava here. I know that it’s upsetting to you, but—”

“I already talked to Ava,” I said seriously.

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “Oh. I’d hoped to talk to you first. I just wanted to let you know that I brought her here to keep an eye on her. I know that we can’t trust her. That much is obvious.”

I eyed Greyson carefully. “Did you think of what Xavier is going to do when he sees her?”

Greyson opened his mouth to reply when a blood-curling scream made us both jump.

“Who was that?!” I asked, alarmed.

His eyes widened as he looked over his shoulder. “That sounded like Marta.”

Without a word, we raced out of the room.

**Episode 1349**

MARTA

Artemis was choking me.

This wasn’t a dream. It wasn’t a vision from a ghost, either. This was someone I knew, in real life, *choking me*. She wanted to kill me. I’d survived so many things—goodness gracious, so many horrible things—and now someone who was supposed to be on the same team as me was about to murder me.

It was a pretty sad ending, actually.

A nightmarish one.

The look in Artemis’s eyes was terrifying—vacant but burning, full of hatred. I was convinced that she was pure evil, that she was no longer herself. I didn’t know her that well, but I had never believed before this very moment that a switch could flip inside her and unleash this kind of violence toward someone who’d never posed a threat to her.

I had never been more afraid in my entire life—even while being held hostage by Bert, or confronted by vampires. This was on a whole other level, because Artemis looked different to her usual self. It looked like her soul had been eaten up by a darkness that she was now going to unleash on me.

She wanted to destroy me.

*Why?*

*Why is this happening*?

I got no answer. I couldn’t even ask to find out.

Artemis’s grip was extremely strong. Powerful in a way that completely barred me from moving. I tried to break away, but I was no match for a Fae bounty hunter. I was just a medium—not a fighter. But I couldn’t just go like this; I *refused* to. In fact, behind all my fear, it made me furious to think that I’d spent decades locked up inside Bert’s mansion just to have my life end so miserably.

Feeling the air being squeezed out of my windpipe, I gathered all my strength and kicked Artemis. She was so surprised by the hit that she gasped for a brief moment. But then she bared her teeth at me, clearly infuriated by my defiance, and slammed me to the floor, making my bones rattle.

I was struggling to breathe. Artemis’s hands were tight and getting tighter around my throat, and I realized that if I didn’t do something, I was going to pass out. And then Artemis would kill me. I needed some kind of advantage…

And the only thing I had over Artemis was my mediumship.

Could I get help from the spirit world?

A lot of good *talking* to a ghost was going to do me right now.

I was starting to feel dizzy. Was I already dying? If I did die, would anyone even care? And what would happen to Lilac then? Goodness, would he die again? That didn’t seem fair. Also, where was that little jerk, now that I needed him? He’d chosen to hang out with me in the bathroom as I took a shower, but now he was nowhere to be seen.

The air was being choked out of me, and black spots were starting to frame my vision. The pain in my lungs was making everything hurt, and slowly, I…

I saw a wolf behind Artemis.

The wolf howled and lunged at my attacker, jumping on Artemis from behind.

*Thank god!*

Finally, Artemis released her grip on my neck. I was free! I rolled away, gasping for air. I was shaking all over, my chest, my throat, and my lungs burning. Artemis stumbled backward as she fought the massive wolf, and I saw pure panic in her features. Every inch of me was aching, and my head felt heavy—so heavy that for a moment I wondered if I was hallucinating.

And then, I realized that this wasn’t just a big wolf.

Of course it wasn’t.

It was a *werewolf*.

And not just any werewolf, it was… Lilac?

*Lilac!*

He was here in his werewolf form, trying to protect me.

Suddenly, I felt like crying, overwhelmed with gratitude. My excitement, though, was dampened when I realized that he was probably only trying to save me because I was his way of speaking to his sister. Not because he truly cared about me as a person. But before I could get too bitter, I recalled that moment between us earlier…

“*Let me go*!” Artemis said in what sounded like a roar, cutting off my thoughts.

She couldn’t throw off Lilac easily—he was stronger than her, but she was a crafty fighter. She slammed deliberately into the wall, shoving Lilac against it as he clawed at her back. The move stunned the wolf. Artemis spun around quickly and grabbed him by the throat.

In a hissing, chilling voice that sent shivers down my spine, she demanded, “*What are you?*”

Now that I could breathe again, my mind started working to process Artemis’s attack. This didn’t make any sense—*how* could Artemis physically interact with Lilac’s ghost? Not even Violet had been able to do that, and she was his twin sister. What was going on with Artemis? What dark magic was at work here?

Was Artemis even herself right now?

Her voice sounded entirely foreign.

“Never mind,” Artemis said, in that same strange, ominous tone. “I’m going to get rid of you anyway.”

With those threatening words, Artemis started to choke Lilac.

The terror within me returned, but I wasn’t about to sit by and watch this happen. I couldn’t fail Lilac. No matter what, no matter his motive, he had tried to save me, and I had to do something.

Gritting my teeth, I got to my feet. “Let him go!” I screamed at Artemis.

My scream distracted her. Artemis turned her vacant eyes on me, and a huge shudder washed over me. Looking into her eyes was like looking into hell itself.

I couldn’t let her win.

Without thinking—and running on adrenaline, fear, and hope—I ran into Artemis, screaming and knocking both her and Lilac into a heap on the floor. I felt like a raging bull, and that was the only feeling that kept me sane. That anger.

My victory was short-lived, though.

Artemis threw Lilac off as if he weighed nothing, as if her powers had grown in the last few seconds. Before I could hit her, or at least try to, she went after me. She grabbed me by the hair as I fought against her, screeching and punching at her chest, but nothing worked.

Artemis took my throat in a death grip, slamming me to the floor. At the same time, she pressed down on me as if she wanted to make me vanish. It felt like she was trying to break my neck, to reach inside me and crush me.

I was trying to struggle, but I felt too weak now. My eyes were burning. The sight of Artemis became a blur of dark magic and rage. I didn’t understand what was wrong with her, why this was happening to her, but I knew what I felt. I knew the truth.

Either way, I felt like this was it.

The death following Artemis must have been intended for me.

Ironic, huh?

I didn’t want to give in, I didn’t want to die, but it was hard to stop what seemed like the inevitable…

“No!” someone said then. I recognized the voice. It was Lilac. “Marta, don’t give up! Marta, stay with me!”

I was trying to focus on his voice, trying to keep my eyes open, but I felt weaker by the second. My vision was fading to black, and I had a fleeting thought… This was death.

It had come for me.

*I’m going to die.*

Suddenly, there was a flash of brilliant white light.

When I opened my eyes, I realized that the light was emanating from my hands. It was lighting up the room, which was now filled with the spirits of all kinds of supernaturals.

I was certain that they were here to help me.

I was certain that they were here to make sure I got out of this alive.

Artemis, that dark magic and evil in her face, was obviously stunned. She turned around to look at all the spirits and eased her grip. And then, out of the blue, there was a massive sound that reminded me of a tornado, and Artemis started shivering before she collapsed to the floor.

The light was gone.

The spirits had evaporated.

All but Lilac.

He stared at me, wide-eyed, his face twisted in surprise. “You’re alive.”

My throat was burning from Artemis’s assault, but Lilac sounded so relieved that I couldn’t help but let out a dubious chuckle. Both of us stared at Artemis, lying on the floor, unconscious.

“What the hell is wrong with her?” Lilac choked out. “That was—”

The door burst open.

“Oh my god!” Cali exclaimed, rushing toward her sister.

Greyson seemed equally surprised as he looked between Artemis and me. Before he could speak, though, Cali turned and glared at me.

“What did you *do*?” she demanded.

**Episode 1350**

LOLA

I was transfixed by the sight of Emmett’s lips. I couldn’t stop thinking about what it would feel like to kiss him, bite him, taste him… All I had to do was give in to the desire that had overpowered my entire body.

But was it really *desire*?

Was it true desire, or had it been fueled by that vampire drink?

And if it were true desire, did that make me a horrible person? I was a horrible person, wasn’t I? I was a cheater who—

“I hate this,” I choked out, clutching my head. It was pounding. I felt like crying. I flinched back from Emmett, because I couldn’t deal with this. “*Why do I have to feel this way?*”

I wasn’t sure if I said the words out loud or not. Either way, Emmett was peering at me with a frown on his face.

“Maybe this excursion was a mistake,” he said. “You’re not ready to confront all the aspects of being a vampire.”

His condescending tone made my skin crawl. A voice in the back of my mind said, *Don’t trust him. This isn’t right. None of this is right.* That voice sounded a lot like Ras.

Emmett went on. “You’re obviously still very much attached to the idea of being a werewolf.”

I bit the inside of my cheek, rubbing my head. And then, I exploded. “I am attached! I shouldn’t be here, watching people doing all this stuff. Jay is still my mate, and I love him!”

Emmett had the nerve to snort. “Right.”

I shoved him. “You don’t understand. You’ll never understand what it’s like, you ungrateful deadhead!”

Emmett stared at me with wide eyes before he burst out laughing. It was so unexpected that I flinched back.

“You really are something.” He leaned closer, all the derision from earlier evaporating. “Let’s get you back to the school, so you can get some rest.”

He put an arm around my shoulders, leading me out. The second he touched me, the second his cool skin came into contact with mine, I was suddenly hit by the feeling that I *didn’t* want this to end. I wanted to stay here with him… But I also didn’t.

I DIDN’T WANT TO BE HERE!

*Regardless, he needs to keep touching me…*

\*\*\*\*

By the time we got back to the school, I’d changed my mind about this whole outing a million times. I shivered every time I thought about Jay, but at the same time, every time I looked at Emmett, my brain felt murky. But overall, my head was starting to feel clearer—thank god.

In the end, what I wanted the most was to go to my room and forget that this night had ever happened.

I got out of the car without giving Emmett a single glance and headed toward the entrance of the school.

He blocked my way. “You can’t just walk in,” he said, clearly amused.

“Why not?” I demanded.

“It’s against school policy to have students coming and going in the middle of the night. You need to sneak in.” He pointed to the upstairs window. “Can you manage that?”

Oh, wow. He had A LOT of fucking nerve. He was the one who invited me to that godforsaken party and *now* he tells me he wasn’t even supposed to?!

“You want me to sneak back into my own room? *Seriously?*” I asked, glaring at him. This was basically him admitting that what we’d just done was wrong. That what *he* had done was wrong. I’d barely been here a week, and I was already in so much trouble.

“Irma can be a bit of a stickler for rules sometimes—it’s best to keep her blissfully ignorant,” he said casually.

I rolled my eyes. “Fine.”

There was a brief awkward silence, and then Emmett said, “Well. I should be going too.”

I gaped at him. “Wait, aren’t you going to sneak in as well?”

He shrugged. “I don’t have to. I’m a professor.”

Right. He was a professor who’d decided it was a great idea to take his student to an orgy. What an amazing, professional guy!

I kept glaring at Emmett, and he cleared his throat. “Okay, then. Goodnight!”

He sauntered off. I was so annoyed at him. He was just so shady. At this point, I hated myself, but I was also proud that I hadn’t given in to the attraction I felt toward him.

I still couldn’t believe that my professor had brought me to a fucking *orgy*. What kind of impression was *that* supposed to leave me with? Grumbling to myself, I turned around toward my room, but then I saw a window open.

Jacqueline was there, looking down at me.

*Oh, shit… Can she see me?*

I was feeling extremely self-conscious. How much had she seen? She smirked at me, so I assumed it must have been enough. She must have seen Emmett and me out here. In the dark. Then the brat turned away, and all I could think about was how bad this looked.

I couldn’t help but remember Jacqueline’s threat about seeing “*Professor Laurence.*”

I wanted to call after her, to gesture for her to come down and talk to me. But what was I supposed to say to defend myself? “Oh yeah, the professor took me to an orgy”?

No matter how you framed this situation, it looked really fucking bad.

And then Jacqueline shut her window again, and I was left standing there in the yard, alone. Groaning, I started climbing up the side of the school, still wearing my nice outfit. I wished for what felt like the millionth time in the past few weeks that I was still a werewolf.

How easy it would have been to just shift and jump up. *Damn it!* There had to be some kind of vampire climbing ability that I hadn’t mastered yet.

I’d have to ask one of the teachers about it…

*Not* Emmett!

By now, I was pretty sure that he was a shady, creepy jerk who I accidentally wanted to fuck, due to the heat situation. But what the hell did *he* want from *me*?

Fuming, I tumbled in through my window then lay on the floor, panting slightly and staring at the ceiling. I replayed the night in my head. Driven by guilt and love, I couldn’t help the desire to hear Jay’s voice. He’d told me not to even consider coming back. But if he learned what had just happened, he would change his mind. I was certain about that. He would probably also tear Emmett apart. Jay was a pacifist and all, but when someone—other than me—pushed him to his limit, he got angry like no one else.

I knew I’d be furious if anyone ever dared flirt with my mate.

Jay was mine.

Just as I was thinking about that—the blood under my skin starting to rumble, an ache growing in the pit of my stomach—my phone rang. It was Jay!

I snapped up the phone, ready to answer. I needed to confess my weakness to Jay. I needed to beg him to come get me right now, to take me away from the school. Away from Emmett.

But before I could tell Jay any of this, before I could even say hello, he spoke up in a gruff tone. “I’m so glad you picked up. You’re the only one who can understand me when I’m raging like this, Lola.”

Jay was rarely angry, so this alarmed me instantly. “What happened?”

He started talking to me about a smoke bomb and Ava and a bunch of other craziness. He was normally so chill, but like I’d just thought to myself, when he was pushed to the edge, he got super furious.

“I’m just freaking tired of Ava and her endless tricks,” Jay was saying, gritting his teeth. “I don’t trust her. I know she’s trying to destroy the pack. She’s hurting my Alpha, my packmates.”

I tried to be as comforting as I could. I really was worried about him now. “I’m so sorry, Jay. I can’t believe you’re going through this.”

He exhaled bitterly. “Thank god you weren’t here for the attack… I would’ve lost my mind. I’ve been having these terrifying thoughts… Not quite daydreams, but close.”

“What kinds of thoughts?”

Jay sighed. “That I’d lost you. That you’d turned your back on me, on our mate bond, and left me for a new vampiric existence.”

I shivered.

“I just wanted to hear your voice, you know?” Jay said. He exhaled with what sounded like relief. “I just wanted to know that everything between us is okay. I love you so much.”

I felt sick to my stomach. My eyes were burning with unshed tears. Here Jay was, being his wonderful self… I didn’t even want to *consider* what could’ve happened earlier with Emmett.

“Anyway,” Jay said then, softly. “I’ve been venting nonstop—I wanna hear about you. How was your day? Did you do anything exciting?”

I paused, cold sweat washing over me. *Should I tell him about Emmett?*

**Episode 1351**

ARTEMIS

*Artemis...*

My head was pounding.

*Artemis!*

Something jolted inside my brain, and I was forced to listen. The voice was here. It felt like it never left.

*Why didn’t you kill the medium while you had the chance?* it hissed. *You literally let Marta slip through your hands when all you had to do was squeeze the life out of her.*

The voice spoke about the horrific act calmly and sharply. About a *murder*. A murder that it had expected me to pull off.

*Perhaps you’re not as strong as you think*, the voice said*. Perhaps you’re a weakling, and have been all along!*

I felt compelled to defend myself. It almost felt as though, by failing the voice, I could be ruined. Maybe I was already ruined, and that was why I said, “I was forced to stop. There were other spirits pulling me away from Marta. What was that? Why didn’t you mention this earlier?”

The voice let out a growl that echoed through my head. *This is the very reason why we need to eliminate the medium! She has powers that can interfere with our plans.*

I wasn’t sure why it said *our* plans. I didn’t have a plan. I just felt confused.

I just felt… broken.

*You don’t want to let anything stop us, do you?* the voice hissed.

My chest started hurting. *Stop us from what?*

The moment the question formed inside my mind, I remembered feeling Marta’s throat in my hands. I remembered squeezing the life out of her. A sudden surge of power and terror combined with the loss of my self-control crashed over me as a horrible memory.

This wasn’t me… *Was it?*

*Oh, but it is*, the voice whispered*. I understand you’re a little confused. Once you and I become one, you will share all my power, all my control. You will know exactly what you’re doing at all times.*

That sounded like a threat. It sent chills running down my spine.

*But first*, the voice continued, *the medium must be dealt with. The medium must die.*

As the voice spoke, I heard another one. A real one. Cali’s voice.

My eyes were closed, had been for a while, but I realized that Cali was cradling my head.

Slowly, I looked up and fought to focus. My sister was looking at me with all the worry in the world. It was disconcerting. Scary, almost.

But of course, not as scary as not being able to control yourself or your body.

“Are you okay?” Cali asked me. Her voice was tender, just like the hand that caressed my cheek.

“Is *she* okay?” Marta almost shouted from a few feet away. Her voice sounded raspy. Different. I’d done that… I’d wounded her.

Or maybe not. Maybe I’d done nothing.

*Right?*

“What about me?” Marta screeched. “She tried to kill me!”

My head still throbbing, I tried to sit up. Had I really tried to kill Marta? Had that been real? Not a dream? But then the memory was back, fleeting. Marta’s neck under my hands while the voice compelled me to do harm…

The guilt was overwhelming. My stomach lurched so suddenly that I felt sick.

“Back off, Marta!” Cali told the medium, then turned to me. “What happened?”

“I’ll tell you what happened,” Marta declared. “Your sister tried to *murder* me. And now, instead of listening to me, the *victim*, you’re continuing to enable her!”

Cali gaped at Martha’s outburst.

“I have no idea what she’s talking about…” I said. “I must’ve blacked out.”

“That’s awfully convenient!” Marta looked like she wanted to cry and scream at the same time. She pointed at her neck. “Tell me, how do you explain the handprints around my throat? How do you explain the fact that I sound like a frog? I’m sure there will be bruises forming there any minute now!”

Cali trembled. “This can’t be…”

Greyson was in the room as well, and I realized it when Marta turned to him, her gaze sharp as a knife. “I can sense that the dynamic here is that you always do whatever the hell Cali wants, but for *god’s* sake, use your brain, Greyson,” she said. “You should lock Artemis up!”

“*No*!” Cali said, her eyes wide with fear. “Something’s trying to get to Artemis! Whatever happened isn’t her fault!”

“Well, it sure as hell isn’t *my* fault.” Marta pointed at me, so harsh that I flinched back. “Artemis needs to be controlled before the dark magic makes her do something that she won’t be able to take back.” She pointed at Greyson and Cali. “Both of you are going to be responsible for someone’s death, just because you’re in denial about the danger here.”

Greyson stayed silent. Cali covered her mouth.

“I don’t want to hurt anyone,” I whispered. That was the truth.

Cali pressed her lips together. “I know, Artemis. I know.”

She kept talking to Marta, but I couldn’t listen. My head was overwhelmed by the voice once more.

*Of course you want to hurt people. That’s actually all you need to do*, it said. *The longer you wait, the longer the list becomes.*

I didn’t understand. *What list?*

*The list of those that want to stop us*, the voice replied. *Our enemies. We need to destroy them first, and it all begins with that medium.*

“Artemis?” Cali shook my shoulders. “Can you hear me? Snap out of it!”

I ignored my sister, still haunted by the voice. The list it had mentioned was… daunting. Who in this room was on it? Was I supposed to kill everyone? Even my own sister? And for what?

Panic started to bubble up inside me as more of the pack members came into the room. Jay walked in first, looking thunderous. He was talking on the phone, but he took one look at the scene in front of him, said, “I’ll call you later,” and hung up.

And then Big Mac arrived. All this attention was making me woozy.

“What the fuck is happening here?” Big Mac demanded, her eyes fixed on Greyson. The Alpha had been suspiciously quiet so far.

“I’ll tell you what happened,” Marta said. “Artemis literally just tried to murder me. Look at my neck!”

My gaze moved to Marta’s delicate throat. Bruises had indeed started to form there. How much pressure had I applied? Why had I done it?

*I told you why*, the voice hissed. *Why won’t you see the truth? Why won’t you see that you’ll soon be mine?*

My stomach twisted.

It got even worse when I looked up at Big Mac. She was speaking, gesturing between Cali and Greyson.

“We can’t keep going like this. I’ve always known that Cali can be naïve, but I never believed that she would allow others to get hurt.” She glared at Cali. “Marta got hurt, and instead of listening to her, instead of apologizing for what your sister did, you’re blaming her!”

Cali shouted something back, something that I couldn’t process. Not when I was so fixated on Big Mac.

She emanated power as she kept speaking. “All I know is that this is fucking ridiculous,” she told Cali and Greyson. “You are both ridiculous and foolish and, frankly, unfit to lead if you cannot see how obvious the danger is. Artemis is a bomb waiting to explode, and if you do not contain her, who knows who will get hurt?! This is…”

Big Mac kept ranting, and now she was gesturing at me. My anxiety grew tenfold. Big Mac was a threat. Not only because of the things she was saying about me, but for other reasons as well… What kinds of reasons, though? And *why*?

As I tried to answer that question for myself, I was hit by a memory.

A flashback. A vision.

I was back at Haystack Rock.

I held the Orb in a bloodied hand as I slowly approached the portal. All I had to do was step through it, and then I would be back in the world I knew. The world where I belonged. I would be saving the human realm, the place where my sister lived, by removing the Orb and hiding it forever. I would prevent it from causing death and destruction and harming the ones I loved. I would finally be doing something good, after spending my life working for the Kollector and doing so much harm.

But as I was passing through the portal, something grabbed at me.

Something I couldn’t see removed the Orb from my hand.

The Orb evaporated.

It vanished.

And even though I knew that it was no longer in my possession, I also felt something surge inside me. Something that knocked me back as it dropped into me like a bomb.

The terror that hit me caused me to shake. I trembled and shivered as I realized that the evil magical artifact had never left. Had never vanished.

It had just been hiding all this time… Inside me.

It was part of me now.

*I* was the Orb.